An Assembly Such As This

by Unforth

Summary

Regency Era-esque AU. Dean Winchester has built the life expected of him, marrying Charlotte Bradbury, raising a family, maintaining his estate, spending winters in ton. However, their life together is built on a shared lie - they are best friends, united to protect the secret of their true desires. Charlie has found a companion who shares her preferences, but Dean is lonely for a want of partner. That is, until he learns of Ms. Naomi's exclusive, monthly, male-only parties, and manages to secure himself an invitation...
ABOUT THE NON-CON: there is sexual assault (non-penetrative, in fact neither party removes a single item of clothing...but it's still definitely a non-consensual sexual encounter), physical assault, emotional abuse and psychological manipulation in this story. The chapter in question is labeled, there are notes within text warning the reader where the assault is, and I provide a synopsis at the end of the chapter (and repeat it at the beginning of the next) if you wish to skip that part.

Notes

A/N: So, um, I've been telling myself for two weeks that I'm not allowed to start something new, something long, until I get some of my current projects done. For about the same amount of time, my brain has whined about how, with all of the vast amount of AU Destiel smut I've read, I haven't found anything set during the Regency era.

Somehow, yesterday, as I sat down to work on "The Devil Went Down to Detroit," it all coalesced into this and it was impossible for me not to start writing. So, here, have a thing. I have an entire outline for the rest of the story, too. Because this is not just a one-shot, no, this crap woke me up at 5:15 this morning and refused to stop writing itself.

Based on how my brain is currently behaving there is a really good chance I'll be neglecting both other projects short term while I pound this out. Imma try to get this done fast. I'm sorry I'm distractable. (But not that sorry. ;p )

A couple notes:

1. I have read a lot of Jane Austen and Georgette Heyer. And, I actually did a small amount of research to write this, which is more than I normally do for fan fic. However, if you want historical accuracy, go elsewhere. I made sure some (but not all!) of my terminology was time period appropriate, and looked at the some pictures of Regency era rooms, and checked out what some fashion might be, and that is the absolute limit of the research I will be putting in to this project. Period.

2. Based on my current outline, there will be non-con later on in the story. Consider yourselves warned. I'll make sure I flag the chapter when I get to it, and highlight the section so that it can be skipped if the reader desires to have the event remain off screen.

Sorry to babble. If you like, please review...I've been gratified by all the nice things y'all say, and amazed by how helpful and motivating I find them. I can't say how much I appreciate them. Anyway. Enough of me talking. ON TO THE SMUT.
Dean was bored. It was an alarming state of affairs. It had taken him years to discover the existence of the soiree at Ms. Naomi's home in London. It had him months to secure an invitation. It had taken him weeks to convince himself that he was making the correct decision to attend. It had taken him days to arrange his couture precisely to match the rigorous dress code and to ensure that his identity would be sacrosanct no matter how the evening proceeded.

It had taken him a mere two hours to grow bored at the dilatory farce that turned out to be the disappointing reality.

Ms. Naomi's parlor was the height of modern fashion. The home was clearly a rental for the Season and was not to be outshone. The walls were pale green and paneled in rich orange cloth. The windows were draped in matching orange fringed in gold that gleamed faintly in the light of the ornate candelabras. Men stood in knots, in pairs and trios, holding quiet discussions while leaning against the elaborately carved marble fireplace, lying on the delicately upholstered chairs, or standing on the fine Persian carpets.

A man dressed in an extremely well made suit walked by. His only concession to the anonymity of the party was an elaborate white feathered mask that failed to hide brown eyes, thin pale lips, an aquiline nose, and slate gray hair. No amount of tailoring could hide a body on the twilight side of middle age, with a paunchy stomach and unappealingly thick legs. Behind his own mask, Dean rolled his eyes. The man looked in all directions as if searching for someone, circling the sitting room before settling on Dean with a predatory gleam in his eyes.

"Good evening, Mr…?" The white-masked man's voice was sleek and overly polished. Everything about it oozed insincerity and disingenuousness. Dean started at being addressed so. In his life, he had never been to a party where it was appropriate for a stranger to approach and beg an introduction. He'd never been to a party like this one.

Though he felt exposed, Dean reminded himself that his mask granted him anonymity, and anonymity gave safety, power, and escape from the social conventions by which he was used to being constrained. That was why he was here, after all. "Asmodeus," Dean said with what confidence he could muster. The name had been carefully selected to match both his costume and the locale, and Dean had been disappointed that thus far no one had recognized the import of his choice. There wasn't a flicker of familiarity with the name from the white-masked man, either. Only a lifetime of good breeding kept Dean from sighing audibly.

"It's a pleasure, Mr. Asmodeus," the man gave a passably elegant bow, taking Dean's hand and kissing it. Dry lips and wispy feathers tickled, and a tongue flicked out, lightly licking Dean's sun-darkened skin. It was a highly unappealing combination of sensations. "I am known as Mr. Zachariah. I hope you are enjoying your first time amongst our numbers?"

"I have felt very welcome, I'm sure," Dean said, unable to keep a trace of his true feelings from his voice.

"And will you have a dance this evening?" The eager light was back in Zachariah's eyes, and his mouth was parted in a grin so wide that Dean could see teeth
"I'm afraid I rarely dance," Dean said as discouragingly as he could while remaining in the bounds of polite behavior. He wasn't sure if they met a literal dance – there was one, just one room over – or if the word alluded to less proper behavior, but he wanted no part of either with Zachariah.

"Ah," said Zachariah, completely missing the hint. "I expect this evening you will find the dancing partners far more agreeable than normal."

"I do, yes," he said neutrally. "Thank you." Zachariah showed no signs of leaving. With a jolt, Dean realized that he recognized the man. Between the features that Zachariah had not deigned to hide, the turn of his voice, and his stubborn unwillingness to understand standard social cues, he could be no other than the infamous Mr. Alder of —— Street. The man was a reputed pederast, indeed it was almost certain, though little could be done about it due to his stature. Society assumed that men like Dean were interchangeable with men like Zachariah. It had taken Dean his youth and his formative years to come to terms with his inescapable preference, and in so doing he'd come to understand how completely different the two truly were. Enjoying the company of adult men who consented, who wished for Dean as he wished for them, was not unclean no matter how taboo it might be. It bore no comparison to the crime of taking the innocence of a youth as yet incapable of understand what they were consenting to. Zachariah and men like him sickened Dean.

Out of the corner of his eye, through the open doorway that led to the ballroom, he caught a flutter of white, blue and black. "So, Mr. Asmodeus," continued Zachariah obliviously. "Do—"

"If you will excuse me?" Dean interrupted. He smiled and gave a slight nod, hoping to pass off his departure as anything other than grossly impolite. Walking away, he could feel a gaze burning into him, but he refused to look back.

At the most rapid stately pace Dean could manage, he entered the grand ballroom. A group of musicians occupied a raised dais at the far side of the room, standing or sitting as their instruments demanded. They were the only people in the room who were not wearing masks and costumes. Instead, they wore thick blindfolds through which nothing could be seen, playing their instruments by rote. The music was sedate and entirely prosaic. The room was vast, papered in pale pink with raised molding painted silver. Red velvet curtains were drawn closed over the enormous windows. Three chandeliers lined the ceiling, blazing with innumerable candles whose light was multiplied by swags of pure crystal teardrops. Mahogany and oak interlocked in an intricate diamond pattern, the parquet floor polished until it gleamed. The room reeked of money, polish, and the musky scents with which men were fond of anointing themselves. With the faint whisper of shoes brushing the floor, cloth scraping cloth, hands clasping hands, Dean stood to one side and watched the strangest dance he had ever seen.

Every person on the floor was a man.

The soiree had been billed as a masquerade, and Dean had accoutered himself appropriately. On arriving, he'd discovered that nearly everyone chose for normal garb, jacket and breeks or pantaloons as the individual's taste required. Many wore additional flourishes, doe's skin gloves or elaborate jewelry or had selected unusual fabric or bright colors, but the outfits themselves were not atypical. Even most of the masks were relatively dull. Case in point was the couple currently promenading beneath the arms of two separated lines of dancers. A tall man wore a jacket in a tawny brown, tan pantaloons and court shoes, his mask making his face appear like that of an eagle. Beside him, a heavy set fellow stretched a bright green satin over his girth and wore loose offensively yellow breeks, and a crude Guy Fawkes mask. Disappointed, frustrated with himself for having expected better of the some of London's supposedly most fashionable, Dean shook his head.

The next couple made their way down the line, one dressed in a completely white suit with a plain
white mask depicting classical tragedy covering his features, and the other...Dean froze. The other was a costume, a true costume as Dean did, and he was captivated by it.

The man was a little shorter than Dean and he suspected leaner, though it was hard to tell because of what he wore. Draped white fabric swathed his entire body except for his feet, on which he wore golden sandals. A matching gold belt was artfully placed to hold all of that cloth around the man's body even as he danced enthusiastically. His mask appeared to be porcelain, thin worked and painted with the delicate, lifelike colors of a girl's doll. It was topped by a thick crop of disheveled black hair. Somehow mounted on his back were wings, roughly the length of his torso, beautifully made with feathers of the deepest black. They caught the light and shimmered purple and green. Blue eyes swept the room, brightened with exertion and laughter. Dean was captivated. He moved around the room so that he could get a better look, acquiring a glass of Champaign so that he would have an excuse to lurk along the wall and sip quietly, hopefully undisturbed. The man was in the line of dancers facing him. For an instant, their eyes met, blue piercing through him. Dean swallowed, feeling a rush of heated emotion as he imagined those eyes staring into his soul as the man pressed Dean's body into a mattress.

Well, Dean was certainly no longer bored.

Finishing his drink, he self-consciously adjusted his mask, stiff blackened leather tooled into the form of a monstrous face with a long nose, ears shaped like bat wings, and a mouth painted devilishly blood red. Cloth attached to the mask covered his hair, and a thick black cape drenched his figure in yards of fabric. The only flesh he showed was one hand, in which he held a shepherd's crook. He'd thought it a good joke, but again, no one had shown the least sign of recognizing it.

Until now. The blue-eyed angel took advantage of another couple working down to the line to give Dean a frankly appraising look, his eyes delightfully expressive. In their stunning depths, Dean saw curiosity, interest, and amusement. He smiled back, though no one could see, hoping his own eyes were as communicative of the extent to which he reciprocated.

The hour was growing later, and fewer and fewer men lingered alone around the periphery of the room. Those few that remained, who yet wanted for partners, approached Dean, but he made no sign of acknowledging them. None had Zachariah's audacity, all accepted his polite refusal and moved on. He devoured the sight of the angel on the dance floor, noting that the lithe man moved easily and that his partner was consistently failing to initiate conversation. It seemed to Dean that the blue-eyed angel kept stealing glances at him, and he desperately hoped he was not wrong. He needed this so much. Only desperation would have led him to such an assembly.

With a flourish, the music ended, and the couples on the floor began to scatter. Some, laughing, waited breathlessly for the next set to begin. Some separated, finding the company not as amenable as they had hoped, and searched for others with whom to partner. Some broke towards the exits for the room, seeking someplace quiet to speak or heading for the staircase that lead upstairs to privacy. Normally, it would have been scandalous for guests to intrude on the family living quarters. There was nothing normal about this party, and throughout the evening more and more men had departed in that direction. It was, after all, the true purpose of the entire gathering: a safe, anonymous place for men to engage with likeminded individuals.

It had been a long time since Dean had the luxury of indulging his preferences.

He was watching the last group depart, feeling surprisingly wistful, when a low, rough voice spoke behind him. "Good evening."

Dean turned, a polite rebuke already coming to his lips, when he stopped dead. It was the blue-eyed angel. He'd never dreamed that the form he saw dancing so effortlessly, eyes glittering with exertion
and pleasure, could have such a voice. The erotic fantasy in his mind blossomed into more full life, blue eyes meeting his, sinewy muscle enfolding him, that unbelievable voice moaning his name in pleasure.

"Good evening," he managed, proud of his ability to maintain the niceties despite the stirring in his breeks. His shapeless costume had many advantages, not least of which was hiding arousal. It was demonstrating a major disadvantage, though – as heat rose in his veins, he found it suffocatingly hot beneath the fabric.

"I am Castiel," said the man.

"Asmodeus," Dean said. "Is it a coincidence that it's Thursday, Mr. Castiel?"

Castiel chuckled. "Are you truly lusty, Mr. Asmodeus?" Dean grinned, though he knew Castiel couldn't see him. Finally, someone had understood his carefully selected pseudonym.

A wicked thought occurred to him, the kind of thing he could never have done in reputable company. Anonymity had many advantages, though, and suddenly he felt daring in a way that he'd never been in his whole life. Bravery on the hunt, gallantry towards others, those were familiar, but he'd never been forward in social situations. Until now, until this blue-eyed angel filled his head with irresistibly enticing thoughts. Leaning forward, he drew so close to Castiel that the ears of Dean's masks brushed the doll's delicate cheek. "Perhaps you will have the chance to find out, Mr. Castiel." That close, he could hear Castiel's breathing grow momentarily ragged. The subtle change only increased Dean's desire.

The music began, a few brief bars to warn the couples to line up and indicate what the dance would be. Feet scuffed on wood and conversation died down as the floor filled with men once more.

"Would you care to join me for the next set, Mr. Asmodeus?"

"It would be my pleasure, Mr. Castiel." Dean leaned his shepherd's crook against the wall.

Reaching out, Castiel took Dean's hands. Strong, lithe fingers seized his own, made rough and calloused by Dean's favorite outdoor pastimes, riding and hunting. In the first shock of contact, Dean imagined what the man might do for hobbies that gave his grip such strength yet did nothing to reduce the lush smoothness of his skin – did he play the piano, paint, or was he fond of writing? Such innocent thoughts quickly vanished as Dean's imagination took flame and he imagined how those fingers might feel pressed bruisingly hard into his skin or curled around his member, caressing and rubbing.

An arm tugged him firmly, and he realized he'd been oblivious to the beginning of the dance. Castiel laughed. "Mr. Asmodeus, I imagined you a better dancer than this."

"My apologies, Mr. Castiel. I will do my best not to embarrass you."

They danced for several minutes in silence, stepping through complex forms, trading partners, weaving with the many other happy men. Dean lost himself in the unexpected delight of sharing in the steps with a partner he would truly have chosen. It was nothing like the dances he'd been forced into as a youth, required to stand up with each girl present lest he offend any, denied the opportunity to stay with those few he found congenial lest he give the wrong impression. His wife was the only dance partner he'd truly enjoyed before this. Charlotte, his darling, sweet Charlie, was the greatest blessing of his life, a woman who desired as little of him as he desired of her. They had fulfilled their familial duties and produced two fine children, now three and six, and that done neither had ever touched the other again. They happily put on the appearance of a fond husband and doting wife,
easily done since they truly cared for each other. Charlie spent her nights with her dear, darling spinster friend – poor Ms. Harvelle, no dowry with which to find a husband, so lucky to have such a school friend to take her in! If only men had similar options. Dean envied her. Perhaps, if he were very lucky, he'd find a younger son with few prospects whom he cared for and who cared for him and might be interested in some manner of arrangement. He'd hardly let himself dream of such, it seemed so unachievable.

Every time he turned around, every time he passed down the line, he was greeted by Castiel's beaming eyes, focused on him as if not another soul existed in the world. Meeting that gaze as he took Castiel's hand, for the first time Dean formed the least idea of what that impossible dream might truly resemble.

"This is your first time at Ms. Naomi's, correct?" asked Castiel, voice low and rough as he grew breathless from dancing.

"Indeed," said Dean. "It is quite an elite group. I found it quite challenging to gain admittance."

"Are you enjoying yourself?"

"Honestly?" Dean chuckled. He was, ultimately, a painfully honest man. Subterfuge disgusted and infuriated himself. It was a cruel irony that he was forced to live much of his life as a lie. He found small solace that those about whom he cared the most – his brother Samuel, the family's long-time gameskeeper Robert, his governess Ellen, and Charlie of course – knew the truth, and didn't value him less for what he was, nor lose respect for him because of the myths he was forced to maintain.

"Always!" Castiel said brightly. Dean wished he could see the smile that so clearly accompanied those words.

"Honestly, I found the early parts of my evening insipid, and felt the first glimmers of despair. However, since then things have taken a surprising turn. It must be the dancing, it is quite stimulating. And you, Mr. Castiel?"

"Entirely the same," said Castiel with evident delight. "I am of your opinion in every regard."

"Remarkable," Dean said. He and Castiel were at the top of the figure. Joining their hands, they skipped to the end of the line, hopped a few kicking, prancing steps, and skipped back. "I don't believe I have ever shared a dance partner with whom I did not differ in at least one major regard."

"It's a gratifying experience, is it not?"

"Very gratifying," Dean couldn't stop grinning like a boy promised pudding, and he wished that Castiel could see how much pleasure the angel's words gave him. He attempted to communicate it all with his eyes, though with no clue as to how successful the endeavor was. "How long have you been attending this gatherings, Mr. Castiel?"

"This is my fourth," Castiel replied as they resumed their places in the line. The music paused. All of the men who had been leading changed their stance so that they would be following, and all the men who had been playing the women's part switched so that they would lead the couple. Dean took Castiel's hands and led him through a figure eight. "I have done naught but dance at any of my prior excursions..." Dean was certain he did not imagine the way the sentence lingered with words unspoken, and lust surged in his veins. Damn, he hoped that communicated in his eyes, as well. "I have found that a simple dance is a fine way to grow more acquainted with someone. It reveals so much more than mere conversation can."
"Oh?" Dean imbued with simple word with genuine curiosity.

"Body language speaks quite loudly," Castiel said. They were serenading around the slick floor, providing them an ideal time to speak. "It reveals athleticism, coordination, memory, endurance...and of course, there's the conversation. You would be shocked how many people struggle with even the most basic discourse while their feet and arms are otherwise occupied."

"My dear Mr. Castiel, it would not shock me in the least," said Dean. "I have shared many an unsatisfactory dance, a truly sad number of such. Indeed, I think I can say this is the only truly satisfying experience of the kind I have ever had."

They linked arms loosely and spun slowly around each other, affording Dean a fantastic opportunity to stare into those stunningly blue eyes. They were alive with happiness, and Dean felt his last doubts fade away.

"It is a delight to me that you feel so," confessed Castiel. "And a relief! Though we had thus far concurred in so many respects, I feared that I was alone in finding this particular dance so far superior to the others of its kind in which I've engaged."

There was no opportunity to reply for several minutes, as the group came together once more and the couples stepped back into lines. Dean's heart raced faster and faster, his body thrummed with anticipation. It was growing increasingly difficult to dance well for the weight between his legs. Finally, mercifully, the music came to a trailing, lilting stop, and the couples bowed to each other.

The moment it was appropriate to do so, Castiel closed the space between them. He took Dean's arm forcefully and steered him towards one of the exits from the room.

"You've said several things I find intriguing, Mr. Asmodeus," Castiel said. His voice was husky and breathless, his grip appealingly possessive. "I was hoping we might have the opportunity to discuss them in more depth."

"Certainly, Mr. Castiel," Dean tried to repress his enthusiasm. It would be unseemly to demonstrate too much excitement. He did not wish to appear desperate. He was desperate, but appearing so was unthinkable. "Certainly." He licked his lips. "Certainly." Castiel laughed.

"Are you well?" Castiel asked with mock concern. "You sound unwell. Perhaps you should lie down and rest. I believe there is a sitting room upstairs where you may lounge until you recover from the efforts of our dance."

"Thank you," Dean couldn't hold back a delighted laugh. Could Castiel be any more perfect? "Perhaps that would be best. Do lead the away, as you are more familiar with the house than I."

They walked through two of the lovely rooms. The first was empty save for a man dressed as Arlecchino playing the piano while a man dressed as Colombina leaned on the keyslip with a dreamy look in his eyes. The second housed a cluster of men talking animatedly about politics, amusingly reminiscent of any normal party. Castiel confidently walked by them and to a doorway that he opened to reveal a servants staircase. Climbing to the second floor, they stepped out into a hallway dimly lit by bronze sconces, no less stylish for being in the private parts of the home, with wallpaper striped in dark and light green and lustrous wooden floors. Most of the doors were closed, and the unmistakable sounds of passion leaked, muffled, into the open. It was impossible not to blush. It was easily the most scandalous thing Dean had encountered in his entire life.

At the far end of the hall, a single door stood open. The mortifying prospect of encountering another couple – whether they emerged from one of the rooms currently occupied or came up the second
staircase and sought the only vacancy – left Dean looking every which way and holding his breath, biting his lip nervously. Fortune was with them, however. They didn't pass another soul, they reached the room, Castiel closed and bolted the door shut, and Dean finally released the breath he held.

It was a small room, containing nothing but a bed, two chairs and a small table. The walls and bedding were both deep blue, a color to compete with Castiel's eyes but for the gleam of life and joy. A single lamp stood on the table, shedding a shaky light over the whole.

"Shall we sit?" asked Dean uncertainly.

"I think that would be wisest," Castiel agreed. Turning, Castiel went to the armchair. Dean hastily undid the clasps holding his heavy cloak closed. The small room was close, and Dean felt like he was boiling beneath the layered fabric. Beneath it, he wore a jacket fitted to his torso as if it had been painted on, showing off the broad shoulders and narrow waist that were the result of his constant physical activity. Breeks clad his legs closely, stretched over every muscle, crotch obviously swollen by his hardened cock. As Castiel glanced back to see why he hadn't followed, Dean had the enjoyment of watching the other man's eyes widen at the sight of him, his pupils spreading black through beautiful blue, unmistakable desire punctuated by a faint gasp. Dean was glad for his mask covering his blush. "I may have spoken too soon," murmured Castiel, voice thick with desire.

Dean took his seat.

For long moments they stared at each other. The light flickered over Castiel's doll face oddly, the painted features of a boy's face flat and lifeless and distantly sinister. He wondered how demonic his appearance had become, but Castiel didn't show the least sign of minding. He wasn't even sure that Castiel had noticed. Castiel's eyes never left his own.

"Is this your first time?" Dean finally broached the topic at hand tentatively.

"No," said Castiel. It had the air of a confession, with a hint of embarrassment behind it. "It is my fourth time attending, after all. Is it yours?"

"No," Dean said, his words tentative as well. "However, it is been some years."

"We do not have to..." Castiel paused, and Dean heard a faint pop, of hesitation over a word, or perhaps of lips being licked. "I mean..."

"I believe you have already observed how much I would like to," Dean said. There was that amazing anonymity, giving him bravery he'd never thought he'd possess to seek that which he craved.

"Yes," breathed Castiel. He half rose from the chair, hands on the arm rests. "May I..."

Completely unsure what he was agreeing to, and not minding one bit, Dean nodded firmly. Without ever breaking eye contact, Castiel approached, knelt beside Dean's chair, and laid a hand on Dean's knee. Even that touch, through the thin fabric of his trousers, was enough to send a tingle through Dean's body. Castiel's palm was hot, and his fingers rubbed gently against Dean's flesh. He didn't move for a long moment, and he made a sound that Dean was certain was his tongue flicking over his lips. With a squeeze, Castiel began to massage up Dean's thigh. Slouching into the contact, Dean let his head fall back against the top of the chair back, and his body slide towards Castiel's hand, breath rushing from his lungs with a needy sound. "Cas..." he sighed the name out.

"I want to make you feel so good, Asmodeus," murmured Castiel. The hand brushed over Dean's erection, and he moaned irrepressslly. "Keep making those sweet noises." A second hand joined the
first, one on the inside of each of his thighs, spreading his legs slightly as if Castiel could read in
Dean's mind everything that he wanted. Confident movements caressed and toyed with the skin, so
sensitive through his trousers, sparing sparse attention for his aching member. Dean's entire body
pulsed in time to his racing heart, each beat a flare of heat and light in his head that spiked when
Castiel touched him. Breathing raggedly, he let each whimper and gasp escape his lips, enjoying the
answering roughness of Castiel's inhalations.

Suddenly the contact was gone, and Dean moaned hugely. "Don't worry, my beautiful demon," said
Castiel. His voice was gravel, a sound like nails scouring Dean's skin. He moaned again, he couldn't
help it. "I have an idea."

Lifting his head with difficulty, Dean watched through liquidy eyes as Castiel retrieved Dean's cloak.
Spreading the fabric over Dean's lap, Castiel held Dean's eyes as his hands slipped beneath the
fabric, questing over his quivering flesh. Fingers touched him unexpectedly, ghostly, movements
hidden by the obscuring cape. Dean started at every contact, breath hitching. Castiel seized Dean's
hips and slid him further down the chair, flicking along his waist band until they found the buttons to
undo his breeks. Getting a sense of what Castiel intended, Dean lifted his hips and allowed Castiel to
to lower the garment, releasing him from the tight confines of the fabric. Those gorgeous fingers closed
around him, and he groaned and thrust needily into the grip.

"This isn't right," he murmured abstractly. "I want to touch you, Castiel, I want to..."

"Shh," Castiel whispered. "You will. Relax." He stroked over Dean's hardness, firm and confident,
and paused to swirl at the liquid slowly leaking from Dean. "I've dreamed of doing this for
someone," Castiel continued, tone as if he were talking to himself. With quick movements, Castiel
stuck his head underneath the thick fabric, his hands left Dean despite a desperate half-thrust in
pursuit, then something soft and warm and wet closed around his head, and it was easily the most
amazing thing that Dean had ever felt.

A moan shuddered through his entire body as he every muscle in his body tensed and pushed into
the contact. It was Castiel's mouth, it must be Castiel's mouth, sinful and awe inspiringly good.
Underneath the black cloak, Castiel had removed his mask and...the lips moved further down him
and obliterated any rational thought.

"That feels..." he groaned as a delicate tongue flicked over him, licking over and over again at the
sensitive opening even as the lips continued to bob up and down. "Good God..." He needed more,
oh, he needed more so much more. His hand trembled uncontrollably as he found the back of
Castiel's head and pressed on him, encouraging him lower. A chuckle vibrated against him enticingly
and he whimpered. "Castiel, please." He strained to hold his hips still as Castiel teased him, taking a
little more of his length only to draw back out again, then a little more, and back, a little more.
"Please." The word was so breathy he wasn't sure it intelligible. Castiel drew all the way out and
returned to teasing at him, refusing to surrender to the pressure of Dean's hand. Light, sucking kisses
traced the vein taut on the lower side of Dean's cock, vibrated along the ridge just before the head,
tantalized his aching tip. "Ple..." Gasping, tears obscured Dean's vision as Castiel's mouth suddenly
enveloped him and the head of his member his a solid barrier. Unbelievable sensation flooded him,
the heat doubling and redoubling. Castiel found a rhythm, up and down, sucking, placing pressure
on Dean again and again until he thought he would explode. "No," he barely managed. "Stop. You
have to..." He sobbed in loss as Castiel obeyed him, pulling away when he was moments from
spilling into the beautiful angel's mouth.

There was a wet sound as Castiel swallowed. He ran a taunting finger through the slick saliva
coating Dean, chuckling low as Dean panted in desperation.
"You've never done that before, Mr. Asmodeus?" he said lasciviously. There was a shifting beneath the cloak, and Castiel emerged, masked once more.

"Perhaps I am less experienced than I thought," Dean admitted.

Castiel leaned close and whispered throatily in his ear, "Shall we learn together?" Lithe hands went to the golden belt and it came unclasped. Castiel gave a tiny shrug, and the fabric enclosing his body all fell away. Beneath, he wore a harness that bore the wings. He removed those as well, carefully setting the fantastic apparatus to the ground.

The sight of Castiel naked was breathtaking. His body was slim and finely muscled, his skin deliciously pale and smooth enough to make many women jealous. His chest was hairless, but near his belly there began a thin trail of black that widened and thickened as it led down to his beautiful erection. Dean had never looked at another man's intimate anatomy and thought it beautiful – strong, thick, appealing, many other things, yes, but not beautiful. Castiel was, though, delicate skin flushed red with desire, long and curved and incredibly appealing. Surging forward, Dean leapt to his feet and enfolded the gorgeous man. He wrapped one arm powerfully around Castiel's back, lay his head on Castiel's shoulder, and clasped Castiel's exquisite, enticing member in his calloused hand. Castiel moaned, a sound combining relief and surprise, and Dean felt a surge of possessiveness and strength.

Unrestrainedly, he stroked Castiel like he was precious, adoring the way that fair body seemed to melt against him, the mewls that leaked from Castiel's lips, the feel of sensitive skin against his rough flesh. Every sound forced twitches from Dean's arousal, and he rutted against Castiel's thigh. Fumbling, Castiel's hands sought the buttons of Dean's clothing, removing them as best he could even as his hips twitched him into every pump of Dean's fist, even as the sounds bursting from his lips grew less inhibited and more full of lust. Insistent tugging at his jacket forced Dean to release Castiel as the blue-eyed angel stripping Dean of his remaining layers quickly, dropping down to remove his pants. Breathing hard, barely close enough that each inhalation brushed their skin and each exhalation separated them, they both stood bare but for their masks.

Damnable masks! Every iota of Dean's mind screamed for them to kiss, for their lips to meet, for him to taste himself inside that talented mouth, for Castiel's tongue to invade him and own him. It was forbidden, though. The rules of the soiree were clear: bodies were fair games but faces were off limits. Faces could give away secrets that other flesh rarely could. For the first time, he wished he'd worn a more revealing mask, one that showed his lips as some of the other men's had.

Their bodies pressed together, arms entwining and binding them close. They held their heads side by side, and simultaneously burst into vocal, longing sounds as their members met and rubbed together. They shamelessly ground each other, delicious friction derived from the closeness of their flesh, and Dean felt himself getting closer again. He felt like he couldn't draw enough air. He wanted to tumble over that edge, wanted to take Castiel with him, but there was something else he wanted even more. Abruptly, he raised his hands to Castiel's shoulders and forced them apart.

For a moment, they stood that way, both breathing hard and trembling.

"What is it you want, Mr. Asmodeus?"

Dean felt a flush of shame for the first time since they'd begun to interact. It never felt natural to ask, even when he wanted so much he could cry. And oh, he would, if he were denied now he would simply break down and sob, he needed to feel Castiel more than he'd ever needed anything. Everything had been for this moment, for the thing he'd never been able to bring himself to ask anyone for.

"Don't be ashamed," there was a coy note in Castiel's voice. Stepping back, breaking all contact
between them, Castiel retreated until he bumped into the bed. He allowed his knees to give way, and he slid back atop the blankets, spreading his legs wantonly wide. "It's alright."

Breath rushed from Dean. It was a beautiful thing, to see that Castiel wanted him, to see that beautiful body pale against a sea of deep blue blankets, that thick, red erection bobbing and twitching, that fine pink hole ready for someone to fill up that angelic form.

It wasn't what Dean wanted, though.

"No," he breathed out, so hoarse and nervous that he could hardly articulate. "No," he tried again with better success. "That's not..." He met Castiel's spectacular eyes. Castiel's breath caught, and his pupils dilated full black. "That's not what I want." His confidence grew. Castiel quivered with barely restrained power, and Dean knew, looking at him, that Castiel wanted this too. "What do you want, Mr. Castiel?"

Slowly, each breath sending tremors through Castiel's body, the angel rose. Like a stalking predator, he circled Dean, looking him up and down. Dean knew he was good looking, his skin darkened with a natural brown undertone, his muscles honed, and he could see that Castiel appreciated it. After two times around, Castiel stopped behind him. Strong hands settled on Dean's shoulders, pressed firmly into the blades, palmed down the flesh of his lower back, and finally settled on his buttocks, kneading powerfully. Dean groaned as each movement manipulated the sensitive skin around his entrance. This was what he wanted, what he'd always truly wanted, what he'd never had. The types of men with whom he'd slept, hired from darkened allies, were not those of whom he could request such a thing. He'd felt them tight around him, heard their apparent enjoyment of every jerking thrust he made deep within their bodies, and yearned with all his being for their positions to be reversed. This was what he had come to Ms. Naomi's for.

A thumb pressed against him, pushed in, and he thought his body would fail him, thought his knees would give out, thought his bones would melt with pleasure.

"It's a night of firsts," desire laced Castiel's voice, low and erotic. His breath brushed along Dean's neck.

"Yes," said Dean as the thumb swirled over the puckered flesh. He bent slightly, forcing his rear more firmly against Castiel's hands. "Yes," a groan ripped out of him as Castiel past tight muscles into his virgin interior. It burned and hurt and rubbed and felt like absolute heaven. "Yes!"

Hard heat met the cleft of Dean's butt, Castiel's erection coming to rest between his cheeks. The thumb came out of him, hands seized his hips, and Castiel walked him forward, rutting against him at every step. Dean's knees gave way as they reached the bed, and he collapsed against it bent forward, masked face pressed into the soft bedding, butt raised shamelessly. Castiel stepped away, and Dean repressed a distressed cry into a mewl of longing. He was so sensitized that even the fine linens felt amazing, and he rubbed his body against them, thrusting his hips weakly to feel the drag of fabric over his member. There was a clatter of a drawer opening and closing, a moist sound, then Castiel was back.

A finger tip brushed over him. Where before it had been rough, skin catching on skin, now it was velvety, liquid coating Castiel's hand chill against his flesh. The finger meandered over the outside of his opening, spreading the moisture. It felt so chill, Dean's flesh so hot, he couldn't understand how it didn't sizzle like water cast onto flames. Need choked at his guts, sublimating hot pleasure into a bonfire of desperation. There was nothing, nothing in him, and he needed it so much. So much. There was room for no other thought in his mind. Something had to fill him. He'd waited a lifetime for it, he couldn't bear the anticipation another moment. He pressed against Castiel's hand, mumbling incoherent pleas.
"Beautiful, naughty demon," Castiel's voice curled around him like a hot embrace. "You truly want me this much?"

"Yes, angel, please," he begged.

The finger filled him, and a cry erupted from his lips, his back arching away from the bed towards the contact. The painful part was gone, the liquid easily lubricating him, and all that was left was the amazing feeling of something pressing against his eternally-neglected interior. It felt right, profoundly correct, and he craved more. Falling back to the bed, he pressed his rear back until he could feel Castiel's knuckle against his skin.

There was stunned silence. Castiel didn't move.

"Please, angel," Dean mouthed into the vile leather of his mask. "Castiel, please, I need you, I need you, please don't stop, oh, please..."

With a growl, Castiel pulled the finger out and thrust it back in, hard, and Dean reveled in the trails of heat that burst throughout him, casting spots over his vision. Castiel penetrated him over and over, and Dean rocked with him, driving the single finger deeper, exposing him to feelings he'd dreamed of without beginning to guess how good they would actually feel. "More." He had no idea if the word actually left his lips. "Need..."

The motion stopped.

"Yes?" Castiel panted. "What do you need, precious...gorgeous...perfect...Asmodeus?"

"More!"

A hand brushed over the dip in Dean's spine, and that simple, relatively chaste contact nearly drove him to climax. He writhed against the bed, whimpering. A moment later, cold porcelain rubbed him, then lips pressed against his skin.

"More?" Hot breath tantalized Dean's skin.

"Please, Cas..."

Dean thought one finger was spectacular. Until a second finger joined it, stretching him, swelling him, delighting him. Castiel moved more slowly, his lips making hot trails over Dean's back as he plunged in and pulled back gently. Fingers embedded to the hilt, Castiel paused, exploring, grazing lightly along the Dean's inner walls. Dean tried to hold still, determined not to come before he'd even felt Castiel's perfect cock inside him, but it was growing increasingly difficult to hold himself back. This felt unbelievably good, yet the urgent voice in his thoughts yet cried out for more.

Castiel pulled out nearly all the way. There was pressure against his entrance, Dean felt the muscles straining and flexing and giving and then he was filled with three fingers buried deeply, unmovingly, within him. Castiel made slight movements that felt monumental to Dean, every twitch of a finger, every slight bend of a joint was electric. As Castiel lingered, not pulling back out, Dean realized there the movements were systematic, that Castiel was searching for something. Dean had no idea what was going on. It felt nice, but not like the thrusting had, that constant friction of in and out. Impatient, he tried to force Castiel to return to resume the required pulse, but Castiel only laughed against his skin, licking at his salty sweat as his fingers continued to feel along inside of Dean.

White hot pleasure exploded through his mind, blanking everything. A loud sound filled his ears

Sense returned an instant later. The sound was his own cry, amplified as Castiel leaned into him and
groaning so hard it vibrated through Dean's entire body. Dean was tensed against the bed, legs trembling as they forced his bottom towards that unspeakable feeling.

"What was that?" he was amazed he was able to form a coherent sentence.

"It's good, right?" Castiel said. He crowded closer to Dean, forehead pressed to Dean's spine, cock a rod of fire against Dean's buttocks.

"Do it again!" Dean demanded. Castiel drew his fingers out completely, drew away from him, left him quivering, ignoring Dean as he practically howled in frustration. "Do it again!"

"Oh, I will," promised Castiel. Hands rubbed along Dean's legs, massaging and relaxing the knotted muscles, easing him back down. A knee pushed against his thigh, encouraging him to spread his legs wider apart, and Dean did so, feeling occasional brushes of the unmistakably hot, smooth flesh of Castiel's cock.

"I've waited...I've waited for you forever, Castiel. Please..."

"Your wish is my command, Asmodeus."

Thick hardness pushed against Dean's entryway, spreading him open, filling him slowing, stretching him, taking him as he'd longed to be taken his entire life. It was agonizingly paced by necessity, pressure building within him to the point of pain, and his breath came in gasps. "Are you okay?" It sounded like speaking had suddenly become much harder for the beautiful angel. "This feels...demon, you feel..." he groaned as he pressed his thighs against Dean's buttocks, as far inside as he could go.

It hurt, a little, and it felt perfect, a lot perfect, unspeakably perfect. This was it. This was right. No one could ever tell him otherwise.

Castiel took hold of Dean's hips and rocked backwards, pulling Dean with him as he did. Fingers dug into his skin, shaking hands guiding him to where Castiel wanted their bodies to be. They shifted together, Castiel's thrusts growing gradually harder and deeper and more insistent.

The spectacular feeling flooded liquid fire through him once again. "There," he exclaimed breathlessly. Castiel repeated the motion with a moan. "Yes!" Dean tangled his hands in the sheets, desperate to cling to something as it felt like the entire world was washing away around him. "Don't stop!" Everything was whiteness and burning and need and fulfillment and bliss.

"Asmodeus," Castiel moaned out his name long and low. "I never thought anything could feel this good." He thrust hard. "Oh God!" He rolled into Dean over and over, until Dean couldn't see for the brightness behind his eyes, until nothing existed except for the glorious cock buried within him and the desperate need throbbing between his own legs. With fumbling fingers, he tried to get a hold of himself. A strong grip grabbed his hand, and together he and Castiel wrapped around his member.

Moving as one, Castiel thrust, Dean's hips met him, their hands stroked him. Castiel moan and faltered, they gripped Dean and both jerked him hard, and Dean was enveloped in ecstasy, splattering semen into the once pristine blankets. "Cas...yes...oh, yes..." He rocked weakly through his climax, desperate to draw out each echo as he felt them slip away. "Castiel...my angel..."

With a primal groan, Castiel thrust again, his hardest yet, balls slapping on flesh as Castiel embedded in him and at that glorious center of divine pleasure again. Dean twitched and clenched as the feeling bordered into pain, it was so good. "Asmodeus!" the cry burst from Castiel's lips. "God, I..." Castiel thrust again spasmodically. "I..." Whatever he intended to say died on his lips as he cried out and
Neither moved for long moments. Sweat made a chill trail down Dean's spine, he struggled to regain control of his breathing, and he could feel Castiel slowly growing flaccid within him.

Castiel withdrew himself from Dean and collapsed onto the bed beside him. Weakly, Dean twisted onto his side and closed the space between them. His semen-stained hand crept to Castiel's body, tracing lines in sticky white over the smooth skin he'd hardly gotten to touch at all. Castiel whimpered, and Dean chuckled—giggled, really—into his mask.

"Thank you," Dean murmured. "I needed that. I needed you."

Castiel rolled onto his side. Their eyes met. At some point, Castiel had replaced his mask, but the doll's face meant nothing, no more than Dean's demonical one did. Clear blue eyes met green, and what they shared was beyond the need for other expression. Castiel settled a hand on the back of Dean's head and drew them together, forehead to forehead.

"No one has ever let me do that," said Castiel tenderly. The hand trailed down Dean's side, touch light against his flesh, causing him to shiver. "No one has ever trusted me to. Certainly, no one has ever asked me to, begged me to."

"Does that mean you liked it?" Dean allowed a mischievous twist to the words. He slipped a finger beneath Castiel's mask, running his thumb over plump, soft lips. Castiel gummed at him gently, drawing a faint moan from Dean.

"Very much."

"Will you be at the February soiree?" he asked, feeling suddenly shy.

"Will you?" Castiel matched him with a vulnerable catch in his voice.

"I wouldn't miss it for the world," he said, "as long as I can see you there, my angel of Thursday."

Castiel laughed with delight.

Good God, a month without this was going to be torture.
The February Soiree

Chapter Notes

This got...obnoxiously long. And gained more plot than expected. Sorry (not sorry).

I am shocked and pleased by how many of you chose to subscribe after reading the first chapter...thank you for the vote of confidence! I hope this second installment gives you a better idea of what to expect as the actual plot begins to unfold, and that you're not disappointed!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Everywhere he went, whether he was at the Travellers Club, at home entertaining, at a party or gathering, riding in the park, or walking down the street, Dean sought out blue eyes.

Of course, he found them everywhere. They were not nearly so common as brown or his own green, but they stood out. A laughing child, an elderly man with crinkled skin, a lovely young woman with blonde hair, a tired housewife, people all over London had pale gazes. The shades of blue ran from the palest of misty gray to navy so deep it was practically black. He’d never noticed how much variation there was in eye color before. No two hues appeared quite the same. Not a one matched the exact cerulean of his angel, nor did any of those who possessed blue eyes have the accompanying unruly black hair.

It was wrong of him to look, inappropriate to hope that a chance encounter would lead him to the true identity of Castiel. He couldn’t help himself. The man preoccupied his every sense, captivated and subverted his reason. Dean would have given anything to touch him, taste him, smell him, hear him, see him. He longed for Castiel to fill him in every conceivable way, craved him, dreamt that the angel could absorb him until they were one person, one complete soul.

The days dragged by in the usual give and take of social visits, gatherings, and promenades. Dean tolerated it for the sake of his small number of friends – Mr. Ashley, Mr. Lafitte, Mr. Fitzgerald, and Mr. Henriksen were all in London for the Season – and because Charlie and Ms. Harvelle enjoyed company. He occupied his time as best he could. The days past mostly quickly when he was with his family and friends, entertaining small groups at home, doting on his children, helping Samuel prepare for his nuptials with his beloved Ms. Moore. Time slowed to a crawl when he was in mixed company. He felt more exposed than he ever had before even with Charlotte on his arm, like strangers could look at him and see the secret desire to which he had finally succumbed. His instincts were to seclude himself, yet only at parties and galas could he hope to find the pair of blue eyes he sought, so he forced himself to attend night after fruitless night. It was worth it, he convinced himself, to see Charlie so enjoying herself at cards and other games, to see Samuel and Ms. Moore able to steal precious moments of privacy with which to converse. He left the parties aching in body and mind, gut clenched with unfulfillable need, desperate for everything he wanted but could not have.

Thus two weeks passed.

Emerging from his bath that Thursday morning, Dean was so hard he was ashamed of himself, thoughts of the past and anticipation for the future driving him to unparalleled arousal.

In the privacy of his bedroom in their rented townhome, he touched himself. He imagined his rough
hands lithe, his calloused skin smooth, his thick fingers nimble. Laying back, his eyes slipped shut. He trailed one of his hands over his skin, settling it on his nipple, tweaking and rubbing until it formed a hard nub. Shards of pleasure leaked from the contact to scatter throughout his body. The other hand, he wrapped around himself with a low groan. After submersing himself had become his favorite time to engage in gratification. With his body flush from the hot water, his skin damp, he could pretend he felt Castiel’s mouth around him. The ring he made with his fingers were the pouty pink lips he pictured on the face his mind had given his angel, the lingering moisture was the liquid heat of saliva, the flick of his thumb over his tip was the tongue that had danced so enticingly over him. He throbbed in his own grip and stroked, blood warming, coursing bliss to every pore.

Slowly, restrainedly, he pumped his aching cock. With a light touch, he ran his other hand along his chest, down his side, hitching his legs up to allow access to his backside. He’d never done this for himself before Thursday two weeks ago, but now he did so nearly every time. He couldn’t not, not any more. Simply touching himself no longer was enough. Even through their brief contact, Castiel had changed him irrevocably. As the hand clenched around his cock trembled with the difficulty of not accelerating his ministrations, his rubbed at his entrance, scratched it lightly with his nail, pressed into it ever so slightly.

Do you like that, Mr. Asmodeus? A husky voice whispered in his thoughts. In his mind, blue eyes peered up to meet his even as that exquisite mouth continued to work around him.

“Yes, Castiel,” he moaned softly. “It’s good, you’re so very good.” Unable to restrain himself, his hips jerked hard into his hand. Drawing his thumb away, he filled himself with a finger. It was not ideal, far from it. Given the choices of having nothing inside him at all, or having what short length of his finger he could penetrate himself with despite awkward angles, he opted to be poorly filled rather than not filled at all. After two weeks, he knew it would unsated, desperate, more in need of Castiel’s cock than he had been before – but what else could he do? Straining, stroking, he fit in a second finger and tried to get them in deeply enough to find that glorious spot that Castiel had so expertly stimulated, but no matter how he squirmed, he couldn’t. All he could manage were pathetically weak thrusts that abraded his dry interior shallowly, shivering him with pleasure and pain in equal parts. A frustrated mewl leaked from him.

Shh, pretty demon. I promise when I see you, I’ll give you what you need.

“I know you will,” he panted. With a groan, his hips jerked into his grip, and he let go his self-control. His hand pumped, his fingers thrust into him, and in his mind’s eye, Castiel’s gorgeous eyes met his until he was rent to pieces, a sweating, writhing mess of want. “Castiel,” he moaned. “God, I can’t wait...” His hips stuttered, his hand clenched, he managed to get his fingers in himself almost to the second joint, and he climaxed, semen streaking out of him to rest thickly on his hand and tangle in the curly brown hairs clustered thickly at the base of his cock. With a shudder, he collapsed limply on to the bed. “Oh, Castiel...”

Such behavior was becoming a daily exercise, and he was mortified by it. He’d always been able to control his inclinations. He’d abstained completely from sex for years, at times by choice, at times by necessity, and while he had always taken the time to satisfy his own needs, it had never felt so wanton.

It had never felt so good, either.

The last spasms of pleasure wracked him, and he relaxed with a sigh, allowing his phantom lover to fade from his imagination. Two more weeks until he could see the real man again. He dared to hope that his faith in Castiel was not misplaced, that the angel would truly attend and seek him out again.

Dean had never been one to flutter over the possibility of being abandoned by a partner, but then,
he’d never had a suitor, much less an inamorato.

Dean cleaned the sweat and grunge from his body with his towel and rapidly donned his daywear. It was a flattering outfit without being ostentatious, a form fitting jacket in a muted green over a vest and shirt in cream, taupe breeks, and polished Hessian boots with the dull luster bestowed by extensive wear. None of it was top of the line, and Sam would certainly find ways of making it clear how unfashionable Dean was to wear it, but he didn’t care what others thought. No matter how he dressed people would say what they would say. He’d heard the fashionable set call Sam a bumpkin even when he was dandied to the nines. Dean was who and what he was, and he knew he was a better man than any of those who judged him for it.

Downstairs, the faint clatter of tea things warned him that the ladies were entertaining in the sitting room, and he snuck by, not wishing to rudely intrude where a gentleman might be undesired. His concerns proved unfounded, however, as Charlotte noticed his poor attempt at stealth and called out, “Mr. Winchester! Do join us!”

He stuck his head in with a broad smile. “How can I be of assistance, Mrs. Winchester?”

Charlie and Ms. Harvelle sat at opposite arms of the same long damask couch, his wife in a demure sitting gown in pale cream striped in blue, Ms. Harvelle in a pale blue of a more girlish cut. Both had their hair in deceptively simple curls, vibrant red on one, pale blonde on the other. Each busied their hands, Charlie with the embroidery she loathed so much, Ms. Harvelle with mending as more befit her supposedly lower status. Theoretically, the young, lean woman was there to be Mrs. Winchester’s companion, someone to speak with her if there were no visitors but expected to keep her own counsel if there were more distinguished personages present. In practice, the Winchesters maintained formality only with virtual strangers. Judging by the faint scowl on Ms. Harvelle’s face, the way she punched her needle aggressively in and out of the hem of the gown she was working on, now was one such time.

Opposite them sat two young women, one with red hair to compete with Charlie’s and slimness beyond even Ms. Harvelle’s, the other round-faced, dark-haired and pleasantly curved beneath her rose dress. Both were bedecked in clothing and accessories that spoke of quality, taste, and wealth. Dean stepped into the room hesitantly, unsure what role he had in such a meeting, supposing that Charlie meant to introduce him. As he entered, a third figure came into view, standing in the corner not visible from the doorway. A lithe young man dressed in the height of fashion, his collar so starched that Dean wondered if he could turn his head, leaned indolently against the window frame, watching outside as if bored out of his mind. He had a shock of black hair and for an instant Dean felt a flash of hope, but he shoved it away. Even without knowing the youth’s eye colors, he was too short and too broad in the shoulder to be Dean’s mysterious angel of Thursday. There was a family resemblance between the red-haired girl and the boy, and Dean supposed any spoiled dandy would be frustrated to serve escort to a sister, abandoned to girlish chatter. Dean’s role would be to entertain him. Fantastic.

“Mr. Winchester, did you have the opportunity to make the acquaintance of Mr. Adam Milligan when we attended Mrs. Alder’s fete last week?” Charlotte asked. He ran through his memory of stuffy parlors and vapid discussions and finally settled on the appropriate event. He’d been especially distracted while they were at Mr. and Mrs. Alder’s impressive home. After all, Mr. Alder – Zachariah – was present, so perhaps other’s of Ms. Naomi’s set would be in attendance as well. Soliciting introductions to every stranger he found, he intently searching each face for magical blue eyes. He’d been disappointed, of course. Mr. Milligan was memorable. He was distinguished as the most important man in the room, and clearly arrogantly certain that he was well aware of the fact. He’d bestowed his introductions like a lord giving alms.
“Yes, Indeed,” he said, marshalling all of his good breeding. “It was a pleasure to make his acquaintance.”

“Ms. Harvelle had the pleasure of meeting Ms. Masters,” Charlie explained. Ms. Master’s brown hair was bound in an elaborate twist with a delicate feathered hat atop it, loose curls bobbed as she nodded politely in Dean’s direction. “She taught Ms. Harvelle the most delightful new game, I cannot wait until I have time to show it you, and I think perhaps it would be simple enough for John to play as well.” His eldest, a strapping lad, was proud to be six and determined to show that he could learn anything, up until the instant something more interesting distracted him and he went sprinting off in pursuit of greener grasses. “Remind me what it was called?”

“Flapdragon, Mrs. Winchester,” Ms. Master’s voice came as a surprise to him. There was nothing girlish or light about it, instead it had a husky maturity at odds with the youthful cut of her wardrobe. Dean laughed. Charlie, catching the look on his face, exclaimed, “Oh, you know this game already, don’t you!”

“I do, Mrs. Winchester,” he winked at her. “I am a master at it.”

“Ignore him!” Samuel’s light voice chimed in over his shoulder. He looked to see his tall, fair brother stride into the room confidently. “I am the undefeated Flapdragon master of the high seas.”

“Eight years, and you two have kept this amusement from me? Of all the…” Charlie stopped herself short, flushing in embarrassment as she realized how rudely she was behaving. “As I was saying, Ms. Harvelle met Ms. Margaret Masters, and today she and her particular friends, Mr. Inias and Ms. Anna Milligan, have come to call. Mr. Milligan is the youngest son of the gentleman we met last week, and Ms. Milligan is his only daughter. Dear visitors, do forgive me, and may I introduce you to my husband Mr. Dean Winchester, and his brother Samuel?”

Both girls rose and curtsied, and Inias left his vantage by the window to join the group and bow. Murmured “how dos” were exchanged by all.

“Mr. Milligan,” Samuel chimed in as soon as the formalities were complete. Inias was staring, open mouthed, at Sam’s put-together appearance and the ludicrously elaborate coif of his neckerchief. “If the ladies can spare you, perhaps you would care to accompany my brother and I? We have an appointment to visit Mr. Whittaker, who has promised me first crack at what he says is the prettiest studded fob he has ever laid eyes on.” Inias’ face lit up at the prospect, his hand unconsciously going to the gold watch chain gleaming at his side. “I remain skeptical. Do you think the ladies can spare you half an hour?” The boy turned expectantly towards his sister.

“I expect we will be staying at least that long,” Ms. Anna had a light, soft voice that made her sound exceedingly gentle. It matched the kind turn to her eyes, and was shockingly incongruous compared with the aggressively overbearing behavior her father had displayed. Dean reflected on it a moment longer and supposed perhaps he had it backwards, that her father’s dominance was precisely why she was decorous to the point of timidity.

“Well, then, let’s just be off, shall we?” Samuel said happily. In a whisper that was easily audible across the room, he covertly added, “Mr. Whittaker has threatened to sell it to Mr. Sandover if I do not arrive punctually at 11:30.”

“No,” gasped Inias with overblown distress. “Not Mr. Sandover! He still wears wool stockings! It would be a scandal. Mr. Winchester. We must rescue that fob from a fate worse than death!” Everyone shared in a laugh at the elderly Mr. Sandover’s expense. Dean passed by his wife and they traded an affectionate clasping of hands before Dean followed the younger men out of the house.
Considering Inias’ clothing, parentage, and attitude had suggested, he proved to be a surprisingly pleasant companion for the short walk to the store. At least, Dean supposed he must be satisfactory, for he and Sam were so enthusiastically bonding over male fashion that Dean dared not intrude. Sam gave Inias a thorough rundown of the outfit commissioned for Samuel’s May nuptials. Without each minute detail, Inias could not possibly assess the watch fob correctly, for the fob was part of the ensemble and must be perfect, in synch with all yet distinguished, restrained yet flamboyant, eye catching but not distracting, there was more such but Dean stopped listening. No blue eyes caught his as they walked along the street, and they arrived at Mr. Whittaker at a time that could pass as “fashionably late.” Fortunately, despite their lateness Mr. Sandover had not stolen their prize. After a hushed discussion of the fineness and rarity of what they were about to see that drew rapturous “hear, hears!” and “let’s sees!” from Sam and Inias, Mr. Whittaker was finally prevailed upon to reveal this pinnacle of the jewelers art. The piece proved to be as singularly unremarkable as every other fob he had ever observed. Dean wore his father’s old fob, an anchor carved in the hard black stone, a gift presented to John Winchester by his former captain, Rufus Turner, upon John’s promotion to Post Captain for gallantry on the Glorious First.

Mr. Whitaker passed Sam a looking glass, and his brother leaned so low above the fob that his nose nearly brushed the table, his long chestnut hair sweeping over his ears. Inias gushed eloquently about the fob, “The opal comes all the way New South Wales,” and “purest white gold,” and “perhaps a little too…something…you know, that ineffable something…for one of your stature,” and “it will perfectly compliment the shimmer of the silk as you’ve described it” and on and on.

“I’m afraid it won’t do,” interrupted Samuel with a sigh, passing back the magnifier. Dean repressed a groan. If this fob was not “the one,” there was no knowing how many more such meetings Dean might be dragged to. Sure enough, the jeweler accepted the refusal with stunning good grace and whisked the offending decoration away, and the remainder of their time was spent in a demonstration of Sam’s good taste, Inias’ lack there off, and Dean’s complete disinterest. One piece did catch his eye, a pendant mounted on a thin chain. The stone was round and simply mounted, the clearest, most stunning blue Dean had beheld outside of Castiel’s perfect gaze. When the light caught the stone, a crisscross of lines glittered white, light somehow manifest and reflected cleanly from the blue depths. The stone mesmerized him and he clamped down inappropriate thoughts as he felt distantly as if he peered into the real thing.

“Star Sapphire,” murmured Mr. Whittaker’s unctuous voice at his shoulder. “Very rare, from India. You have excellent taste, Mr. Winchester. Would you like to take a closer look?” He shook his head wordlessly and tore himself away.

They left without a fob, strolling home, and Inias and Sam were clearly fast friends. It could be worse, Dean supposed. Inias was well connected, the son of one of the most influential men of the ton, and for such an insensible peacock he displayed a surprising quantity of good nature and wits. Sam had befriended many a sillier person, and many who were far less appropriate as acquaintances. In the time his younger brother had pursued Ms. Ruby Cassidy, Dean had grown frankly alarmed at the proclivities of those who passed through his home at all hours. Time and Ms. Moore had changed all that, and Sam was no longer in danger of descending into a selfish life lived for naught but the pleasure of the moment. Watching Inias and Sam converse easily, Dean felt a long nursed concern finally lift from his shoulders, and he smiled contentedly.

A flicker of blue caught Dean’s eye, and he followed it to the clear gaze of a waif selling flowers. Though she was obviously not his angel, as she stood shivering in the cold she seemed an angel nonetheless, thin and worn and undeserving of the fate that life had dealt her. He stopped. “How much for the entire basket?” She blinked at him as if he’d spoken a foreign language. “Miss?”

“A bob and 6 pence, sir,” she stammered. The dazzingly white daisies were bedraggled, and Dean
wondered how she’d gathered so many amidst the chill of winter. He fished in his pocket, removed two shillings and passed them to her, sweeping the basket off her arm.

“If you don’t mind waiting a few minutes, I’ll return the basket and give you another shilling,” he promised.

“Yessir!”

Sam and Inias stopped, looking back at him, Inias frankly incredulous, Sam indulgent. “What?” he answered their looks gruffly. “The ladies will appreciate the flowers.” He brushed between the two men, and turned, walking backwards and holding a finger up in Inias’ face. “Always make the ladies happy, Mr. Milligan.”

They arrived at the house to find the visiting ladies donning their outer wear, jugging gloves and parasols. Dean liberally bestowed flowers amongst them, earning a bemusedly quirked eyebrow from Ms. Masters and a modest blush from Ms. Milligan. Goodbyes were made all around. Dean overheard Ms. Harvelle and Ms. Masters planning on a further meeting even as Ms. Harvelle’s hands worked busily braiding together daisy stems. Sam and Inias were covertly exchanging calling cards, a daisy having somehow found its way into Inias’ pocket. Mrs. Winchester gave Dean an affectionate look, her gentle hands threading a daisy through each button hole of his jacket. The foyer was flooded with a great deal of laughter and breathless goodwill, culminating when Ms. Harvelle bestowed a crown of flowers atop Charlie’s head. Sadness only took over when goodbyes were made – there were other calls to be made, it had been a pleasure, wouldn’t they stop by again sometime? Soon, the ladies promise over their shoulders as they leave, very soon!

The door closed behind them, Sam seeing them off and bearing the basket to return to the waif. Ms. Harvelle grabbed the last few daisies and manhandles them into the neckline of Mrs. Winchester’s dress as both women giggle. Dean rolled his eyes. “What pleasant young women!” Charlie said, swatting Ms. Harvelle away. “Enough, Jo! Enough!” Ms. Harvelle backed away, nothing shy about the smile on her face. “They’re surprisingly modest, given their parentage and connections. How was the Milligan boy?”


“Well, I’m tired of tea,” Ms. Harvelle announced in her brusque, blunt way. “What say we to lunch, and season it with wine?”

The door burst open and Samuel returned, looking distinctly proud of himself for no obvious reason. “Lunch?” he asked as if he’d overheard. He hadn’t, he was merely hungry all the time and capable of eating Dean out of manor and comfort given the opportunity.

Passing Sam a daisy, which he promptly tucked behind his ear, Charlie led the way to the dining room. “By the way, Dean? Sam? If you know any eligible young men, Ms. Masters and Ms. Milligan have both ‘come out’ this season, and are distressed by the some of the attention they have received. Having some nicer boys around them would improve their view of the species and protect them from unwanted advances.”

“You wish to improve women’s view of the male species?” Sam said incredulously.

“I like men very well, Samuel,” Charlie said tartly. “They are extremely useful in many respects.” She paused, a smile tugging at her lips. “I simply have no desire to bed them.” She burst into a laugh, Ms. Harvelle snorted her agreement. Samuel contrived to look aghast that such scandalous words would ever leave Mrs. Winchester’s lips.
“She’s got you there, Sam,” Dean clapped his brother on the back, grinning. “John Henry Winchester, if you push your sister one more time you will have no dessert for a week,” bellowed Ellen’s strident voice, her Liverpool accent obscuring the words. “What’d I just tell you, boy?”

Completely ignoring her, John barreled through the doorway and leapt at his father. Dean happily caught the child in an embrace and spun him around, letting his legs fly outward. John laughed with childish delight. “Faster, faster!” he pled, and Dean obliged, going about so rapidly he began to grow dizzy. John wiggled and wriggled in his arms, finally slipping free and dropping to the floor with a content sigh. Dean tottered, world teetering around him. Chuckling, Sam put an arm on Dean’s shoulder to help him stay up right.

“Dean, what have I told you, boy?” Ellen intentionally echoed her prior words, giving Dean a sharp look. She was holding Diana in her arms. The small child’s face was scrunched with distress, her chubby hands lifted to her eyes, but there was not a single actual tear evident. As if reading that Dean suspected her falsehood, Diana wailed and buried her face in Ellen’s shoulder. “There, there.” The wailing crescendoed.

“If John retches, I have to clean it up,” he recited her repeated admonition.

“And that’s the truth,” she vowed. The tantrum subsided the instant Ellen wasn’t looking and resumed the moment attention returned. Ah yes, the poor little darlings.

With an air of innocence, John ran to his mother and clutched at her skirts. “It’s alright, darling. I’ve got something for you,” Charlotte said, and dropping the crown of daisies atop John’s head. It instantly slipped down and became a necklace.

“I made that for you,” huffed Ms. Harvelle.

“Dean, I’ve been thinking about hat pins,” Sam said as if bestowing a great gift upon him.

“It’s okay, sweetie,” cooed Ellen, teasing at Diana’s cheeks until the skin pinked and a sweet, tentative smile came to the girl lips as she forgot what she was so unhappy about.

“Come on, everyone, lunch won’t serve itself,” Ms. Moseley called from the kitchen.

Letting it all wash over him, Dean smiled and went to the kitchen, grabbing a steaming pie as his share of settling out their lunch. That done, he took his place at the head of the table. John promptly climbed into his lab. Sam sat beside him and talked animatedly about the relative merits of onyx and tiger’s eye. Ms. Harvelle and Charlie bickered playfully about the hidden meanings of gifted daisy crowns. Ellen settled at the far end with the toddler, she and Ms. Moseley discussing the best use for slightly spoiled apples. Dean’s family, at one table, enjoying a meal. Everything he wanted from life, all the people he cared for, happy, healthy, and together. It was perfect – or at least, it was almost perfect. His mind conjured a phantom in the only empty seat, a lean young man with tousled black hair and stunning blue eyes and full lips smiling at him, gaze as full of adoration as the look Charlie and Ms. Harvelle were now leveling each other.

He sighed, took the butter knife from his son’s clumsy hand, and began his meal.

The closer it grew to Thursday, the — of February, the slower the time passed. The Wednesday evening before was the most unending yet. He couldn’t have said what was so dreadful about it, because in truth he hadn’t the least attention to spare nor the slightest ability to concentrate on a word that was said to him. By the time they left, Charlie was convinced he was ill, though in her sly words...
he detected a hint that she suspected the truth. She knew as well as he what the next evening was.

Dean woke that morning to the certainty that arms embraced him, a warm body pressed against his, and blue filled his vision. His first thought upon seeing sunlight and a pale sky was confusion, wondering where his companion had departed to. Reality set in harshly. Sadness and profound loneliness crushed down on him in a way that was unfamiliar and unwelcome. Ruthlessly, he quashed the feelings. They were unworthy of him. He was not unhappy, for the most part. He loved his family, and they loved him.

_I’ll love you tonight, Asmodeus._

Castiel’s voice whispered through his thoughts and he groaned, cock beginning to harden between his legs. He shook his head with a silent admonishment. Not today. He would not touch himself in solitude and risk dulling the acute pleasures to come. As the dream faded into nothing, the anticipation that had kept him up much of the night curled in his gut and settled tensely. His throat felt oddly constricted, and the thought of eating was nauseating. How many hours til he saw his angel again?

He’d known the day would be torture, and had planned ahead accordingly. The only horse he’d been able to afford to bring from the country was his black hunter, Impala. She was boarded at a stable nearby, and when he arrived she was already curried and saddled, ready for him to take her on a short excursion to the country. It proved pleasant to feel the wind in his hair, to escape the sights and smells of the city, but it did little to soothe him. The landscape around London was nothing like the rugged beauty of Lawrence, his manor in ——shire amongst the hills and dales of northern England. Some part of him wished he were home, no matter how desperately he craved the evening. As long as he remained in London, as long as he attended Ms. Naomi’s soirees, some part of him felt justified in hoping for the impossible. Once he returned home, such whims would return to their rightful place in dusty attics and cobwebbed corners, and he could return to his normal life.

Sighing, turning Impala back towards the city, he wished he truly thought it would be that easy.

By the time dusk fell, he was incapable of sitting still and had been in a state of partial arousal for hours. As early as he dared, he made his way to Ms. Naomi’s, having finally resolved that he’d prefer to wait around in her sitting room making awkward small talk with masked strangers while he awaited his angel than spend one minute longer stalking about his own home, snapping at anyone who looked at him.

Ms. Naomi’s impressive townhouse was on a narrow lane off —— Road, at the fringe of polite society. A wealthy dowager, Ms. Naomi was something of an unknown to Dean, for he had never met her. Ostensibly, these Thursday night meetings were intended as Salons in the French style, a place for men of letters and learning and power to meet and engage in lively discussions that spawned the great ideas of the morrow. Upon Dean’s arrival, a servant took his hat and gloves – and obligingly handed him the shepherd’s crook he’d completely forgotten the prior month. A quick stroll through the public rooms established that Castiel was yet to arrive. Several of the men with whom he’d exchanged words the previous month gave him nods of recognition which he returned in kind, and other than that, he was left to his own devices.

In other words, he seethed in a state of abject tension, his thoughts an agony of anticipation and need, his cock as stiff as a board, and probably as suitable for driving in nails as a hammer.

Guests trickled in seeking their acquaintances. Some couples immediately retiring upstairs. The music had not yet begun, but refreshments were laid out, and unattached men gravitated towards the table to exchange small talk and sound out their options. There was a timelessness to Ms. Naomi’s. Thick curtains blocked the view out every window, there was not a clock to be seen, and his
costume had not allowed him to bring his pocket watch. Surely, it was growing late. Several men approached him, and Dean managed disinterested chitchat to pass the time. Most recognized rapidly that he was paying them no mind and drifted off again.

The door opened and Castiel, a vision of divinity in draped white and black wings, stepped into the room. An older man dressed in staid clothes with a mask made entirely of cloth pulled over his head flanked him. They paused in the doorway and exchanged words. It was impossible to guess what might have been said, but their body language spoke to a comfortable familiarity with each other, the kind of intimacy that rendered it acceptable for the older man to lay a hand on Castiel’s shoulder and give it a squeeze before they parted ways. A stab of hot jealousy pierced through Dean, and he repressed it. The angel was not his, could never be his but for these nights. Who he was outside of here was none of Dean’s concern.

The gentleman strode rapidly across the room, met another man wearing a suit as garish as anything Sam had considered for his wedding, and the two exchanged a warm greeting before proceeding immediately upstairs. Meanwhile, Castiel stood in the doorway, looking around as if lost.

His eyes fell on Dean.

As Dean watched in wide-eyed wonder, Castiel’s entire demeanor changed. His eyes lit up, his shoulders relaxed, and all signs of the young man submissive to the elder who accompanied him vanished. With confident, eager strides, Castiel came directly to him. Their eyes locked, and blue seared through him like fire and ice.

“Mr. Castiel,” Dean inclined his head slightly, unwilling to break eye contact.

“Mr. Asmodeus,” he said, returning the nod. God, the things that voice did to him! A faint shudder twitched through his body and set the cloth enwrapping him swaying.

Dean opened his mouth to reply, and could find no words as passion, pure and unadulterated, licked through him. He’d thought himself aroused before, but now his member throbbed painfully, straining against the buckram of his pants. A glimmer of concern lowered those perfect eyes.

“Are you feeling unwell again?” There was a hint of true anxiety and a more generous splash of raw amusement in Castiel’s voice. Remembering all that ensued as a result of the last time Castiel asked him that question, Dean bit his lip hard to repress a moan, managing to choke it back into agitated breathing.

“Perhaps,” Dean chuckled weakly. “Forgive me.”

“No at all,” said Castiel brightly. He must have determined the cause of Dean’s distress somehow, for he laid a hand lightly on Dean’s and guided him once more towards the staircase. “A lie down was just the cure you required last time. Perhaps I will be as successful in doctoring what ails you this time, as well.”

“Any aid that you can administer would be overwhelmingly appreciated,” Dean said, following him in a daze.

They proceeded up the narrow staircase to the upstairs hallway, where they found many rooms vacant, including the familiar blue bedroom. Returning to their prior boudoir, the air was tense and silent but for the moans of other men. The moment the door was closed, Dean collapsed against it, fumbling with stupid fingers at the clasp of his cloak.

Seeing the muddle that Dean was making of the simple task, Castiel’s hands closed over his, and
though they moved confidently, Dean could feel them shaking slightly. Their skin brushed, and Dean whimpered.

“Are you truly ill?” Castiel asked with evident concern. The enveloping fabric fell away, and a breath of fresh air hit Dean’s overheated body. He heaved a sigh of relief, his knees weakening as he slid further down the door. Those gorgeous eyes left his to stare with burgeoning lust at Dean’s extremely prominent erection.

“I haven’t been able to stop thinking about you for a month,” Dean confessed.

The sound that Dean was growing accustomed to interpreting as Castiel licking his lips beneath his mask came. Castiel drew a deep breath, causing the fabric on him to shift and his wings to rise and fall.

“Me either,” he admitted.

“I can’t wait,” said Dean. “I want to dance with you again, and to have a chance to speak, but to be perfectly blunt, if I do not feel you inside me in the next five minutes they will have to send me to Bedlam.”

There was that sound again, the faint smack of lips, the click of moisture on dry skin! His mind embellished the noise by imagining Castiel’s lips wrapped around Dean, sucking down on him hard and he moaned pitifully. Lust flooded Castiel’s eyes. “We can’t have that,” Castiel’s voice was seductive and low. “However, if you will permit me to conduct an examination of the problem, I believe we can find the cure.” Trembling, Castiel took one of Dean’s hands and laid it to his cloth-swathed crotch. Dean squeezed Castiel’s bulge, heat burning through fabric, his actions feeling were deliciously filthy contrasted with the brilliant clean white of Castiel’s clothing. Castiel’s eyes slipped rapturously shut at the contact, and Dean palmed at the hard cock, drawing an almost pained moan from Castiel’s throat.

They stood like that for a moment, and then they were on each other.

Their bodies were close, their masks rustling as they brushed. Dean’s hands were on the gold belt securing Castiel’s robes. Castiel’s hands were on the buttons of Dean’s breeks. The belt undone, Dean’s placed his hands on Castiel’s shoulders and pushed the fabric away, caressing the unblemished skin beneath. He caught the harness for the wings and tried to remove that as well, earning a snarl from Castiel. “Leave them,” he said, his voice harsh and rough and good God no mere sound should make Dean feel like he’s about to tumble into his release. “Get on the bed.”

“Yes,” gasped Dean. Castiel turned and hurried to the bedside table. Dean leapt onto the mattress, settling on his knees. He tugged his pants down and then bent forward until he rested on knees and elbows. He watched Castiel’s every move hungrily as the winged angel opened a bottle of some kind of oil and poured it on to his hands. Castiel then looked to Dean, and froze, eyes wide, swollen cock twitching against his belly, as he stared with longing at Dean positioned and awaiting for him.

“You’re unbelievable,” breathed Castiel. “I want you so much.”

“You’ve used two of your minutes, Mr. Castiel,” Dean said desperately. “Three left ‘til madness, I promise you.”

Instantly, Castiel was behind him. There was no teasing, there was no warning, there was no delay. A hand settled on Dean’s still-clad back and two fingers were shoved deeply into him. It was better, so much better, than he remembered, than anything he’d been able to do for himself. His weigh collapsed forward, shifting his bottom into Castiel’s hand, and he groaned in satisfaction.
“Don’t worry, my precious demon,” Castiel thrust in and out harshly, rapidly, smearing Dean with lubricant inside and out. Focusing on Castiel’s voice was all that kept Dean from climaxing immediately. “I will always catch you before you fall.”

“I know you will,” Dean whimpered. Frantically, he freed his mouth from his mask and pressed his lips into his arm, holding back sobs of relief that finally, finally he was going to be filled again. A third finger roughly joined the other two. It hurt as it had not the first time. Though Dean had begged, he knew that wasn’t what spurred Castiel to take such haste, he had seen in the angel’s captivating eyes that his need and longing matched Dean’s own. With such desperation driving them, there was no time to prepare, no patience to give taut muscles time to relax, there was only right now and how much they required physical contact with each other. Even the hurt felt good, because it meant he was being touched. He’d suffer anything if only Castiel would keep doing as he did. “God, that’s...that’s...” Clenching his legs, he raised his bottom, straining to drive Castiel deeper with each penetration even though it was impossible. Dean’s thoughts screamed for a touch against that perfect spot deep within him, and Dean strove for contact, shifting himself forward and back, up and down, but Castiel compensated for each adjustment, denying him.

“Not until I say so,” muttered Castiel distractedly. He audibly bit back a moan.

Glancing back, Dean took in sight of Castiel behind him. On his knees, Castiel’s gaze was locked on the motion of his own hand buried within Dean and his other hand stroked his oil-coated cock. Desire choked at Dean, and he moaned out, “What are you...?” Castiel’s eyes met his, dark with need and pleasure, and though he couldn’t see it, Dean was prepared to swear that the angel smiled at him.

“Saving you.”

The fingers withdrew, and before he even registered the emptiness, Castiel lined himself up and thrust in to Dean in a single motion. Pain and pleasure coursed through him, eliciting a sound he would never have confessed to a soul was a scream. Then...nothing.

“Are you al—?”

“Move, Damn you!” hollowed Dean. Panting hoarsely, he rocked forward and slammed back, and they cried out in unison.

Hands clutched his clothed hips and squeezed, and Castiel held Dean still and began a punishing pace, grunting and groaning each time he pulled back and then sank back in. Dean was beyond words. Every few thrusts, Castiel hit that spot that threatened to shatter him irreparably, incomparable bliss melting his bones until he couldn’t have confessed to a soul was a scream. Then...nothing.

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“Asmodeus,” growled Castiel. In his mind, he plead with Castiel to touch him, to never stop filling him, to keep moving, to go faster or slower or harder or softer, but there were no actual words, they tangled up with raw desire and couldn’t make it past his lips. “As...mo...oh God this feels good. I need...I want...” Flesh met flesh as Castiel’s legs slammed into Dean’s buttocks and thighs, Castiel’s cock burning within him and driving him higher than he’d ever been. His body felt afire, he was suffocating beneath his jacket and shirt, tears leaked from his eyes, light seared his head. He thought he might die it felt so glorious.

“Whatever it is, take it,” the sentence emerged as if ripped from Dean, a howl whose words he couldn’t put meaning to. “Take me, angel...I’m yours...”
Hands left Dean’s hip, seized his shoulders and pulled him upright. Castiel growled and groaned and thrust up into his body. Every stroke hit Dean’s most sensitive place, and it was too much, far too much pleasure for anybody to bear. “Ca...” he gasped. His vision blanked in blackness each time Castiel struck against him, showing him the room as one massive blur of blue. “Cas...” His climax rolled over him, released in a flood though he was yet untouched, and he collapsed limply back against Castiel. Crying out, Castiel barely caught Dean’s weight.

There was a moment’s hesitation, and then Castiel was thrusting into him again despite the awkward angle, chasing his satisfaction. Dean whimpered at the continued stimulation to his spent, weak body, feebly tried to help. Barely responsive muscles clenched, and Castiel groaned, wrapping his arms around Dean and shifting his dead weight to improve his angle. Dean clenched again. “That...” Castiel whispered as he thrust again. “Do that...” Dean mustered more strength and bore down hard. “Yes,” groaned Castiel. The body supporting Dean tensed completely, arms crushing him, and Dean squeezed again. “God, yes...” Castiel’s movements flagged as he spent himself inside Dean, one, two, three pivots of Castiel’s hips, and then the angel went limp. Tangling together, they fall back against the bed, panting as if they’d run to Marathon.

“That was amazing, right?” Dean finally managed.

“Yes,” agreed Castiel, still breathless. “Yes, that was amazing, Mr. Asmodeus.”

“Good...good,” mumbled Dean abstractly. “I thought so...I thought it was...just wanted to be sure that you...”

“You can be sure,” Castiel nodded, his chin bumping Dean’s shoulder each time. “I can honestly say that was the best experience my body has ever had. Ever, ever.”

Dean chuckled, dissolving into a pained groan as an ache settled into his spent muscles. “Ever, ever,” he echoed by way of agreement. Flopping over, Dean pushed Castiel off him and tackled the seemingly insurmountable task of removing his jacket and shirt.

“How often we are in concurrence is one of my favorite things about the time we spend together,” Castiel mused, sitting up, shrugging off his wings, then turning to help Dean.

“What’s your favorite?”

“You don’t need to ask me that,” Castiel emphasized the words by running his hand along the diamond of flesh now exposed on Dean’s chest.

“No, I guess I don’t,” Dean smiled against his mask. They pealed Dean’s clothing off, then settled back, unashamedly perusing each other’s naked bodies. “You know what I wish?”

“No – what?” Castiel asked. Fingers dropped onto Dean’s stomach and began tracing lazy swirls there.

“I would very much like to kiss you,” he said wistfully. Castiel’s head quirked to the side, a curious light in his eyes, and he nodded once decisively.

“Close your eyes,” ordered Castiel. Obediently, Dean did so, though it meant blotting out his sight of beautiful blue. Fingers lifted Dean’s mask aside, exposing his mouth to the open air. “My eyes are closed, too,” Castiel said, which explained why a moment later Dean felt stubble bump hard against his lips. He grunted, and Castiel laughed, and blindly they sought each other’s lips, finding a nose, a cheek, the curve of a chin. Dean took the time to lightly kiss each, loving the feeling of coarse skin against his own. Finally, mouth found mouth and Dean moaned as Castiel’s lips satisfied his every
fantasy. They were plush and soft and malleable, giving at the slightly pressure from Dean. Warmth and comfort spread from the soft contact. Castiel seemed unsure what to do, and so Dean took the lead, teasing at Castiel’s mouth with his tongue until the angel realized that Dean wished entry. Castiel tasted like honey and pepper and something Dean couldn’t place but that was his new favorite flavor. As their tongues met, Castiel moaned lightly into Dean’s mouth, and he breathed the sound in hungrily as Castiel drew away from him.

“Was that your first kiss?” breathed Dean tenderly.

“Yes,” Castiel mumbled. Dean felt a surge of possessiveness. He grabbed the back of Castiel’s heads and forced their lips together again, ravishing the angel’s delicious mouth with his tongue, adoring as Castiel tentatively licked at Dean’s lips and explored his mouth. They stayed joined until the need for air drove them apart, and both fell back against the bed, breathing hard. The weight of Castiel’s head settled pleasantly on Dean’s chest.

They each placed their masks back in place, and Dean opened his eyes to see a mass of black hair facing him from beneath the edges of Castiel’s masks, rising and falling with Dean’s breathing. Dean buried his hands among the tendrils and massaged Castiel’s scalp, delighting in every appreciative sigh he coaxed from the other man. Imperceptibly, they gradually shifted until there was no distance left between their bodies. Castiel lay flush beside him, legs encircling Dean’s, an arm around Dean’s stomach, his head and shoulder’s resting on Dean’s chest. Dean encircled Castiel’s shoulder and pressed him closer, and Castiel gave a happy sigh and snuggled closer still. The profound delight of being in physical contact with another person flowed through Dean, and he thought he could easily spend the rest of his life doing nothing but holding Castiel in his arms.

Shifting, Castiel turned to rest his chin on Dean’s breast, looking up at him, the expression conveyed by his eyes adorably vulnerable and content. Castiel’s eyes closed as a yawn stretched his jaw and exposed Castiel’s chin beneath the painted mask. Dean got his first glimpse of pale skin shadowed with black and lips as pink and delicate as Dean had imagined. Reaching over, Castiel took Dean’s hand, interlaced their fingers, and lifted them in the air over head. Their skin contrasted, Castiel’s appearing light as cream against Dean’s, which was sun tanned dark where his sleeves didn’t protect him. Blue eyes studied their hands as Castiel turned them now this way, now that. Dean rolled his thumb over the back of Castiel’s hand and smiled at the soft approving sound Castiel made at the back of his throat.

“What do you do?” asked Castiel drowsily.

“That’s a little personal...” said Dean.

“Apologies – I meant, what are your hobbies, your pastimes?” Castiel corrected himself.

Dean hesitated before replying, but when he considered his answer, he knew there was nothing revealing in it. Hundreds of men in London for the Season could as easily answer identically. “I’m fond of riding,” said Dean. “I like to hunt and shoot, and I keep a good stable. When I have access to appropriate locales, I am also partial to walking and fishing.”

“Oh,” said Castiel. Their hands dropped. The single word and simple gesture conveyed such a profound disappointment that Dean felt sick. “That is why your hands are so brown?” Dean managed mumbled agreement. The first thing that his angel learned about him as a man caused Castiel to think less of him. It hurt like a fist clenched ‘round his heart.

Awkward silence fell.

“What about you?” Dean asked tentatively.
“The opposite, I suppose,” Castiel sighed. “Indoor pursuits – art and reading primarily. I’m fond of poetry...” Castiel trailed off as if made as uncomfortable by their supposed difference as Dean was. However, Dean felt a surge of relief. This was a topic into which he could enter.

“Have you read *The Prisoner of Chillon* yet?” he asked. A prayer went up to whatever kind spirit led Dean to share in his brother’s pursuits. Many a night at the Winchester home passed in Samuel entertaining the family with dramatic readings of his favorite works.

“No!” said Castiel with surprised enthusiasm. The pain in Dean’s chest vanished, replaced with happy warmth. “I have not been able to acquire a copy.”

“I will bring it for you next soiree,” promised Dean. “You see, we are not so opposite after all!”

“I loved *On First Looking into Chapman’s Homer,*” Castiel enthused. “It was as if I stood myself and stared upon the ‘realms of gold,’ how Keats could capture so much in so few words...have you traveled, Mr. Asmodeus?”

“Yes,” said Dean. The poem was one of his favorites, as well. “As Cortez has, I’ve stared at the Pacific, though I don’t think I surmised much, wild or otherwise. I have seen walked on Delos and seen many of the other isles of the Mediterranean.”

Lifting himself up on an elbow, Castiel met Dean’s eyes. The blue was as bright as Dean had ever seen despite the dim lighting, wide with wonder and soft with interest and affection. No, Dean amended, that could not be, they were too unknown to each other for that. It was merely curiosity.

“How is that...how did you...you must be...?” Castiel stammered, unable to alight on a question that did not tread dangerous ground.

For a moment the answer was on Dean’s lips, how his father was a second son, how his mother died in childbirth, how John Winchester was lieutenant on the new-built ship *HMS Audacious* at the time. How John convinced his patron and Captain, now Admiral, Turner to permit the boys on board, kept at John’s own expense, how Captain Turner’s illegitimate daughter, Missouri Moseley, had helped raise them, how Dean had circumnavigated the world three times before his 13th birthday. How the advent of war with France had forced Dean and Sam to return to land, but each peace brought them new adventures asea. How Dean fervently importuned his father to buy him a midshipman’s commission, but John had denied the request without explanation. How they had been permanently beached when Dean was 19, Sam 15, to take up residence at Lawrence with their Uncle Henry Winchester II. How Dean had not left England’s shores since that day, how in ‘05 his uncle died of typhus, his father was killed at Trafalgar, how all the responsibilities of landed gentlemanhood, included a young and troublesome Samuel, descended onto Dean’s unprepared shoulders at 21. How he’d struggled to understand his sexual desires even as everyone around him pressed for him to find a wife, how he was too young to wed yet too shackled by obligation not to. How he despaired until he met Charlie how they were wed in ’09. How he was happy with his life save for the absence of a beautiful, blue-eyed angel to sit in the vacant chair at his dining table. Tears pooled in his eyes and his hands shook as he clutched Castiel to him.

Neither spoke for a long time.

“I’m sorry,” whispered Castiel. “I shouldn’t have...”

“It’s alright,” Dean forgave him brusquely. He hesitated. “Were circumstances different...I would happily share my history with you if I could, Mr. Castiel. Perhaps I can instead divert you with tales of places I’ve been? My wife says I can bore the shell off a turtle.”

Another extended pause. The warmth in Castiel’s eyes diminished and he slumped back onto Dean’s
Dean groaned, realizing what he’d just said. “It’s not what you think,” he said softly. “I know I shouldn’t have ever mentioned it, but having done so, I hope you’ll forgive me a brief explanation? She knows I am here. She knows that I want this, and not her or any of her gender. She approves, and has as little interest in physical pursuits with me as I do with her. There are women who are like we are...like I am, I mean, and I was fortunate to find one such to wed. Forgive me, I’m saying far too much, but...” He floundered for the appropriate way to conclude his inappropriate exploration of his personal life.

“I’m not married,” Castiel said in a rush. “And it is we, for I am like you – I have no interest in the female form. And it is not too much to share, it is far too little, and I wish we could discuss all, but...” He shook his head, burying the chill ceramic of his mask against Dean’s heart. “We both know the reasons we cannot, must not.”

“Yes,” sadness flooded Dean. How many hours did they have left together before they would leave safety and companionship for the cold, lonely chill of a London February? Sitting up, he wrapped his arms around Castiel, guiding the other man until the embraced closely, bare chest to bare chest, hands resting on firm back muscles, Castiel’s buttocks settling comfortably into his lap. Abruptly, Dean separated them, only because he wished to see Castiel’s angelic eyes once more. “Let me tell you about the Greek isles.” Castiel’s gaze blossomed with delight, and he nodded enthusiastically.

Dean would never have credited how little of the night they spent love making, and how much of it they spent talking. He’d not have traded their discussion for mere physical intimacy for all the wide world.

Chapter End Notes

By the way, the full text of the Keats poem they quote is on Wikipedia, it's short if you want to read it: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/On_First_Looking_into_Chapman%27s_Homer

This chapter is set in February, 1817, the first was in January, 1817, right around Dean’s birthday, in case anyone was wondering.
So, um, I’ve been writing a chapter day, which is a pretty insane pace. I’m normally a fast writer, but this is a bit much even for me. Yet...I want to see if I can keep it up. I like having difficult goals to strive for (I once made an entire queen sized granny square blanket during the Olympics, just to see if I could) ...so, I’ve set myself a ridiculous goal: a chapter a day on this til it’s done. If I pull it off, that'll have ya'll a whole book in about two weeks.

Wish me luck!

It will make a welcome relief from packing! Charlie had said to Dean. You’ll have a fine time, I’m sure. Besides, there’s no way to refuse such a polite invitation from such a notable man. You have to go. If not for yourself, consider it a personal favor for me, as I’ve become good friends with Ms. Milligan and Ms. Masters, and a consideration to Sam as he pursues his acquaintance with Mr. Milligan. It was all stuff and nonsense, they both knew that with Samuel visiting the Moore family for the month and Ellen and the children already returned to Lawrence Hall, what Charlie really meant was, you are the only thing standing between me and noisily making love to Johanna Harvelle on every piece of furniture in the house, including your bed.

“...don’t you agree, Mr. Winchester?” Adam Milligan fixed Dean with a steely, pale green stare, pulling him from the abstraction that was the only thing getting him through the evening.

Looking up from his wine, Dean caught a glimpse of men watching him expectantly, faces made ruddy by flickering candlelight and the rich, dark wood that paneled the walls and seemed to absorb any attempt to render the room bright, welcoming, or cheery.

Reluctantly, Dean met Mr. Milligan’s eyes, deep set in a narrow face showing early signs of growing gaunt with age. At the perceived challenge to his dominance, Mr. Milligan’s eyes narrowed and his face grew stern, a disturbing yet effective contrast to his lingering boyish good looks. Flushing slightly, Dean was glad for the dim dining room to hide his discomfort as he averted his gaze, taking in the expensive material and fine fit of Mr. Milligan’s jacket before fixing his eyes on Mr. Milligan’s staid cravat.

“Of course I do, Mr. Milligan,” Dean raised his wine glass in acknowledgement. All he could do was hope that whatever he’d just agreed to was not too mortifying.

“See, Mr. Novak?” There was a hint of snide triumph in Mr. Milligan’s voice. “Even a Northerner of small concerns concurs with my view of the matter. You must concede you’ve the wrong, and I’ve the right.”

“I concede nothing,” the middle aged man, introduced to Dean earlier as Gabriel Novak, met Mr. Milligan’s aggressive assertion with a wide, easy smile and a casual tone of voice. “Mr. Winchester is young and it is his first time joining us. I appreciate the impossible situation that he is in, required to curtsy to courtesy,” Mr. Novak chuckled at his alliterative turn, “and respect his host by espousing opinions that may not be his own. Thus, I take him as not the least authority on the manner.”
Well, at least Novak hadn’t said Dean’s opinion was irrelevant because he wasn’t titled. That’s what
Lord Walker had asserted earlier when Dean had suggested he preferred a plain dish to a ragout. Nor
had he damned Dean with faint praise, as Mr. Alder had done, calling him the best of the country
squires to a room of people who clearly thought that Fielding’s depiction of Squire Western was
intended as a biography of the breed. They probably assumed he was illiterate as well, and that
Henry Fielding was as unfamiliar to Dean as a pig was to the moon.

Indeed, in contrast to the things that had been said to Dean – or, worse, said about Dean as if he
could not neither ears nor the ability to comprehend the King’s English – Mr. Novak had paid him a
downright compliment. After all, Mr. Novak’s statement indicated that he believed that Dean was
conversant in standard societal etiquette. It was a far cry from when they’d entered the room and Mr.
Milligan had, with uncomfortable familiarity, clapped a hand to Dean’s shoulder and informed him to
“not worry – the place settings are very fine but he understood that things were different aboard a
ship or in the country, and he’d not hold it against Dean were he to use his fish fork and his salad
knife to consume his meat.” Moments later, Mr. Milligan had forcibly steered Dean to his seat,
practically pushed him into it, and then stood over him, staring into his eyes intimidatingly. That had
easily taken the lead as the most unpleasant experience of a highly unpleasant evening, and Dean had
no idea what it was about, nor why Mr. Milligan once more was catching his eye now. He met the
pale green gaze with confusion. Perhaps all of this was meant to discourage the growing familiarity
between the young Milligans and the Winchester family? He could think of no other reason that he
should be so formally invited and then so ruthlessly set down for all to see.

“Here, now,” snapped Mr. Milligan into the momentary silence. His eyes bored into Dean’s. “On the
nose, Mr. Novak, a little too on the nose, I think. You overstate his situation, surely. A cunning
young man like Mr. Winchester knows his own mind. Why should he think better than to make his
opinion public? Come, Mr. Winchester, defend your agreement. Let Mr. Novak hear what you
would say.” There was the hint of a cruel smile on Mr. Milligan’s face. Bastard. He knew that Dean
had not been listening, and was determined to out him in front of the group. If he didn’t want Mrs.
Winchester and Anna Milligan to be friends, surely there was a better way of accomplishing that end
than subjecting Dean to social torture!

Tearing away from Mr. Milligan’s eye contact as if removing a leech from his leg, Dean glanced
helplessly at expectant faces up and down the table. Ten men assembled in the formal dining hall at 3
North ------ Street. Opulence surrounded them, dark polished wood, gilded candelabras, air thick
with cigar smoke, a table covered in fine linen, bare but for the crumbs of a fine meal and drinks in
crystal decanters and fine glassware. As his mind scrambled for something even vaguely appropriate
to say, it occurred to him unhelpfully that perhaps the point of inviting him was not to divide the
families, but rather to remind Dean of the distance between a man such as himself and people such as
these. The Winchesters gave no honors and received many to have any Milligan grace their sitting
room.

A movement caught his eye. Mr. Novak, brown hair receding from his forehead and lightly streaked
with gray, a shadow of a mustache and beard around his lips, was mouthing something pointedly to
him. Dean gave the slightest shake of his head to indicate that he didn’t understand. Mr. Novak
rolled his eyes and tried again, lips shaping words with exaggerated emphasis until Lord Walker
scowled at him and Mr. Novak converted his movements into an overdramatic yawn.

Dean was no closer to having a clue what the message was.

“Don’t be shy now, Mr. Winchester. You’ve graced us already with your opinion on fishing,’’ Mr.
Kubrick sneered. The pock-faced man with a hooked nose was a sycophant for Lord Walker, and
though they’d known each other mere hours, Dean loathed them both. He resisted the urge to grind
his teeth. Learning Dean was an outdoorsman, they’d forced him into a conversation on outdoor
pursuits because surely on a property such as yours, large and so very far from the city, you must know more about such things than those of us kept occupied with governance and duty, men of the Ton that we are and, of course, now it was fodder to use against him. “Come, tell us what we all know already – that there is not a sane man alive,” he paused to sneer at Mr. Novak, “who supported that absurd income tax.”

That was what this was about?

There was a hiss from the Lord Walker, and Mr. Kubrick realized moments too late that he’d given the game up. A furious expression darkened his face.

“I’m afraid Mr. Novak had the right of it,” Dean said with all the calm aplomb he could manage. “I feared it rude to speak my opinion freely, knowing it to be at odds with those of my esteemed hosts.” He hated picking each of his words carefully, examining each one for double meanings and unintended implications before it left his mouth. “However, pressed to share my views on the matter, I’ll confess I think the repealing of the income tax was an ill-judged decision by the House of Commons, and I’ve done what I can to ease the increased burden to the poor of my district. It is in the interests of all gentlemen of good conscience to recognize the privileges of birth and accept the burdens that accompany those privileges.” A host of scowls greeted this pronouncement, save one face, which broke into a broad grin.

“Are you a Whig, Mr. Winchester?” exclaimed Mr. Novak with evident delight. Lord Walker and Mr. Kubrick gave the man matching looks of disgust. “There are two Whigs invited to Mr. Milligan’s table? Oh, happy day, my good fellows, happy day! You will find it harder to team up on me, now I’ve an ally!” All eyes were on Mr. Novak now, who gave Dean a mischievous wink.

As normal conversation resumed and Dean was released from the Hell of being the center of attention among this group who were so determined to demonstrate the precise extent to which they perceived themselves his superiors, Dean released a slow, relieved breath. Mr. Novak argued some point well past the point of absurdity, the others took him entirely seriously and grew more and more irritated, the twinkle in Mr. Novak’s eyes grew brighter and brighter, and Mr. Milligan watched all silently, pale eyes dark beneath his brow as his gaze pierced Dean. Whenever Dean looked his way, he found Mr. Milligan still looking at him. An irrational voice in his mind wondered what Mr. Milligan saw, what he knew, if he somehow had learned of Dean’s participation in the soirees, if he knew every secret of Dean’s soul.

Thank God he and Charlie were tying off their stay in London for the season on Saturday. Though leaving troubled him in some respects – not least being that it would render it impossible for him to attend further events at Ms. Naomi’s – it would be relief to escape the stultifying, suffocating attention of men such as Mr. Alder and Mr. Milligan.

By the time Dean got home that evening, everyone else was abed, and he was so wrought up and frustrated that he couldn’t relax. In his night clothes, he tossed and turned beneath his blankets, unable to find a comfortable position, incapable of quieting his thoughts, sick with frustration for Mr. Milligan and all men of his ilk. He wished he’d had a chance to thank Mr. Novak. It had meant a lot to have the older man support him, and Dean respected the courage it took to stand by one’s opinion while faced with such forceful opposition. A pair of cruel green eyes haunted his dreams, for once supplanting the lovely blue pair that usually left him struggling to find rest. With a final grunt of frustration, he stood up, donned a dressing gown, and adjourned to his to study.

Sitting down at the desk, he lit a single candle, pulled out a piece of paper, a quill and ink, and set to writing.

Dear C,
I’m sorry I have not written in several days. The weekend spent preparing for the departure of our children, and for our own leavetaking one week hence. It was fatiguing, and I am glad it is over, but it had the wonderful advantage of causing the time to pass quickly. I turned around to find that I had passed from Wednesday to Monday and was that much nearer the day when I will next see you.

Forgive me if I speak roughly, but I have had the most damnably unpleasant evening and I needed to relieve myself of thoughts that have plagued me for hours. Never in my life have I seen a more disgusting set, so certain of their superiority, so convinced that they have the right of everything in all regards, that it never enters their mind that they might be incorrect about anything, even that about which they know nothing. Before the case is ever brought before them, they have reached judgment, and may God have mercy on the soul of the condemned because they will have none. If I could never see them again, it would be too soon – save one, who showed himself to be a diamond in the rough. In his company I would happily spend more time – though pray do not be jealous, for I mean nothing of the kind – I speak merely of friendship.

A strange fear struck me in the course of the evening’s trials, and now I find I cannot put it aside enough to even fall asleep. A man there gave me the strangest looks, and I wondered – can he know what we have done together? It was a stab of chill fear to my heart. Exposure would be ruinous to myself and all concerned in my affairs. Sense tells me to stop rather than risk that harm to my loved ones, yet the thought of not seeing you again is abhorrent to me in every regard. I never thought myself so selfish, so willing to risk all. It frightens me.

Not so much as the prospect of giving you up, however.

I will see you on Thursday, my darling angel, and until then know that I remain ever your most devoted,

A.

By the time he finished writing, the clock on the mantle chimed an echoing refrain of three bells, his eyes were gritty with fatigue, his hand ached, and his thoughts had finally calmed. He folded the letter and sealed it with wax. With a sigh, he opened the bottom drawer of his desk and added the letter to the pile of others already there. He’d written six such over the past weeks, with no more idea of what he would do with them now than he’d had when he penned the first. If he were wise, he’d burn them, but the desire to present them all to Castiel on Thursday was strong, to let the angel see how much of Dean’s thoughts he occupied. To what end? He slammed the drawer shut and slumped against his desk, momentarily dejected. What a hopeless situation this was proving to be. His attendance at Ms. Naomi’s had been intended as a way to alleviate the unending ache for companionship he felt, not amplify it a thousand times over. How he felt now was worse than how he’d ever felt as he gazed longingly at Ms. Harvelle and Charlie, or Samuel and Ms. Moore, and wished he had a person to be as devoted to as they were to each other.

Imagined pressure on his shoulders soothed him, arms clasped him, short dark hair brushed his cheek, soft lips pressed to his temple. Blue eyes ensorcelled him, swallowed him, captured heart and soul and mind as one. The low, smooth, sweet voice of his angel sang him to sleep.

“Don’t worry, Dean,” the half-forgotten sound of his mother’s voice drifted up from thirty years before. “Angels are watching over you.” She had said that to him every evening. After her death, he’d never believed it – not until now.

Spirit soothed, he slipped to sleep with his head cradled in his arms.

In the morning, he woke stiff and achy, his back protesting mightily. With a groan, he stood and stretched, smacked his lips a few times to clear the gunk from them, and was confronted by the sight
of Charlie standing beside the door, watching him with a concerned expression.

“Do you want to talk about it?” she asked.

“No,” he replied more harshly than he’d intended to. He softened his tone. “No.” Crossing to her, he put a hand on her shoulder and grazed a brotherly kiss across her cheek. “I’m alright, Charlie. Truly. I’m looking forward to going home. I’ll be ready to resume our preparations in an hour, if that’s alright with you.”

He didn’t wait for her answer, and as he pulled the door open and started out, she called, “as long as you know that I’m here when you’re ready.” In an undertone he didn’t think he was meant to hear, she added, “you stubborn idiot.”

Shaking his head, he strode down the hallway and up the stairs. Spring had brought pleasant changes to the house, the addition of color in the form of flowers on nearly every available surface, the opening of drapes long closed, the airing out of stuffy rooms. Lost in thought, he topped the stairs, turned towards his room, and saw a flash of cream-colored fabric a moment too late to stop his forward moment before he walked into someone.

A slight form jostled to the ground at his feet, bright blue eyes, a child’s soft features framed by a mop cap that couldn’t constrain wispy blonde strands, a demure cream colored dress appropriate for a youth.

“Who the…?” he bit back an expletive. There was something familiar about her. “My apologies,” he amended. “May I help you up?” He held out a hand, and she took it tentatively, her hands calloused and worn, a sharp her angelic features. The comparison stirred his memory. “You’re the flower girl!” he exclaimed as she got to her feet. Blushing bright red, she slipped her hand free and smoothed her dress.

“Mr. Winchester…?” he moved to see Ms. Harvelle standing behind him. “Have you met Claire?”

“Claire?” he asked dumbly. He thought the girl must be around ten, and she no longer appeared so gaunt as she had when he’d seen her the month before.

“Yes, sir,” she whispered. Her voice had a hint of refinement not common to the lower classes, and was so faint and breathy he could hardly make it out.

“Mrs. Winchester has hired her on,” Ms. Harvelle explained in a tone that brooked no argument. “It’s been unreasonable of you to expect two gentlewomen to see to their own toilette and errands without the aid of a ladies maid. Don’t worry, Mrs. Winchester is taking the expense from her pin money.”

“I wasn’t worried,” he said faintly. The child could hardly require enough pay or food to have much impact on the household expenses. He knelt down so he could look her in the eye. Shyly, she looked at his face, stopping short of meeting his gaze. “Hello, Claire, my name is Dean Winchester.”

“Claire Richardson, sir,” she answered faintly.

“Are you coming to Lawrence Hall with us, Ms. Richardson?” he asked, a hint of a smile playing on his lips.

She caught his eyes, aghast to be addressed so politely, then looked to Ms. Harvelle for guidance.

“It’s alright, Claire,” Ms. Harvelle said encouragingly. “Answer Mr. Winchester.”

“Yes, sir.”
“Would you like us to relocate your parents as well?” He was more than willing to do so, he could always provide employment for able bodied adults. And if they were not able bodied, they deserved charity.

“My mother passed, sir,” she bit her lip and tears swam in her beautiful eyes and he felt a stab of guilt. “My father…” She shrugged helplessly.

“Right,” he said with embarrassment. “Well, we’ll be at Lawrence Hall in a week and a half, and when you are not occupied with your duties, you can explore to your heart’s content, and play with our children. I hope you shall find it to your liking.”

“Very happy, I’m sure,” she bobbed a fair imitation of a curtsy.

“Claire, I could use your help downstairs, if you will…?” Ms. Harvelle said.

“Of course, Ms. Harvelle!” Brushing by Dean, the girl fled downstairs. Ms. Harvelle chuckled and Dean watched in wonder as the slip of girl vanished into the drawing room.

“Don’t let it bother you,” Ms. Harvelle said. “I imagine in a few years she’ll be comfortable enough to stop calling you ‘sir’ every sentence.” Dean rolled his eyes and laughed.

Packing for their departure sped the days by in a blur, bringing Thursday upon him before he knew it. The morning dawned cloudy but warm, the trilling of birds celebrating the arrival of spring making a cacophony outside Dean’s window. Though the Winchesters did not leave ‘til Saturday, the preparations were mostly done. He and Charlie had decided to make a morning and afternoon of it, playing the couple they weren’t – with Ms. Harvelle in attendance, of course. They shared a meal, talked in the sitting room, entertained Mr. and Mrs. Lafitte for a time, and went for a stroll. It was all tremendously sedate, but Charlie and Ms. Harvelle knew him well and did their best to dissipate his tension, and he allowed their efforts to calm his anticipation as the hour of his reunion with Castiel approached.

Evening came, as it always eventually does, and found Dean once again standing by himself in the beautifully appointed sitting room at Ms. Naomi’s home. The rooms seemed more crowded than he’d recalled, men passing by and giving him assessing looks before either seeking introduction or moving on. Though February should have prepared him for the fact that Castiel and his unknown companion were not among the early arrivals, he was nonetheless taken aback at how long he found himself waiting for the angel to arrive. He’d allowed himself the faint hope that Castiel anticipated their time together as much as Dean did, and the cruel voice in his mind that continually reminded him that he could never truly have a relationship with the other man found ammunition in every minute that passed without the angel appearing.

Unable to stand staring at the doorway any longer, Dean ghosted through the rooms, hoping that in constant movement he’d be spared having to pretend interest in anyone else at the party. The first dance was assembling in the ballroom, and he nearly ran across the space lest anyone ask his hand. Pausing to catch his breath in the small room where Zachariah had once introduced himself, Dean stumbled as someone deliberately bumped into him. Turning, he was confronted by a stranger a little taller than himself, face and hair completely concealed by a white mask depicting Zeus, complete with a golden diadem and a beard carved in the imitation of thick locks of hair. The mask was alabaster white save for the pupils, cut circles that revealed nothing of the man save for the black pupils of his eyes.

“Good evening, Mr. Asmodeus,” said a voice that tickled at his memory. Lean and nearly trembling with energy, the man’s figure gave the impression of youth though his voice had the rasp of age. His garb was dated and garish, straight from the Versailles of Louis’ heyday. His jacket had a full skirt in
bright pink embroidered in silver and gold, his pantaloons were made of white velvet, of all things, and silk stockings ended in heeled court shoes the match of his jacket. Frippery and lace tumbled from his wrists and cascaded down his front.

Part of him wanted to rebuff anyone who would seek his attention so rudely, but after a moment’s internal battle, he decided to be polite. It cost him nothing to maintain good relations with his fellow attendees, and if he caused trouble, he might lose his chance to see Castiel. “I’m sorry, you have the whip hand over me,” he said jovially. “I’m afraid I’ve not had the honor...?”

“I am Michael,” was the reply. Dean gave a slight, polite bow. “My apologies for shouldering you.” There was not a hint of contrition in his voice. “It was merely my eagerness to make your acquaintance at last. Your reputation has proceeded you, Mr. Asmodeus.”

“You must be mistaken,” Dean said. “I have been here twice and have spoken with few, I hardly believe I have a reputation.”

“Eyes such as yours would be noticed anywhere,” came Mr. Michael’s arrogant answer. Dean frowned. Such a statement could mean many things, most of them hinting at worrisome things. He shook off the paranoid thought. No one could identify Dean Winchester based solely on Mr. Asmodeus’ exposed hands, green eyes, and above average height, and none but Castiel had seen him in less. “Mr. Zachariah told me of you.”

Through the open door, Dean could see the dancers prancing and strutting, flashes and flickers of all the colors of the rainbow as they paraded across the floor. “Ah, did he?” said Dean noncommittally. A man dressed in an aggressively orange outfit entered the room and approached a group of men holding a hushed conversation nearby.

“Yes,” said Mr. Michael firmly. “He suggested that you might be someone of interest to me. And he was right.” Uncertainly, Dean gave Michael a second glance, but saw nothing that he hadn’t seen the first time. It was impossible to distinguish the man’s features, for the mask obscured all save for the pupils of his eyes, peering blackly through two small dots in the eyes of the Greek god’s face. As little as he could see, there was something about those eyes that made him uncomfortable, pinned and trapped, laid bare, violated, even. He repressed a shudder. “He was right. You’re fascinating. I would like to get to know you better.”

The other group of men vacated the room, leaving Dean disturbingly aware that he and Mr. Michael were alone. There was something so very wrong about all of this, but he could not put his finger on it. Michael closed with him, and before Dean could react a hand grasped the back of his head, forcing his eyes to meet Michael’s shadowed gaze. “I do not appreciate men who do not give me their attention while I am speaking with them.”

Anger overcame all polite objections. Dean knocked Michael’s arm away roughly and pushed past the other man, striding through the door and into the ballroom. There was a shout behind him, loud enough to draw eyes towards the parlor even from among the dancers, but Dean ignored it and continued on. Searching for someone he knew, anyone he recognized with whom he could converse to avoid being forced back into interaction with Michael, Dean was relived to spot a familiar figure among the dancers. The man dressed all in black wearing black cloth over his head, the man who had arrived with Castiel last month, was promenading with his partner, the fellow in the wedding suit and a melodramatic comedy mask. If that man was here, Castiel must be here too. Determined to find him, Dean systematically searched the rooms.

Room after room produced nothing, and Dean was growing despondent when he heard a familiar, unctuous voice.
“...is otherwise engaged for the evening,” Zachariah’s voice oozed down Dean’s spine like slime. Dean stepped into the doorway and saw Zachariah’s broad back as the man faced Castiel, he was as breathtakingly perfect as always.

Castiel’s eyes met Dean’s and betrayed a hint of happiness before he said coolly, “I believe you are mistaken, Mr. Zachariah.”

“I’m sure I’m not,” said Zachariah, and Dean couldn’t help but picture Mr. Alder’s false smiles from dinner on Monday. First Michael cornering him in the parlour, and now Zachariah lying to Castiel about Dean. There wasn’t the slightest doubt in Dean’s mind that he was the topic of the conversation.

“No,” Castiel gave a slight shake of his head, amusement blossoming in his eyes. “I’m absolutely positive are entirely misinformed about the matter.”

“How so?”

“Mr. Asmodeus is standing behind you,” supplied Castiel, voice cracking on a laugh. Zachariah wheeled around, the feathers of his mask failing to disguise the furious set of his mouth and the angry narrowing of his eyes.

“Good evening,” said Dean, unable to keep tight fury out of his voice. They were trying to keep him away from Castiel. That had to be it. His stomach tied in knots as he thought of what the likes of Zachariah and Michael might do to the beautiful angel. “I believe Mr. Michael is looking for you. You should go.”

With a snarl, Zachariah strode from the room, leaving them alone. Indifferent to the fact that the room was public and another guest could walk in at any time, Dean closed the space between them and caught Castiel up in a protective hug, mind conjuring up all manner of horrors that might have just been averted. “Are you alright?” he asked softly.

“I hope his words did not distress you,” Dean ran his hand over Castiel’s head, not sure which of them he was trying to sooth.

“Not at all.” Leaning forward, Castiel drew close to Dean and whispered in his ear, “I believe we established in February that you’re mine, Mr. Asmodeus.” The voice and words hit Dean’s gut like a caress, instantly hardening his arousal. He licked his lips and swallowed. Possible replies swirled through his head, and after an instant’s internal debate, Dean settled on the absolute truth.

“It’s true,” he whispered back. “I am, completely, totally, and without reservation, yours.”

A possessive, dominating growl sounded from the back of Castiel’s throat, and Dean shivered. “Upstairs. Now,” the angel’s grated out.

Dean didn’t need to be told twice.

They hastened down the hall and up the stairs to the familiar blue room. The instant the door was closed and bolted, Castiel’s hands were removing Dean’s cloak, his fingers were tearing at every button of his pants, and Dean was helping him, trying to remove his garments as quickly as possible. He’d planned ahead this time, not bothering with a jacket or vest, instead opting to wear only a loose shirt which Dean tugged over his head. Shoes were kicked off, trousers manhandled from his legs,
and in moments Dean stood bare but for his demonic mask while Castiel remained dressed. A waft of chill air brushed Dean’s erection. Blue eyes stared from the never-changing cherubim mask, narrowed as if Castiel was weighing him, assessing him, trying to reach some kind of decision.

Before Castiel found the conclusion he sought, Dean dropped to his knees at the angel’s feet. He looked up, and Castiel’s eyes went wide, pupils blown.

“I had an idea,” murmured Dean, deliberately echoing what Castiel had said before pleasuring Dean those sinful lips. Yards of white encircled Castiel’s waist, hanging loosely down to his ankles. Dean slipped beneath, the cloth not thick enough to render it dark. He could make out the shadows of lean legs, well-turned calves, and the musky scent of Castiel’s desire. Lifting his mask, Dean took Castiel’s member in his hand. Castiel was only half hard, and Dean massaged the sensitive flesh to spur him to full arousal. Above him, the angel moaned, the sound enveloping Dean as it tangled in the confines of the cloth. Dean licked his lips to moisten them.

Gently, he kissed the tip of Castiel’s beautiful cock. The skin of the head was unbelievably soft, sheathing throbbing hardness, and felt heavenly against his lips, like a kiss in how it turned Dean’s insides liquid. Curious, he mouthed the ridge below, using his finger to move Castiel so Dean could trace along the top of the shaft, shifting his head so that he could lick along the vein on the bottom. A hand dropped lightly onto the top of Dean’s head, fingers rubbing his scalp.

“I wish I could see your mouth stretched around me,” murmured Castiel encouragingly. “When I imagine your face, you have such a beautiful mouth.”

With a moan, Dean wrapped his lips around Castiel and drew the head into his mouth. He’d never done this before, and had only Castiel’s example to guide him, but he’d known for days that he needed to taste his angel, wanted to learn him inside and out. There were many ways to give pleasure, and Dean wanted to use every single one to bring Castiel to his knees in bliss.

“Just like that, just like I dreamed you would,” Castiel continued. Dean hesitated a moment, lost in the reassurance that Castiel thought of him, pictured them together even when they were apart. Seizing the initiative, Castiel rocked slightly into Dean’s mouth. Liquid dripped onto Dean’s tongue, tacky semen leaking from Castiel’s slit, and Dean eagerly lapped it up, toying at the opening, finding that he could use his tongue to manipulate it minutely. The hand on his head tensed in response, and Castiel’s breathing grew vocal, gasped breaths tinged with sound. “Have you dreamed about doing this to me?”

Every day, he longed to say. Experimentally taking more of Castiel into his mouth, growing familiar with the bulk filling between his lips, Dean hummed his agreement.

With a shattering groan, Castiel thrust into him, hitting the back of his throat, causing Dean to gag. He pulled back, choking as he tried to breathe and cough at the same time.

“I’m sorry!” The sensual spell was momentarily broken, Castiel’s words lost in concern and worry. “I didn’t mean to...that just felt so...are you alright?”

“I’m fine,” said Dean, reassurance somewhat ruined by the hoarseness of his voice and a renewed bout of coughing. “If you can give me one moment...”

“Of course,” exclaimed Castiel, lightly massaging the base of Dean’s neck through the enshrouding white fabric. “As long as you need.” Dean nodded against Castiel’s thigh and took a hold of Castiel’s slickened member in his hand, getting a grip on his erratic breathing. Castiel moaned in surprise, and Dean encouraged him to draw the sound out by running a calloused finger along Castiel’s length, pressing into the vein, flicking the slit with his nail, earning a string of murmured
encouragement, “oh, yes, good, very good, gentle demon, precious demon, don’t stop...” The words were like touches, rough and hot against his thoughts as a hand would have been against his skin. His body ached with desire, screamed for contact, grew heavy with need. Each pleased sound from Castiel causing Dean’s member to twitch and roll in his lap, throb against his belly.

Curling his hand around Castiel, he stroked hard down to the base of his cock with one hand and toyed teasingly with his testicles. He wrapped the other hand around his own urgent need, forcing a moan from his lips in relief at simply being touched. Making a circle with his lips, he held Castiel firmly and took as much of him as he could, all at once, quelling his gag reaction and drawing a shuddering cry from the angel. Propelled by Castiel’s beautiful noises, drew back and then swallowed Castiel deeply once more, repeated the motion again, again, in and out, until Castiel’s cry was one long moan that amplified when the sensitive head struck Dean’s hollowed-out cheek. Dean hummed again, a deep low sound that tingled through his body, and more liquid spurted into Dean’s mouth and he swallowed it eagerly.

“’smodeus,” the letters slurred together, sound echoing the easy sway of Castiel’s hips as he thrust each time Dean enveloped him. Atop his head, Castiel’s hand mirrored that pressure, striving to get deeper, to feel more. “That feels so good.” Dean started to stroke himself, unable to wait any longer to gratify his desperation. Whimpers stuttered his even rhythm. Soon, the throbbing cock in his mouth would be thrusting into his bottom. The mere thought forced a moan to escape him.

“Stop,” murmured Castiel breathlessly. Startled, Dean did so, nearly gagging again as Castiel did not abate his thrust into Dean’s mouth. “Not that...your hand...on your...your...your sweet, delicious cock...stop touching yourself.” Dean squeezed back tears, looking up with importuning eyes though he knew Castiel couldn’t see. “I want to make you feel good. I want to do it.” The air beneath Castiel’s costume had grown sweltering. Dean was covered in sweat, and a wave of dizziness hit him as he forced his hand off himself, raised it to Castiel’s thigh and squeezed so that the angel could have no doubt that Dean had done as ordered. Quaking with denied desire, Dean pulled away from Castiel, laved the head of his cock with his tongue and drank down everything Castiel released. Kneading Castiel’s thigh with his thumb, playing with his balls, Dean earned a sound of profound satisfaction from the angel. “Obedient demon...” Castiel’s grip on the back of Dean’s head firmed. “My Asmodeus...” Stiff fingers dug into Dean’s scalp, arrested his movement. Pain swirled with his forestalled pleasure and produced a feeling of dizzy euphoria and a light sound he couldn’t put a name to leaked from his throat. Castiel thrust slightly into Dean’s mouth, and Dean moaned. “You let me do all the things I’ve dreamed of.” Encouraged, Castiel thrust harder, hitting the back of Dean’s throat. Prepared, at the instant Castiel was deepest, Dean swallowed. “God, I love it,” moaned the angel. Thrust, swallow. “I love being with you.” Thrust, swallow. “I love being inside you...” I love you, Dean’s thoughts screamed, the emotion so all encompassing, so good, that his cock gave a delighted throb and dribbled pearl droplets onto his leg, pushing Dean to the brink of climax untouched. His lips suctioned to the cock filling his mouth.

“I’ve spent weeks fantasizing how good this would feel,” groaned Castiel. “It’s better.” The hand atop Dean’s head trembled, grip loosening. “I’m close, I should...” Surging forward, Dean took as much of Castiel as he could, hummed and swallowed hard, and Castiel moaned. “Wait...” With a hummed denial, Dean swallowed again, striving to take more of Castiel, continuing to rub and massage with his hands. “You...” Dean swallowed a third time, and whatever Castiel was about to say was lost as a strangled sob ground from that beautiful mouth and thick release filled coated Dean’s throat. He choked and struggled to swallow it down, marveling in the strange taste. Castiel trembled, moaning at every effort Dean made to clear the liquid from his throat, at every flick of Dean’s tongue, at every slight brush of Dean’s teeth. When Dean was sure he had milked every drop from Castiel’s cock, he pulled free with a wet sound, gasping for air. Semen leaked from the corner of his mouth, trailed down his chin, dripped onto his leg to mix with the drops his own cock had
Throat aching, Dean chuckled, a sound so low and rasped he could hardly believe it came from him. Repositioning his mask, he escaped from the stultifying heat and humidity beneath Castiel’s robe and looked up to see Castiel gazing down with unfocused eyes. The blue that Dean was finally prepared to admit he absolutely adored swam with pleasured tears and emotions that Dean didn’t dare name. Despite feeling like he might be sick unless he was touched soon, Dean managed to put on a lopsided grin that he hoped Castiel could see in his eyes.

“That was very naughty, demon,” Castiel said weakly. There was the whisper of lips being licked. Castiel broke eye contact and swept his eyes slowly down the reddened flesh of Dean’s muscular chest, raked to Dean’s lap, where his ruddy member throbbed and pulsed with every beat of Dean’s heart. “I should punish you,” Castiel continued with more confidence. “Lie down.” Obediently, tingling with anticipation, Dean rolled back onto the floor, stretching out his legs. He looked down the length of his body, taking in his puckered nipples, the slight rise of his breasts and thighs, and the mass of his cock, red, tip coated in white. The room was small enough that he took up nearly the entire space between the chairs and the bed. “Close your eyes.” Wondering what Castiel was up to, Dean did so, expecting a hand to come and move his mask.

There was a rustle beside him, and with a rush of air, cloth hit the ground heavily. Castiel must be stripping. Moments later, Dean heard a series of faint clattering sounds he assumed were the wings being set down. He sensed weight and heat beside him just before he heard knees hit the wooden floor gently, and cool breath brushed along his body. “Castiel,” he exhaled.

Fingers rubbed his nipples, and Dean squirmed, the first time another person had ever touched him there. The contact stopped abruptly and Dean chased the unseen, departing hands, whimpering. Castiel chuckled, and lips landed on the tip of Dean’s cock, sucking hard, drinking down his preliminary release, and Dean groaned, back arching. As quickly as it started, Castiel’s mouth was gone, the warmth was moving away. Desperate for more, Dean started to rise.

“What are you thinking?” asked Castiel breathily.
“You, inside me,” Dean’s every sense was filled with Castiel. His fingers scabbled at the floor, seeking any kind of purchase with which to ground himself. One hand found Castiel’s garment, and he gripped it in a tight fist. “You, touching me. You, kissing me. You, having your way with me, however you want. Anyway you want me, Castiel. I trust you. Anything for you, just for you. Only, please, don’t make me wait any longer. Please, angel.”

“I’m almost ready,” Castiel ground out, voice harsh with desire. The wet sounds increased in frequency, a continuous stream of smacks and pops and drips. There was one final one, and then silence save for heavy breathing.

“Castiel,” pleaded Dean.

Feet struck the floor, padded to him, took positions one on each side of his hips. Castiel lowered himself atop Dean, straddling him, one hand hard on Dean’s shoulder, holding him against the polished wood.

“You don’t call me ‘my angel,’ ” Castiel observed, his breath hot on Dean’s neck. Unseeing, Dean reached out and grabbed Castiel’s wrist, pressing up the length of strong arm, following the line of Castiel’s neck until he cupped the bare skin of Castiel’s cheek beneath the mask, inches from Dean’s own face. Stubble tickled at his rough skin.

“Are you my angel?” breathed Dean, dreading the answer.

“Heart and soul,” Castiel mouthed against Dean’s skin. Sucking hard on Dean’s racing, tender blood line, Castiel chuckled at the groan that his declaration forced from Dean. A hand clasped Dean’s cock, holding it steady, holding it up right, and Castiel lowered himself onto the hard shaft, tight opening dripping oil down Dean’s length. Hot, unbelievable pressure squeezed against Dean’s oversensitized member and the unspeakable pleasure of it wracked his body. He threw his head back, arcing into the contact, mouth open wide but incapable of making the least sound as every muscle strained. “I love how much you want me.” The words were so quiet Dean wasn’t sure he’d heard them correctly over the pulse of blood in his ears.

Leaning back so that Dean could fill him more completely, Castiel placed his hands on each of Dean’s shoulders and slowly rose up, bearing back down with tense muscles. The hand Dean had lain on Castiel’s cheek fell limply aside. His body felt out of his control, numb with the heat of pleasure, only his hips still able to engage, thrusting convulsively into the delightful constriction.

“Cas, I can’t...” Dean tried to repress his release. They’d only be joined for moments, Castiel had hardly made a sound beyond labored breaths. Dean wanted – he needed – for this to be good for them both. “I’m going to...my angel, that feels so good...” He jerked upwards hard, and Castiel ground out a guttural groan, fingers digging into Dean’s shoulders.

“It’s okay,” managed Castiel. Letting go of Dean, he grabbed Dean’s hand and brought it against his crotch, enabling Dean to feel that he was not hard. “This is for you, just for you, because I want you to feel as good as I do.” Accelerating his pace, Castiel rode Dean. It was the only apt description that came to Dean’s strained mind – Castiel rose and fell as if he were posting on a stallion, meeting every thrust of Dean’s hips. “Open your eyes. I want to stare into that beautiful green while you fill me.”

White spots flooded his vision. He thought he’d answered Castiel’s request, but he couldn’t see anything, eyes filled with tears, the room a blur of blue. More and more of his thrusts teased passionate sounds from the angel, driving Dean wild, driving him to delay his own gratification as long as possible. “When we’re apart...you’re all I want...my angel...you’re everything...” A hand gripped Dean’s chin and held his head still, and blue eyes swam into focus right above his face,
staring into his soul. “Oh my God...” Dean shattered. There was no other word for it, the pieces of
him crashed together and then burst apart and he cried out over and over, ragged notes forced from
his abused throat as he spilled his seed into Castiel’s insides.

Shaking over took Dean’s whole body, waves of heat and chills, and he felt feverish, whimpering at
the aftermath. Castiel rose from him, and Dean rolled on his side, embarrassed. He’d been so
overwrought due to waiting, the past month, the past hour, that reaction set in heard. Inarticulate,
soothing sounds filled his ear, and warm hands wrapped around his waist, anchoring him, reminding
him of where he was, who he was. Warmth encircled him, Castiel’s chest to Dean’s back, Dean’s
head tucked into the crook of Castiel’s neck, Castiel’s arms holding him close. This was the position
he woke up so many mornings imagining, the fantasy that faded the sunlight and left him feeling
empty and forsaken.

“Are you alright, my darling Asmodeus?” Castiel asked affectionately.

“Don’t ever let me go,” whispered Dean before he could stop himself. Castiel stiffened, then melted
against his back. One arm left Dean’s waist and Castiel wormed his fingers beneath the cloth backing
that held Dean’s mask in place and touched his head and hair, petting him reassuringly.

“I don’t want to,” Castiel said.

“I may not be able to come next month,” confessed Dean. A muted sound of sorrow died noticeably
in Castiel’s through. “I...we’re done for the Season. I’m needed at home in the spring.” There was
more to say, like always, so much more, the farmers that paid his rents needed aid, Samuel’s
wedding to prepare for, the lack of funds to support more than ten weeks in London. It died unsaid in
Dean’s mind.

“What...” Castiel hesitated, then tried again. “I do not wish to be here if you will not in attendance.
There is no one else here whom I could possibly dance with, now that I’ve stood up with you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Dean, anguished. “I don’t know. I would not otherwise return to London until
September, and then only on business. But knowing that you are here...”

“I will be here,” said Castiel decisively. “If you are present, we’ll dance, and elsewise, I will return in
May, and June, and whenever you come, you will find me here.” Twisting in Castiel’s arms, Dean
turned so they were facing each other. He took Castiel’s hands in his, their eyes locked, and Dean
saw blue eyes brimming with tears and sincerity.

“Castiel, I...” I love you. He choked the words back. It was such an entirely inappropriate
declaration that regardless of its truth he couldn’t speak it. “I brought something for you.” Breaking
away, unable to bear Castiel’s affection in light of his uncertainty when they would be reunited, he
crawled on his hands and knees to his fallen cloak. He’d sewn in a secret pocket in which to carry
things so his hands would not be occupied. From it, he withdrew the folio of Byron poetry that he
had brought as promised. His fingers brushed over the soft linen fibers of the seven letters he had
written, carried along though he remained unsure about the wisdom of delivering them. In a
heartbeat, he decided. Perhaps the letters could communicate what was forbidden for him to speak
aloud.

Taking all from his cloak, he passed them to Castiel, who looked through everything curiously. “The
Byron,” Dean explained unnecessarily. Castiel ran a finger over the wax seal on the letter. Words
eluded Dean under the intensity of Castiel’s gaze. “They’re letters,” he managed at length, looking
away, watching the floor between them, the flicker of the lamp flame, the drying spunk on his leg,
anything but Castiel’s face. “That I wrote to you, during the month. Please take this in the spirit I
intend it when I say, I think about you all the time. Not just...this...” he made a gestured with which
he attempted to encompass their nudity, their clothing scattered over the floor, the sweat cooled to their bodies, all of it. “I miss your voice, your humor, the way you laugh, the light in your eyes when you smile. I soldiered on, and when I could bear it no longer, I wrote. I know it is highly indecorous. Burn them unread if they offend you, but I have been a faithful messenger to my heart, and delivered them into your hands.”

A sniffle pulled him back to Castiel’s face. Blue eyes swam with liquid, tears spilled over to disappear beneath the mask. “I’m sorry,” mumbled Dean, mortified. “I should not have...it was forward of me...I meant no offense, please forgive me.”

With a cry, Castiel threw himself into Dean’s surprised arms, papers clutched in his hands. His shoulders shook as he wept against Dean’s neck, pressing the sculpted nose of the mask into Dean’s throat. “I’d forgive you any trespass,” Castiel sobbed. “But I categorically forbid you from apologizing for the crime of caring for me.” Dean trailed a hand down Castiel’s spine, soothing the younger man, lending him strength. The forbidden words were on his tongue again, and it was a long while before he repressed them, hid them away deeply, caged them so they would not attempt to win free once more.

When his tears finally subsided, Castiel drew away from Dean. “I have something for you as well,” he confessed shyly, reaching a hand beneath his mask to wipe his face. Castiel rose, set the book of poetry and Dean’s letters on the night stand, and retrieved the cloth of his toga from the floor. From amongst its folds, he pulled the golden belt, and he unclasped a charm that Dean had not previously noticed dangling from one tassel. “As you, I created this and brought it, divided on the wisdom of presenting it to you. Having received your letters, though, I know it is the correct course. It is yours, it must go with you. Please, take it.”

Castiel pressed cool metal into Dean’s palm. Gilded to appear gold, it was an unadorned circular locket with an intricate clasp holding it shut. He opened it. Within were two miniatures. A silhouette, black on white, was identifiable as Castiel’s profile thanks to the disordered hair. The other was breathtaking. In minutest detail, Castiel had painted a partial likeness of his own face. Black hair scattered in all directions, beautiful blue eyes peered out, exquisite in their perfection, their faithful replication of the real thing. Pink lips were shown in more vague detail, drawn into a smile. The fain outline of a chin speckled with the faint black shadow of stubble, a ghostly nose and a single line imitating high cheek bones substituted for the elements of Castiel’s face that must remain a mystery. There was not enough detail to use the image to name a man seen in the flesh, but it faithfully replicated Dean’s angel as he saw him in his dreams. Speechless with joy, he met Castiel’s gaze, wide-eyed.

“I told you, I am fond of art?” Castiel reminded him. Dean nodded. “After the first time we met, I painted your likeness, what I knew of it, filling in the rest to suit my imagination. I’ve gazed on it often since then, losing myself in your eyes. It has given me succor and support through difficult days when I naught else would have brought me the least comfort. It occurred to me that you had no such memento, and though I knew the risks, I dared to hope that if your feelings matched mine, you might appreciate such a thing. As you said of me – destroy it if it does not bring you pleasure. It is not mine, it was never mine. I meant it always for your hand. Keep it or dispose of it as you will.”

“Good God, Castiel,” he muttered. Something in his voice must have seemed off, for the light in Castiel’s eyes dimmed, his features fell. “How are you so damned perfect all the time?” Castiel laughed, a sound that Dean thought he could listen to forever. Shutting the locket, closing his hand around it, Dean held it to his heart. “I will keep it with me always,” he vowed. “No matter what happens, no matter what happens, no matter what , believe that, please.”

With a light-hearted sound of pleasure, Castiel leapt to his feet and retrieved his wings, hoisting them
over his shoulders. “Let’s dance,” he said. Dean laughed, and Castiel caught his eyes, elation making them so bright Dean perceived them as glowing. “Come on, get dressed.”

Smiling in return, feeling simultaneously jubilant and heartbroken, Dean rose more slowly and donned his outfit. “Anything for you, dearest Castiel,” he echoed his earlier words. “Anything, so long as you are happy.”

As Castiel tugged him down the stairs, the forlorn through struck Dean that if he could not attend in the coming months, there was no knowing when he’d see Castiel again. So much could happen in a year, changes in circumstances that swept all prior plans away. His own life attested to that. If he did not come in April, he might never see his angel again. As they took the floor for the cotillion, the locket safely stashed in the hidden pocket of his cloak, Dean was glad for the exertion to dampen his eyes and hide the overflow of a couple tears that he was unable to keep inside. This might be the last time he was with the most wonderful man he’d ever known. Had he not been so happy to have Castiel with him, he’d have been ineffably miserable.
The April Soiree

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sunday evening was like every other at Lawrence Hall. Nothing changed the rhythm of life in the manor, the flow of the seasons, the give and take of the people who lived there in relative harmony – Ms. Harvelle’s ongoing squabble with Charlie regarding which of them had won more games of spillikins notwithstanding. Even with Sam’s nuptials fast approaching, there was little variation. The preparation was completed, and the guests had not yet arrived. The great fob debacle had finally been resolved to Sam’s satisfaction, and as that was the direst complication the wedding faced, there was no longer a thing to worry about.

Laughter and happy talk at supper surrounded Dean, encompassed him, submerged him, but he could not pretend that it actually satisfied him anymore than the food had. Like standing alone in a vast crowd of strangers, like ascending the main top of the Audacious and beholding the azure ocean stretching to the furthest edge of the horizon without the least sliver of land in sight, he was physically present and yet completely apart from that which unfolded around him. Otherworldly was the word he sought, perhaps: a ghost watching the living. Without Castiel, without the prospect of seeing Castiel, he felt dead. The vision of blue eyes swimming with tears came back to him powerfully, clenched at his heart, roiled his stomach with nausea though he’d eaten little, twisted his throat until he could barely breath. Awash with liquid, those blue orbs resembled the ocean, he realized wistfully.

If he didn’t leave the next morning, it would be impossible to attend the April Soiree. Even Impala could cover the distance between -----shire and London in less than four days.

Dean wasn’t going. That was the end of it. It was the prudent decision. The reasons to avoid a fourth meeting were manifold, but by far the most compelling was the expense. There wasn’t money for such a luxury. Lawrence Hall was not a grand estate, and the preceding years, while not bad, and not been flush, either. The mansion would need a new roof within a few years. The sums he put aside monthly for Diana’s dowry would be adequate to see her able to choose a suitor based on inclination rather than necessity, provided he continued at the same rate for the next dozen years. With £20,000 to her name, only the prejudice of society would be able to divide her from whomever she loved best, he reflected bitterly. There was the expense of Samuel’s wedding and the accompanying increase their household costs once Mrs. Winchester nee Ms. Moore took up residence at Lawrence Hall. Setting Samuel up with his own home in the neighborhood, large enough to accommodate the brood of children Dean expected the happy couple to produce, was another forthcoming concern.

As soon as he could politely do so, Dean retreated to his study for the evening, leaving Ellen to bed the children down for the night, Ms. Mosely and Mr. Singer to pretend – as they had since the day they had met in ’93 – that they were not smitten with each other, and ensuring that Ms. Harvelle, Charlie, Samuel and Ms. Moore had no qualms about a fifth as they settled in to a game of whist.

The accounting book were yet open on his desk. He’d perused them all afternoon, convinced he’d made an error. Though he’d stared at the neatly ruled pages until his eyes blurred and run figures until he’d filled an entire page with jumbled scribblings, he could not find where he’d gotten off. Sitting before it once more, he took a clean sheet and reviewed every entry for the fifth time. Perhaps he’d gotten the wrong sums from his financier. Perhaps he’d misremembered what his chief renter had told him of expected incomes for the years. Perhaps, if he added and subtracted the same numbers enough times, he’d discover £10 that he’d not known he possessed, and be able to depart
for London in the morning.

No, that was certainly not why he was obsessing over a ledger after supper on a Sunday night. Absolutely not. He merely wished to be sure he not miscalculated, and couldn’t escape the feeling that he had.

That was it.

An hour more math and a sheet of paper so soaked with ink, front and back, that it stained his desk top, finally served to convince Dean that there was one farthing unaccounted for. No funds appeared like manna from heaven to enable him to visit his angel. It was an absurd fantasy anyway. There were other reasons not to go, besides. The journey would see him gone 8 days from Lawrence. He couldn’t make a monthly habit of such an extended absence. -----shire society would notice and wonder at it. His time with Castiel had been divine, but it was over, and he had to return to his regular life. If, in the heat of the moment, he’d supposed his feelings to be profound, that was excusable, but there was no place in this world for such an attachment. Better to put quash his affections now, lest they – God forbid! – grow stronger yet.

Placing his ledgers and records back on the shelf, he poured himself a tumbler of whiskey and swirled the dark liquid around the glass. Castiel’s absence was a constant ache in his gut, a glimpse of blue that always lingered just out of sight. He pulled his chair away from the desk and slumped in to it tiredly, sipping his liquor.

He needed to see Castiel. He needed to speak with Castiel. He needed to feel Castiel. It was inconceivable to him that his feelings could grow any stronger, they were already so intense that at times he felt practically wild with desire, regret, adoration, loneliness.

With a pair of sharp scissors, Dean trimmed his quill, took out a clean sheet of paper, dipped into his ink well, and wrote—

_My dearest angel, I want to be with you more than I have ever wanted anything in the world._

No further words came. He balled the paper in his hands and threw it in a rubbish bin. For all the reasons he had not to go to London, he had one compelling reason to attend. Whenever he thought he’d convinced himself, once and for all, to stay home, he would remember the predatory glare of Michael’s case, the obsequious tone of Zachariah’s voice. A powerful surge of possessiveness washed over him at the thought, a need to protect he had felt towards few others in his life. One thing only kept him from using his concerns as an excuse to throw caution to the wind and ride for Ton – the knowledge that Castiel did not attend the soirees alone, Dean’s fragile conviction that the man in funereal garb would protect the angel.

With a frustrated grunt, he reached into his pocket and withdrew his pocket watch. Sharing a ring with it was the small locket, as promised borne on his person at all times. The one day he had forgotten, he’d panicked upon discovering its absence and torn the house apart before realizing that it was precisely where he’d left it, on the dresser in his bedroom. Rubbing a finger over the plain exterior, slowly becoming bronze as Dean’s touch wore away the cheap gilding, Dean resisted the urge to open it. Seeing Castiel’s face never helped. He removed the watch and fob chain from where they were secured to his jacket, holding them to his face. The cheap, unadorned metal, was a contrast to his grandfather Henry’s antique engraved watch and his father’s anchor fob. Only gentlemen were welcome to Ms. Naomi’s, but Castiel was not wealthy. A younger son, perhaps, or an orphaned youth, or someone whose family had exceeded their revenues and lived modestly while retaining the faint afterglow of prestige. Precisely the kind of person who would struggle to find a wife, and who might be amenable to some sort of alternative arrangement.
Ridiculous, dangerous sophistry! With that perfectly formed body, slim and pale and toned, with those unbelievably blue, clear eyes and that shock of black hair, Castiel would have no difficulties securing any spouse he wanted. That was surely why he was in London for the Season. No matter how poor, anyone of breeding knew that Castiel was gem of the first order. Many a woman was in the position that Dean hoped his own Diana would someday be in – adequately provided for, able to afford to choose a husband based on his ability to look pretty in her drawing room or adorn her arm like a favorite bracelet. That was Castiel’s future, and Dean let himself believe that, once the young man adapted himself to it, he would be happy. Dean had to believe that.

Opening the locket, Dean stared into dazzling, lifelike blue eyes. His fingers carded through silky black hair, his sight beheld the glow of affection in bottomless blue eyes, his skin tingled as warm breath huffed against his neck. Suppressing a groan by downing the remainder of his whiskey, he set the picture aside and rose, in desperate need of another draft. Taking up a position before the dark fireplace as he sipped it, his thoughts roiled. Perhaps he would get drunk. The idea of oblivion was disturbingly alluring.

There was a gentle knock on his door.

“Come in,” he said.

“It’s gotten quite late, Mr. Winchester.” Charlie stuck her head in the room, hair bound in curling rags for the night, thick night gown trailing to the floor.

“I didn’t know I had a curfew, Mrs. Winchester,” he replied wryly. She stepped into the room and quietly closed the door behind herself.

“You don’t,” she agreed, smiling. There was a pregnant pause. “I’m worried about you, Dean.”

“Please don’t be,” he said with a shake of his head and a sad quirk of his lips. “There’s no need for that. I’m happy here with you and the children. We have a good life. We have everything we need.” The last statement rang so patently false in his ears that he had to take a drink. He needed Castiel. Wheeling, he paced back across the room. The feeling that he might crawl out of his skin with frustration and anxiety was only amplified by the way Charlie stood and watched him calmly. He couldn’t meet her gaze, couldn’t accept understanding and sympathy in her eyes. Determinedly, he looked away.

“There is no shame in having everything you require and yet wanting more,” she said. He had no answer for that. There was a rustling of cloth, the movement of her gown as she walked, and a long pause. “Is this the man who has you captivated? Oh, Dean! He’s beautiful.”

Damn! He turned to find her leaning over the desk, the locket he had carelessly left out held gently in her hand. Unthinkingly, he strode across the room and snatched it from her, squeezing it possessively in his powerful grip, bringing his fist to rest over his racing heart.

“I am not captivated,” he snapped. “There is no...there’s nothing...” Compulsively, he returned to pacing, unable to look at her, unable to keep still, unable to ignore her words. Beautiful, wonderful Castiel...my angel...

“Don’t be absurd,” sniffed Charlie derisively. “I know you, Dean. You are not a man to share intimacy with one you do not care for. There was no way you were going to walk into a room full of men, no matter how likeminded, and take any which one to your bed. When I helped you obtain invitation to Ms. Naomi’s, I feared you were setting yourself up for disappointment. Imagine my happiness that I was wrong. From that very first Friday after, it’s been obvious you had met someone whom you nursed genuine affection. We’ve all noticed. You do not have to—”
“Charlotte, stop,” he interrupted. He spun about to find her directly behind him. With a sad smile, she lay a hand on his cheek.

“It’s alright, Dean,” she said gently. “You’re allowed to feel this way.”

A surge of fury flashed red in his eyes. “No,” he snarled. Knocking her hand away, he slammed the hand holding his tumbler against the wall so hard the thick glass shattered in his hand. Amber whiskey and red blood dripped to the floor. “Don’t tell me it’s alright, Charlie.” Pain throbbed through him – his hand cut deeply by glass, his heart frozen agonizingly in his chest. “Don’t lie to me.”

“I’m sorry,” she stammered. He’d frightened her. Shame and disgust instantly replaced anger. His shoulders slumped, his head dropped, his hands unclenched and fell limply to his sides. Chunks of glass, released from his grip, clattered noisily on the wooden floor. “You know that I truly am not bothered by any of this, right?” Muster his courage, he looked at her face. Beautiful Charlotte, red hair in messy ringlets along her brow, met his green eyes with such confidence and love he could hardly stand it. She reached into the pocket of her dressing gown and withdrew a kerchief, took his hand and carefully used the cloth to clean his wounds.

“I know,” he managed in a low, pained rumble. “I’m sorry, I should not have...” He winced as she removed a chunk of glass embedded in his palm. “I shouldn’t have reacted as I did.” There was so much more to say, but they were not words he could admit to, not sentiments it was appropriate to share. He managed a lopsided grin. “What’s a smart woman like you doing with a fool like me?”

“You’re scared,” she inferred, completely ignoring his attempt at levity. With soft, soothing hands, she wrapped the kerchief around his hand and knotted it securely in place. Reaching over, she took his other hand in hers and unfolded the fingers that clutched the locket. It wasn’t a secret from Charlie. He had no secrets from his wife, the only person other than Sam to whom he could say anything. She alone of everyone in his acquaintance could enter into his feelings on this difficult matter. Hesitantly, she reached out and the locket, watching Dean the entire time. He flinched when her fingers closed over it, but didn’t move to stop her. Every movement demonstrated that she understood how precious the piece of jewelry was. Charlie lifted it and opened it. Dean’s blue-eyed angel stared back at them from within, and Dean thought his heart would either melt like candle wax or shatter like the brittle glass had. How could looking at a picture simultaneously make him feel like the luckiest man in the world and the most worthless? “Are you in love with him, Dean?”

“Don’t ask me that, Charlie,” he said, horrified by the note of despair in his voice. He tore his eyes away from the image, settling on Charlie’s eyes only to find the feelings stirred by his plight were no less painful. Resting his head in his hand, he turned so she wouldn’t see his tears. “I’ve spent three evenings with him. Only naive debutantes and virgin beau believe themselves in love so soon.”

“That’s not true,” said Charlie compassionately. “I knew you were the man I wished to marry after three evenings together.”

“That’s completely different, Charlie,” he said. Tears momentarily repressed, he forced himself to turn back to her. “You were not looking for love.”

“You think I do not love you?” she said with a huff. He gave her a wry look. “It’s not exactly the same, but it is certainly not ‘completely different.’ ” She quoted him mockingly, her inherently cheerful voice husky and brooding. “Let’s see, those first three nights – if I recall correctly, it was Mr. Murphy’s the first night, a week later at Mr. Shurley’s, and finally the recital here at Lawrence Hall – yes, definitely. I had my heart set on you by the time Ms. Rosen finished droning out that ridiculous, off key ballad while making calf eyes at Samuel.”
“That’s absurd, you know it’s not the case! We were months thrown together before we finally became engaged.”

“That’s because you are intolerably dense, Mr. Winchester,” she said tartly.

“Very well,” he rolled his eyes. “What did you know of me by the time Ms. Rosen completed that unspeakably dreadful solo?”

“The two most important things,” she caught his gaze and held it intensely. He hung on her words, he realized suddenly, hoping in them to find vindication for the feelings in his heart that seemed to have so far outpaced his head. “I knew that you were a good man – by which I mean intelligent, kind, gentle, caring, and considerate.” He flushed at her praise and tried to look away, but she caught his chin in a surprisingly strong grip. “And I knew that you had not the least interest in my body and would never take any liberties beyond those that I would allow.”


“More than you’ll ever know, Dean,” she shook her head. “With my youth, my features and my limited fortune? Many men assumed that they were at liberty to touch, to press intimately against me in the midst of a dance, to brush my hair from my face, to crassly take my hand to kiss their compliments. Men of privilege far too often take what they want from those who lack similar luck in birth and fortune, never a care for the damage they do. You, however, were entirely aware of how fortunate you were, and were ever...exactly who you are. No false modesty, yet no airs. No aloofness, no condescension, yet no unwelcome familiarity.” She grinned. “Then, of course, there was the way you stared at Mr. Henriksen as if you wished to devour him.”

“I did not,” he scoffed. His crush on Victor Henriksen had been what had finally brought him to terms with his true desires. It had been entirely unrequited, of course, but it had enabled Dean to find some modicum of peace, helped unite himself and Charlie, and earned him Henriksen as a close friend.

“I was afraid you were going to tear his regimentals off in the middle of Ms. Rosen’s second piece,” laughed Charlie.

“She was playing terribly,” Dean confessed. “The thought crossed my mind.”

“Come here, you big idiot,” she laughed and caught him in a rough hug. Her familiar embrace, friendly and warm, settled on his strained willpower and snapped it, the last straw that overloaded the camel. Laughter dissolving into choked sobs, he returned her embrace. “Shh,” she said, guiding his head to her shoulder. “It’s going to be alright, Dean.”

“How?” he demanded brokenly. “I love him, Charlie. I love him so much I can’t stand it! I don’t even know his name.”

“I will find him for you, darling,” she promised. “You deserve this additional happiness more than anyone I have ever known, and I will make sure it happens for you.” Tears streamed down his face. He was unable to believe that Charlotte would do that for him, could do that for him. He was unable to believe that even should she, Castiel would wish to interact with him outside of the constrained, anonymous world of Ms. Naomi’s. He was unable to conceive of any series of events that would resolve this with him in the arms of his stunning angel. Her hand stroked down the curve of his back as if he was a child, encouraging him to continue to let out all the hurt and sadness and loneliness he had repressed for years.
“Go to London, Dean,” she murmured encouragingly. “It’s alright. Lawrence will be fine in your absence.”

“This is an excuse to get me away so you can finally rearrange the parlor, isn’t it...” mumbled Dean, his lame attempt at a joke further ruined by the way his words broke on the catch in his throat.

“Actually, my nefarious secret plan is to have Claire go through your wardrobe and destroy all the items that, despite their threadbare state, you insist on still treating as clothes fit for a man to be seen in,” she smiled into his neck. A laugh immediately shattered into a sob as he thought of Castiel, how he gazed at Dean as if no one else existed in the world, how his body felt pressing into Dean’s, the danger he might be in.

“I’ll leave in the morning,” he whispered.

Dean wept against her until long after the candle burned out, plunging the room into darkness.

The sun full in Dean’s eyes woke him up the following morning. He couldn’t recall how he’d gotten to bed, but he felt the full effects of his late night and embarrassing bout of crying as he rolled over, hand painful, eyes sandy and head dull. The sun did not hit his windows until past 10, and he needed to get under way. Rising, he paced his bedroom a few times. A small room, it had been the guest room assigned to Dean when he’d visited his uncle during his youth. With unadorned white walls, blocky wooden furniture, a four post bed, and cotton curtains and bedding in matching forest green, it felt more like home than the ornate master bedroom with its damask curtains, hand painted wall paper, and hideous Rococo furniture. Samuel had claimed that room as his own, and welcome to it. When Dean had worked out the kinks in his joints and scrubbed his eyes in the water at his nightstand, he went to his dressing room, freezing in the doorway when he was greeted by a small form buried to her waist in his wardrobe.

“Was Charlotte so determined to update my outdated clothing that she’s sent you before I’ve departed?” he laughed. The child jumped, there was a thump of her head hitting wood, and then she stumbled free with a dazed look on her face. He hurried to his side. “Are you alright, Ms. Richardson?”

“Mrs. Winchester asked me to help you pack, Mr. Winchester,” she mumbled, rubbing at her head. “I’m sorry, sir, I didn’t mean to intrude.”

“It’s no bother,” he said with good nature.

With Claire’s help, they rapidly packed him a single bag into which they stuffed the least amount with which he could manage – a few toiletries, changes of small clothes and his costume. That done, he shooed her out with strict instructions to ask Mr. Singer to saddle his horse. Once she was gone, he dressed in clothes appropriate for travel in the season – a thicker jacket than normal, stiff buckram breeks padded on the interior of the thighs, and his boots. His hand ached with every motion, the flesh grown stiff, and whenever he tried to flex it, fresh red blood would seep through the wrappings. With a surprisingly deft touch, Claire helped him to wash and bind the injury. She was a sweet girl. He could see why Charlie had hired her, she deserved better to starve on the meager income she earned selling scraggly flowers to passersby.

The family were all assembled for breakfast when he arrived. The room was tense with anticipation, everyone shooting each other covert, concerned looks that they thought he could not see as Dean took his seat at the head of the table. Ms. Moseley broke the tension by bringing in their eggs, and the usual shenanigans ensued in the form of a spirited argument between Ms. Moore and Ms. Harvelle over the merits of 3-minute eggs and 6-minute eggs. Among assertions of absolute and indisputable authority on the matter, two camps formed. Those who preferred a runnier yolk avowed
irreconcilable difference with those who wished their yolk fully cooked, with little John stood in the middle and proclaimed that he did not like eggs at all even as he licked yolk from his fingers.

Watching them, having given his opinion that he enjoyed each depending on his mood and thus been exiled from the conversation for being an uncivilized heathen, Dean felt his eyes mist over. There was nothing more important than family, and with one such as this he was surely the luckiest man in the world. Save for that one empty chair, anyway.

A tap on his shoulder drew him from his reverie. Groundskeeper Singer, Old Bobby as Dean had used to call him, looked uncomfortable in the great house. Nothing had prevailed on the older man to take a bedroom in the place. You’re my family as sure as anyone, boy, he’d said the last time Dean had tried to convince him, but they will take me from my home when I’m dead and cold and not a day before. His clothing was rugged and suitable for outdoor work, trousers held over a smudged linen shirt by suspenders, a loose frock coat over all. Through many an outdoor hunt and adventure, Singer had been Dean’s guide, mentor, assistant, friend, companion, and sage. “Come on, idjit,” he said affectionately. Dean wished Claire could hear the old servant calling him that, it might cure her of all her “sirs” once and for all. “Horses’ ready.”

The room fell silent as Dean folded his napkin and rose. Charlie, Ms. Harvelle, Samuel and Ms. Moore followed suit, accompanying him to the front room as he retrieved his overcoat and donned it. Four matching sets of concerned eyes – yes, four, he supposed Samuel must have finally reached his utmost capacity for keeping a secret and told Ms. Moore, damn him – followed his every movement.

“I’m not going to a funeral,” he said dryly. “Though London is uncommonly dreary this time of year.” The words bounced off the tension without making the slightest dent, and he rolled his eyes. “Would you all stop it already?”

Suddenly, Ms. Harvelle and Charlie were both crowding him, giving him hugs and reassuring pats on the back and cooing out senseless support, “have a safe ride, come back as soon, post a letter to us while you’re there, take every opportunity of enjoying yourself,” all in an overlapping, virtually unintelligible babble. He returned their hugs, laughed off their words, and finally escaped their overzealous compassion to find Ms. Moore offering him a sunny smile and a hand shake. Finally, Sam virtually tackled. His brother’s embrace was snug and caring and went a surprising way towards calming Dean’s lingering qualms about making the journey.

“Be careful, Dean,” Sam murmured in his ear. “I won’t be there to protect you.”

“Shouldn’t I be the one saying that to you?” chuckled Dean, unable to put into words how much he appreciated Samuel’s support. “Don’t burn the place down while I’m gone.”

“Hey, that was one time,” snapped Sam, drawing away from Dean. There was a smile on Sam’s lips and a twinkle in his eyes.

Singer held the door open for Dean, and as he walked through, Sam called out to him, “hey, will you pick up my watch fob while you’re there?”

“See you in a week, Sam,” he called back. The doors closed, the house was left behind, his saddle bags were secured, and it was time to depart. Impala stomped impatiently as she waited for him, reins tied unnecessarily to a hitching post, and a second horse stood beside her. The dusky gray gelding, incongruously named Chevelle, was small and stocky. She was Singer’s preferred mount. Dean shot the groundskeeper a quirked eyebrow, and got a stern look in return.

“Mount up,” said Singer gruffly. “Sky’s mighty threatening, and I’m not riding in the rain with you no matter the reason.”
Laughing despite himself, Dean mounted Impala unthinkingly, his hand giving a sharp jolt of agony that he felt to his elbow as he settled into his saddle. At his side, Bobby clambered onto Chevelle. Blood immediately soaked through the bindings, and he sighed. A moment later, a drop hit him on the nose. So, that was the kind of journey it was to be? Setting off side by side, Dean set his eyes on the horizon, allowing the phantom of glowing blue eyes to draw him south.

Despite the threatening storm clouds and a chill breeze, only occasional splatters of rain plagued them the first day. They said little, Bobby was never one to speak when he had nothing to say, and stopped only at full dark at The King’s Arms in -----ton.

The sound of steady rainfall on thatch woke Dean before first light on Tuesday morning. Normally, he’d not risk travel such weather, but there was not a day to spare if he was going to make it to London. Thus, despite Bobby’s steady stream of imprecations, they got an early start through a driving downpour. Despite all Bobby’s grousing, he stayed by Dean’s side through the entirety of a bleak, unpleasant day. By the time they arrived at -----field, it was well past dark, they were some hours behind the pace Dean would have liked, and they were soaked to the bone, chilled and clammy. The skin of his injured hand looked particularly bad, wrinkled and leech white, and cleaning the wound was rendered difficult by trembling in his other. Realizing he’d never be able to hold utensils steadily enough to feed himself, Dean hid his deficiency by declaring himself not hungry, adding an empty stomach to his list of ailments.

Everything Dean owned was still damp the next morning save Castiel’s letters, which he’d carefully wrapped in oiled skin for the trip. The rain had abated, but cold air followed in its wake. To his chagrin, Wednesday proved even more miserable than Tuesday had been. His clothing dried stiff to his body, his joints hurt, his bottom rubbed raw due to the friction between his sodden saddle and his damp pants, and the cuts on his hand were an angry shade of maroon and stabbed pain like needles to his brain when he flexed his grip. Though he managed to eat a hearty meal for dinner, his stomach rebelled moments after he retreated to his room and he retched the whole into his chamber pot. Too exhausted and drained to summon a servant to empty the mess, he lay down, spent body a quiver, the flavor of bile acrid on his tongue and the metallic tang of vomit tainting the air, regretting immensely the wake up that he’d scheduled for dawn the next morning. They were still nearly 70 miles from London. If he were to have a prayer of making it to Ms. Naomi’s soiree, of seeing Castiel, of protecting him, he would have to leave Bobby behind and ride Impala as fast as he’d ever pushed her. Sleep overtook him as part of him despaired.

A clear dawn greeted him as the inn’s morning man woke Dean up with a firm shake. Dean groaned, feeling terrible. Every symptom that had plagued him the night before was worse. His stomach rebelled at the mere thought of food, his head pounded, his throat rasped, and every muscle felt tender and weak. Nonetheless, he told a disgruntled, sleepy Bobby that he was fine and practically snapped Bobby’s head off at the suggestion that nothing was important enough to risk ague.


“I thought I already established that I was not going to London for a funeral, Mr. Singer,” Dean’s attempt at a set down was completely ruined by the hoarseness of his voice. Stubborn as he was, Dean acknowledged privately that he was in a bad way, but returning home without seeing Castiel when he’d come so close was unthinkable. “Follow as you can. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“The Toreador Inn, ----- on Thames, right?” Singer asked. Dean nodded confirmation, and rose with every ounce of determination and strength he could muster lest his dear friend realize how ill he was and stop him. There was no way Dean could overpower Singer in his current state. It would be child’s play for the heavier groundskeeper to restrain him, and then Dean would not get to see Castiel.
The ride from ----ham to London was ghastly. To husband Impala’s strength, Dean alternated her between a ground-eating canter and a stately trot. The trot was a gait she could maintain longer, and in other circumstances he would have largely restricted her to that, but his legs were simply incapable of posting for long. Fortunately, Impala was the finest piece of horseflesh in the kingdom, else he’d have ended up flat on his face in a ditch, or else come out of his feverish daze to find his mount had steered him to Bath. As it was, the horse knew the way to London as well as Dean did, she’d internalized the need for haste, and as always she did him proud. They left ----ham at the crack of dawn, and the last glimmers of sunset saw them walking through the streets narrow, stinking streets of London, abuzz with life and activity as evening set in.

Dismounting outside of the Toreador nearly brought Dean to his knees. The ostler gave him a concerned look, but had the manners not to question him beyond asking if he needed any refreshment. Dean declined, choking back vomit at the thought of eating, and took his bags to his room. Hastily unpacking his costume for the evening, he bundled it under his arm and proceeded out once more, praying that Mr. Whittaker had not yet left his place of business for the evening.

The short walk to the jewelers proved more challenging than it had any right to be. His legs felt like jelly, vertigo scrambled his senses, and his teeth chattered with cold no matter how he tried to convince himself that the evening was mild. The thought of his blue-eyed angel waiting for him, alone and uncertain and in unknowable danger, was all that spurred him on. Over the course of the day, he’d arrived at the conviction that he’d been cruel and selfish to allow Castiel to attend the evening’s soiree in the mere hope that Dean would attend. The idea that the black clothed, black masked man could protect Castiel was ludicrous. After all, his attentions were absorbed by the man in the wedding suit and comedy mask. Funereal garb and wedding garb, Dean realized, and the idea seemed inordinately funny. Opposites attracted at Ms. Naomi’s, Dean’s demon costume to Castiel’s angel, and...he cut the thought off. It was irrelevant and distracting. God, he was tired.

Someone needed to protect Castiel from Zachariah and Michael. That was what mattered.

There was a faint flickering of candle light visible through the glass at Mr. Whittaker’s, though no other indication that he was open for business. Dean hammered on the door, feeling each blow against the wood throb through his body as if it were a punch to his temple. He didn’t let up until the bald man answered, clutching a chamberstick in one hand and looking suspicious.

“May I help you?” Mr. Whittaker’s expression relaxed when he recognized Dean. He pushed at the petite reading glasses perched precariously on the end of his broad nose and eyed Dean’s disordered appearance.

“Mr. Whittaker,” Dean greeted him, his voice dry and hoarse. “Apologies for disturbing your evening. I’m only in briefly town. Is it too late to make a purchase?”

“Not at all, not at all,” Mr. Whittaker was all smiles as he realized that there was money to be made. “Do come in.”

Holding the door for an unsteady Dean, Mr. Whittaker closed it behind him and then quickly circled the room, lighting scattered candles until a dull yellow glow suffused the space warmly. Dean shivered uncontrollably.

“I presume you are here to pick up Mr. Winchester’s watch fob?” asked Mr. Whittaker. A glimmer of gorgeous blue caught Dean’s eye, and he looked around the empty room for Castiel before realizing how ridiculous he was being. “Mr. Winchester?”

“Yes?”
“The watch fob?”

“Right, right,” he nodded, and the floor seemed to move at strange angles as his head bobbed. “The watch fob.” The blue caught his eye again, drawing him to the small display case that contained the star sapphire pendant dangling from a delicately worked chain. “And that.” He gestured vaguely at the case.

“You also wish to purchase the Elephant’s Eye?” Mr. Whittaker asked, surprised.

“No,” snapped Dean. “The necklace. I want to buy that necklace, right there.” He pointed at it.

“Of course, Mr. Winchester.” There was a pause. “You are aware that I do not operate on credit, correct?”

“How much is it?” Dean tried to compute how much money he had on his person, but the numbers defied him and he arrived at a different total each time.

\[\text{£52, sir},\] said Mr. Whittaker, his tone apologetic.

“That’s a lot,” muttered Dean, made miserable at the thought of leaving the necklace behind. It was the same color as Castiel’s eyes. The idea that any but the angel should possess it was anathema to Dean.

“Mr. Winchester, are you drunk?” Mr. Whittaker asked uncertainly.

“Just tired,” he explained, managing a lopsided grin. Fumbling, Dean reached for his wallet, only to have his injured hand pulse agony that he felt from his toes to the back of his eyes. With effort, he kept upright and didn’t vomit on Mr. Whittaker’s tiled floor. He dug the wallet out and passed it to the jeweler. “Here. Do I have enough?”

Wide-eyed, Mr. Whittaker searched the bills in the fold and counted them. “I’m afraid not. You have £26 tuppence, sir.”

“Damn,” snapped Dean.

“It’s unusual for more than one such stone to be discovered each year. I cannot possibly sell the necklace for less than £45, I’m sorry.”

“I’m leaving with the pendant,” Dean said, voice dangerous.

There was a long pause. “I can see that this is important to you, Mr. Winchester. I have a proposal. I will sell you both pieces for £50, and I will take half this evening.” Mr. Whittaker deliberately counted out the required bills onto the counter. “You may take the pendant tonight, but I will hold on to the watch fob until the morrow, when you can bring the balance and pick up the other piece. Is that acceptable to you?”

The words seeped through Dean’s mind. He wanted to object, but with careful consideration he concluded he was being ornery. It was a very reasonable solution to the problem at hand. He had a banker in London – he could procure the difference in the morning. “Deal,” Dean said with a grin.
“Pleasure doing business with you, Mr. Whittaker.”

“Any time, Mr. Winchester,” said Mr. Whittaker with a strained laugh.

It was late and full dark before Dean arrived at Ms. Naomi’s, invitation in hand, mask over his head, costume haphazardly draped around his body, and the spectacular necklace and month’s letters stashed safely. Excitement gave Dean temporary energy to shake off all the symptoms plaguing him, and he entered the lavish foyer feeling more clear headed than he had since he woke up that morning. Hastily, he scanned the entry room and adjoining parlor, but saw no sign of his angel. Dean’s mind conjured horrors of Michael’s cruel eyes pinning his angel, of Zachariah tearing the wings from his back. The vision strengthened his unsteady legs as he passed through the first sitting room and into the ballroom.

The dance was well underway, it being by far the latest that Dean had ever arrived. Dean scanned the pairs of men twirling around the floor in a waltz. He watched, momentarily dazzled immobile by the spinning couples, without seeing the least sign of white robes or black wings. Steeling himself, he continued onwards, skirting the edge of the room and making his way to the parlor where Michael had confronted him, his heart pounding. Sweat pooled on his back, his body sweltering beneath his clothing and his cloak. A bead of moisture trailed from his forehead and down his cheek, hidden by his mask. The doorway seemed impossibly far away, each step that brought him closer tiny, yet before he knew it, he could see inside.

Dean drank in the sight of the most beautiful man in God’s creation, safe and sound. Castiel sat in a delicate wooden arm chair, his wings preventing him from leaning back. Elbows on his knees, his head hung and he stared at the ground, hands oscillating with jittery energy. Relief flooded Dean so strongly that only a white-knuckled grip on the doorframe kept him from sinking to the ground as his legs gave way beneath him. His knee clunked on the wood as a sigh drained the tension from his thoughts.

Startled, Castiel’s head jerked up, eyes wide and alarmed. The moment he saw Dean, he gasped, and Dean marveled at the simple joy that Castiel’s reaction brought him. The angel slumped dejectedly when Dean was absent, shifting to obvious elation upon Dean’s arrival. Those two bastards hadn’t laid a hand on Dean’s precious, beloved angel.

“Thank God,” Dean murmured.

“Asmodeus,” exclaimed Castiel happily, hopping to his feet and closing the distance between them. His steps slowed when Dean made no move towards him. Dean’s legs were past obeying him, past supporting his weight another step. Castiel came to a complete stop at arm’s reach, clearly taken aback by Dean’s impassivity. “Is all well?” A thought seemed to strike him, and Dean read hesitant amusement and uncertainty in Castiel’s voice as he said, “You know, you do not need to feign illness to convince me that we should adjourn upstairs.”

“I’m fine,” Dean managed, wishing his voice didn’t sound so worn. “Please don’t worry. Everything is alright now.”

“I don’t understand,” Castiel replied, worry dimming those stunning eyes. The dulled expression hurt Dean’s heart, he never wanted to see the least sign of rain marring the perfect sunshine that Castiel deserved.

“You’re safe, that’s all that matters,” said Dean reassuringly.

“Did you think me in danger?” asked Castiel with distressed confusion. “Asmodeus, what’s the matter?”
With a happy smile, Dean reached out and put his unhurt hand on the cheek of Castiel’s mask. Satisfied that Castiel was really there, not a phantom at his dinner table, not a glimpse of blue gone when he turned to see, Dean gave in to the weakness in his knees and slumped forward. The last thing he was aware of was Castiel’s arms wrapping around him and easing him to the ground. He forced a reassuring smile to his face, forgetting completely the mask obscuring his features.

Awareness returned. Something cool and damp rested on his forehead and a warm hand clasping his. Another damnable dream, he thought unhappily, waiting for the pleasant touch to vanish as it did every morning.

“Please open your eyes,” murmured a distressed, deliciously familiar voice. “You’re scaring me, Asmodeus.”

“Castiel…” Dean’s lips felt unresponsive, and he wasn’t sure if he thought the word or actually spoke it aloud. The hand gripping his squeezed tightly, and Dean’s fingers twitched in a weak attempt to reciprocate.

“I’m here,” said Castiel’s luscious, deep voice. With a happy sigh, Dean allowed his eyes to slip open. The room was blue – their usual bedroom, he recognized belatedly. Castiel had pulled one of the chairs alongside the bed and watched Dean closely, eyes soft with anxiety. Two other men stood nearby – funeral man and wedding suit man.

“Cas,” Dean breathed the name out, relaxing against the mattress. “You’re awesome.” He giggled.

“Why did you come if you’re so ill?” exclaimed Castiel. “You should never have made a journey in this state, what were you thinking?”

“Had to see you,” shrugged Dean as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. “I wasn’t feverish when I set out, it must have been the rain on Tuesday and I…”

“Stop,” said funeral clad man quietly, his voice a rich baritone that Dean was sure he’d heard before. It stood to reason, Dean thought, remembering that Zachariah was Mr. Alder and the familiarity of Michael’s voice, there must be many men at the soiree whom he’d encountered elsewhere. If only he could place this particular voice, he’d know the identity of the man who arrived with Castiel, and might be able to find his angel. “Do not say more. You do not wish us to reconstruct from whence you’ve come.”

“It’s the fever talking,” said wedding suit man, with the most refined, lilting accent Dean had ever heard. “Perhaps we should leave the two of them. Can we get you anything, Mr. Asmodeus?”

“No, thank you,” Dean met Castiel’s eyes. “I’ve everything I need.”

Wedding clad man laughed. “I’m Balthazar, by the by. I would shake your hand, but…well, one is bound in bloody rags and the other is occupied. Perhaps some other times.”

“Loki,” the other man added brusquely. “Come, Balthazar, I think they’re going to do another waltz.”

“I do love a waltz,” Balthazar laughed again, the sound a perfect match to the exaggerated curve of the lips of his comedy mask. The door closed behind the two men, and Castiel heaved a sigh of relief.

“I’m sorry I frightened you,” Dean said. The last word caught in his throat and he coughed, pain wracking his chest.
“Still frightening me,” said Castiel faintly. “Oh, Asmodeus…I’m delighted to see you, you must know that, but how could you?”

“I had to see you,” Dean averted his eyes uncomfortably. “I had to be sure that you weren’t hurt. If anyone laid a hand on you…”

“Why do you think anyone here would hurt me?”

“After the way Michael and Zachariah behaved last month…” Dean trailed off, realizing that he’d not spoken to Castiel at all about how Michael had divided them from each other.

“Michael has no interest in me,” Castiel said reassuringly. “Zachariah was merely being difficult. It’s a favorite pastime of his. You have made a mountain out of a molehill, my darling, and may have done yourself serious harm.”

Dean lifted Castiel’s hand to his the hard leather mouth of his mask, pantomiming a kiss to the back of it. “Any amount of suffering is worth it to see you.”

“That’s very endearing,” said Castiel dryly. “And complete nonsense. I am not worth what you are putting yourself through on my behalf.”

“That’s complete nonsense,” Dean said mockingly. “You are a treasure beyond worth.” He colored as the words left his mouth. “That sounded better in my head.”

“No, it was fine,” Castiel shook his head, slightly breathless.

“Would you pass me my cloak?” asked Dean abruptly. Reluctantly, Castiel released Dean’s hand and retrieved the garment. Dean tried to sit up to take it, but found himself unable to manage even so minimal a feat of strength. “There’s a pocket sewn in. It contains the letters I have written you this month, and something I bought for you.” Castiel felt around in the fabric as Dean grew increasingly impatient, until finally he discovered the box containing the pendant and the missives. The later were immediately placed safely among the folds of Castiel’s clothing. He emerged clutching a similar pile, and showed Dean how he was placing them in Dean’s pocket. That done, Castiel held the box uncertainly. Dean waved an encouraging gesture.

Castiel’s eyes went wide with shock when he opened the box and beheld the contents. Smiling shyly behind the mask, Dean watched Castiel stare at the pendant, then meet Dean’s eyes, then stare once more. “I cannot accept this,” stammered Castiel.

“It belongs with you,” Dean said. “I thought so the moment I first saw it.”

“Asmodeus, this must have cost a fortune! I cannot…I’m obliged, I’m sure, but…”

“I’ve made you uncomfortable again,” sighing, feeling like a fool, Dean closed his eyes and rolled to face the wall. “I’m sorry. You are under no obligations to me, Castiel. I thought you would like it.”

“I love it,” said Castiel softly. “But it’s too much.”

“It’s not,” Dean said self-consciously. “I’d string the stars in the sky on a necklace for you and they’d still pale before the sparkle in your eyes. I just thought…I hoped it would bring you pleasure.” Tears worked their past his lids. Of course it was too much. He knew it as well. It was a luxury beyond his income, when he’d been concerned he couldn’t even afford to come to the city. The price hadn’t mattered to him in the least, though. When he’d seen the necklace, he’d known that he had to give it to Castiel.
Weight settled on the mattress behind him, arms enfolded him, warm lips rested on the back of his 
neck. He could feel moisture through the cloth covering his hair, and he realized that Castiel had 
removed his mask and that his gorgeous angel was crying. Damnation, must Dean always make the 
man cry?

“I love you, Asmodeus,” Castiel whispered. “I love you, and it’s killing me that we cannot be 
together.”

For a heartbeat, Dean’s mind went blank with the shock and delight of hearing a declaration he’d 
thought never in his life to receive from any man, much less one he adored so much. “I’m sorry,” 
Dean’s voice choked with emotion. He’d never thought that learning that the object of his every 
desire reciprocated his feelings would hurt so much. “I’ve done nothing but make this harder for both 
of us at every turn.”

“But do you love me?” there was a quiver of fear in Castiel’s voice that shocked Dean.

“More than life,” confessed Dean. “Can you possibly doubt that?”

Castiel’s delicate fingers untucked Dean’s shirt and slipped beneath to lay, cool and comforting, over 
his erratically beating heart. Neither spoke for a long time. Castiel’s tears soaked the back of Dean’s 
head and Dean’s own made a puddle at the lip of his mask. Dean tried to convince himself that the 
shaking in his limbs he could not quell was due to his fever, not sorrow.

“I will keep the necklace,” Castiel whispered. “I will cherish it.”

“Thank you.”

“Will you be able to attend next month?”

“I will find a way.”

“Do not risk yourself again on my behalf,” implored Castiel. “I cannot bear that I am to leave you 
tonight not knowing if you are improving or succumbing, cannot abide my inability to summon the 
doctor you desperately need. The arrangements are all made, when you are ready to go, Loki’s 
carriage will take you wherever you instruct, the driver a man of discretion who will keep your 
esential secret. Then I am not to know your fate for a month – if at all!” Castiel choked on a sob. 
“Promise me you will seek sanctuary with those who will take care of you. Promise me that you will 
not come next month unless your health is restored. I am perfectly safe. The only one of us in danger 
is you.”

“As you wish,” Dean reluctantly agreed. “I swear it. Close your eyes.” Giving Castiel a moment to 
comply, Dean removed his mask, closed his own eyes, rolled over in Castiel’s embrace, and placed a 
gentle kiss on Castiel’s forehead. A small, distressed sound escaped his angel, and he wrapped his 
arms around him, holding him close, pressing Castiel’s face to his chest so that there was no danger 
of catching a forbidden glimpse of the other man’s features. “Please rest easy, my Castiel...my love.”

“Never until I can wake in your arms, my precious Asmodeus,” whispered Castiel, shoulders 
shivering as he began to weep again. “Never in this life.”

Dean’s heart broke.

With what little strength his arms possessed, he held his angel close, nestling his chin among smooth 
black hair. Castiel gripped the fabric of his shirt and pressed the brow and nose that Dean dared not 
look upon into Dean’s breast. Both weeping silently, they stayed thus until the hour grew late and 
there was no choice but to part.
In case you don't feel like Googling how much a pound was worth in 1817, here, I've done it for you. The 50 pounds that Dean spends on the necklace and the watch fob is the modern day equivalent of roughly:

1700 British Pounds
$2600 US
$3150 Canadian
(Based on the conversion rates of pounds to dollars yesterday...)

So, yeah, a lot to spend for someone who doesn't have a huge income (Dean's estate is worth roughly 2000 pounds per annum, definitely wealthy, but not fabulously so), on someone whom they've met three times.

Also: tons of apologies for the lack of smut. The outline for this chapter had smut, I had it all worked out with detailed notes, but then I changed things. So, I had a NEW idea for smut, and I had that all outlined. Then I actually wrote the chapter...and this angst fest happened instead. It just refused to be steered in to sexy times. I'm sorry! Please forgive me! I'll make it up to you, promise!
Glimpses of an Angel

The laughing man was kept just ahead of him, lithe and tall and beautiful. A deep voice drew Dean on, teased him, rich with humor and joy, dark with seductive suggestion. Castiel’s voice, Castiel’s laugh, Castiel’s form, always out of reach, no matter how fast Dean ran, or desperately he stretched his arms, strained with his fingertips. Pushing himself faster, faster, Dean sprinted towards the fae form, but try as he might, he could not catch his angel. Those skipping feet were perpetually one step ahead of him, never reaching for him, never looking back, denying Dean even a glimpse of the heaven awaiting him in those deep blue eyes. A rock, lost amongst knee-high grass, snagged Dean’s foot and he tripped and barely caught his balance. Castiel was across the field, a hand reaching back to summon him, but Dean was exhausted and could not compel his body to continue to pursuit. Gasping to catch his breath, Dean fell to his knees, head dropping in dejected defeat.

A shadow fell across him, wings silhouetted against the sun. Smiling with delight – Castiel had had taken pity on him, Castiel had come to him! – Dean looked up and beheld pitiless, cruel black pupils nestled in the evil, heartless, alabaster face of Zeus. Dark shadows made an aura around the body, oozing and growing into a black cloud that blotted out the sky. Horrified at the will 'o the wisp that had led him so far astray, Dean looked around, seeking Castiel. His love had been there, Dean was sure of it, but this fell spirit had stolen the angel, hidden him away. Stumbling back as the unmoving lips of the mask smiled at him cruelly, Dean looked everywhere, seeking light, seeking warmth, but there was no blue left in the world, only deepest night and withered brown grass and...

The snapping, splintering sound of wood breaking woke Dean and he jerked up with a start, only to collapse back against the poorly cushioned bench with a groan. The slightest movement made his joints scream in pain and his body felt weak. If not for Sam’s upcoming nuptials, he’d have stayed in London to recover, but there was no way he could take the extra days away from Lawrence Hall. He was needed there, and he’d not risk missing the wedding. Friday morning had seen Dean paying Mr. Whittaker what was owed, picking up the watch fob while Singer went to hire him a stage coach, insisting that riding with the post was absolutely out of the question.

Though the stage could conceivably take Dean home in two days, mere hours had been enough to show that such was impossible. Dean’s wracked body could not bear the strain of non-stop travel on rutted roads. The rattling and jostling had been torture on a body wracked in turn by chills and fevers, crippled rheumatism, and starved by nausea. Friday evening had seen them at -----ham once more, and as they’d prepared to switch stages, Singer had taken one look at Dean’s pale, shaking body and declared that “only an idjit would ride all night in a torture box on wheels just to save eight hours travel.” Dean hadn’t argued; he’d hardly been able to stand, and Singer had supported him up the stairs to their room. Removing from the stage coach for the night was incomparable bliss, and as he lay awake Saturday morning, feeling only slightly recovered for a night’s sleep, he dreaded returning to the torture box on wheels.

Fearing that the journey would proceed slowly, Dean overcame Singer’s objections, insisting that he take Impala and Chevelle and return to Lawrence Hall to let them know that he would be delayed and that they shouldn’t worried. With every iota of willpower he could muster, Dean mounted the steps into the stage, instructing the driver to see him as far ----ester. Being alone in the carriage had proved both a blessing and a curse. He no longer had to pretend that he felt anything other than awful, but he had little with which to distract himself.

“You alright there?” the driver stuck his head in the window, accent thick, face weather-beaten, grin toothless beneath his worn hat.
“I’m fine,” Dean grunted. “I’m great. What happened?”

“Sprung a wheel, guvnor,” said the man as if it were the best of news. If Dean could have lifted his arm, he’d have been tempted to punch him. “I’ll muster up a soul for fixing, see if I can find another carriage -----cester bound.”

The driver disappeared again, and Dean slumped back against the bench with a thump and a groan. Eyes slipping shut, Dean prayed for sleep, even if it brought more troubling dreams. Anything was better than the way he was imprisoned by his diseased body.

Sleep didn’t come, nor did a carpenter to replace the wheel, nor did another carriage. A small, miserable part of Dean whined about how everyone had abandoned him “on the very day of his utmost danger.” The thought brought a sorely-needed chuckle, relief that he could find levity in any part of this debacle. Dean was no more Squire Allworthy than he was Squire Western. Surrendering to the inevitability of being a wake, Dean pulled himself by increments into a seated position and gave in to the temptation that had eaten at him since Thursday night. From his bag, he retrieved his oiled cloth and tenderly unwrapped the six letters that Castiel had bestowed on him. Folded and sealed with blue wax, each bore a date in the upper corner and a stylized, calligraphy letter “A.” Dean took the oldest, dated only two days after the March Soiree, and replaced the others in his bag to be saved for later, husbanded against the lonely weeks ahead.

Cracking the wax, Dean carefully unfolded the letter and held it to catch the light from the carriage window. The page was trimmed small and every inch was filled with a small, neat script, except for one corner, where a ruled box enclosed a small ink drawing. The suggestion of a face, full, soft lips, scruffy chin with a slight cleft, hair trimmed short, eyes staring out, a challenge, daring the viewer to meet them - a surprisingly apt likeness of Dean, all things considered. Drawing the locket out from his pocket, Dean opened it and held the two images side by side, imagining their likeness hanging pendant to each other in his home. With a sigh, he closed the locket and put it away, filling his mind with Castiel’s likeness and voice as he took in the contents of the letter.

Dearest A.,

I awoke this morning from a dream of you. It was nothing scandalous – quite the contrary. I would call it ordinary save that no moment I am with you, no moment I imagine you, can possibly be described as anything other than extraordinary. We walked together in Hyde Park on a fine spring today. Gentlefolk strolled the paths, children played, a dog gamboled, birds sang, and a gentle breeze scented with lilac stirred the pale green leaves. A chance-met acquaintance greeted us, and we exchanged polite words. There was not the least awkwardness, though love for me shone on your face in every glance. No one seemed to think anything the least odd, even when I took your hand as we gazed out at the Serpentine. We were happy and unmolested, accepted and content.

I think it perhaps the cruelest nightmare I’ve ever had.

My time in London passes achingly slow. I wish to return home, but my family writes to encourage me, “stay, stay! Be merry and bright and young and free! Enjoy the delights of Ton! Make many new friends, and perhaps, someday, bring them around to meet your less fashionable relatives!” Of course, what they mean is: “stay, stay! We can’t afford you and you’re no use here! Remain in your relative’s care, and do not return without a wife!” I would be a fool not to understand that the object of having me, of all of us, go to London was in the expectation that I would find a woman of wealth who appreciated me appearance and would save us all. I have no words to tell them how deplorable, how odious the very concept is, but we have little money, our family has few prospects. It would be a selfish cruelty to those I love if I do not to seek what is best for them. So I tell myself, but I cannot deny that my attempts thus far have been dilatory, and it has been a relief that in a half year
I’ve met with no success. When I think about a woman touching me intimately, my flesh creeps.

It is the profoundest contrast to how I feel when I remember the brush of your fingers against my skin. The thought of your hands pressing against my body overwhelms me in the best possible way, though the memory is as far from the reality as a thumbnail sketch is from a painting by Rembrandt. However, until I see you again, it will have to do. Until then, I remain your faithful and loving,

C.

Hopelessness tried to subsume affection as he comprehended the opposing forces tearing at his lover. With the expectations of an entire family resting on Castiel’s lovely, shapely shoulders, it was no wonder that he struggled so. Guilt flooded Dean, that he had made Castiel’s situation more difficult, increased the conflict between Castiel’s desires and responsibilities. Had Dean moderated his behavior as he should have, perhaps Castiel would not feel so trapped, so sad. Dean’s heart ached to read of it.

A pounding on the carriage door startled Dean. A postman in a red coat, his sunburnt cheeks the precisely same shade, peeked in. “Oi, man said you needed to get to -----cester. I’ve the post here. We’ll arrive at 1 this morning. Where’s your bags?”

Minutes later saw Dean established in the only open seat on the coach, perched atop beside the driver. Fearing that any sign of illness would alarm the other riders and cause the driver to abandon him unceremoniously at the side of the road, Dean clung to the slight rail, tossed and swayed at the coach’s every motion. He nearly fainted each time they hit a particularly bad rut, vision flickering black, tunneling until the countryside seemed across an ocean from him. They arrived at -----cester at three. It was easily the most miserable 16 hours of Dean’s entire life, not excluding the time he caught scurvy, the bout of malaria he nearly didn’t survive when he was 17, and the time he fractured his leg and, unable to walk, awaited rescue from a rocky shoreline for a day.

The next morning, Dean was not able to rise from bed. The innkeeper took pity on him and sent his youngest daughter, Ava, to care for him: “don’t trouble yerself, sir, she’s had every kind ‘o sick on God’s earth, there’s nothin’ you’ve got as’ll catch ‘er.” Dean consented only because he was helpless to do elsewise. He’d have wet himself without someone to retrieve the pot from beneath his bed. By that night he was fading in and out of awareness, plagued by visions that teased at the corner of his vision but never resolved into anything definite. In the rare moments his thoughts cleared, Dean was unable to think of anything but despair that he’d miss the wedding, he’d never see his wife and children again, that Castiel would never know why he never returned to Ms. Naomi’s.

It was mid-day Monday when he awoke to the same press of misery. Ava informed him that a doctor had seen him, physicked him, bled him, and promised to come back in the evening to see if he was doing better. Propping him up on pillows, she fed him thin gruel despite his protests. For a wonder, he didn’t vomit, the first food he’d kept down since Wednesday. Even such minimal exertions as conversation and consumption fatigued him, and he drifted through a waking dream. A string of visitors sat with him, his wife, Sam, Castiel, others he cared for, all come to see him. Not until the hallucinations faded did he realize they were the imaginings of his strained thoughts. There was little comfort in the realization, still less in the dissipation of his phantom visitors. Lucidity served to remind him of the comfort he would feel, were one of his loved ones present, and how abandoned he felt without them, though he knew there was no justice in the thought.

“I’m looking for a gentleman: Mr. Dean Winchester,” one such fantasy began as dusk was falling. Dean heard Sam’s familiar voice, speaking somewhere outside the open window. “He’s my brother.”

“You’re in luck,” the jovial innkeeper said. “We have such a person upstairs. He’s in a bad way, I
fear."

"You do? You do! Is he alright? Is he...?" The words choked off, Sam’s voice thick with distress. Dean longed to call out for his brother not to worry, but he couldn’t find the strength.

"Don’t know, sir," the innkeeper said sadly. " ‘Twas a close thing. May yet be. The doctor’ll be back in an hour or two."

The voices faded, and Dean sighed sadly.

Minutes or seconds or hours later, the door opened, and Sam stepped in, hair brushing against the low door frame. His hallucination wasn’t done with him yet after all. Dean forced himself not to react or respond when the phantom of his younger brother stared at him with horrified concern. "Dean? Dean!" The last time Dean had tried to interact with one of his hallucinations, he’d fallen from the bed and spent an hour convulsing on the floor, frozen with cold that threatened to shatter his bones, not strong enough to rise again. He’d learned his lesson.

Sam crossed to the bed and waved a hand before his eyes. It was easily the most annoying thing any of his delusions had done, and Dean grimaced. "You’re scaring me. Say something!" Dean shook his head. "What? Why the hell not, Dean?"

"’s not real," Dean murmured.

"No, no, I’m real," Sam grabbed Dean’s hand and lifted set it on Sam’s chest. "See? Real. Actually, really, here. Are you hallucinating?" Sam jerked his head to look over his shoulder, hair flaring over his ears in a way that made Dean chuckle. "Has he been hallucinating?"

"Yes, sir," said Ava sadly. "He’s been doing better today, though. He finally got some sleep, and ate something."

"I’m okay," Dean was proud of how normally and reassuringly he said the words, and was disappointed at the horror manifest on Sam’s face in reply.

"No, you’re not," snapped Sam, voice tinged with petulance. "You weren’t careful, you acted brashly, and you nearly killed yourself." Coloring, Dean lowered his eyes. It wasn’t his fault he got sick, but he didn’t have the energy to argue, especially since he still wasn’t convinced his brother wasn’t a hallucination. He rubbed his fingers against the fabric of Sam’s clothing where his hand yet rested, and thought it a fairly impressive phantom. It was more real than any of the other dreams had been. If his fevered mind was to make a delusion which he could touch, it could have at least done him the favor of conjuring Castiel. With a sigh, Sam shook out his shoulders and dropped Dean’s hand, which fell limply back to the covers. Collapsing in to the chair beside the bed, Sam looked at, entire face tense and brooding with concern. "Damnation, Dean. You scared the bejesus out of me. Bobby and I have been looking for you in every town and inn between home and here for two days."

"Sorry," mumbled Dean. Weakly, he gave Sam’s hand a squeeze. "Didn’t mean to."

"Was it worth it?" Sam asked quietly.

"Yes," Dean said without the least hesitation. No matter how much it hurt, Castiel loved him. That was worth anything.

It was two days before Dean’s fever broke, and Friday before he was in his own bed at Lawrence Hall. Sam’s wedding to Ms. Moore was a mere two days away, and Dean was scarce able to stand, forced to watch in frustration as the hubbub of last minute preparation and arrive guest proceeded
around him while he was forbidden to do a thing to help. He tempered his irritation by entertaining, sitting in a chair in their sitting room and engaging in conversation with anyone or everyone while those who could help, did so. In the evenings, he soothed himself by reading and re-reading the two letters he had thus far opened.

The day of Sam’s wedding dawned as bright and clear and stunning as Ms. Moore’s fondest dreams. The guests assembled and the church filled, and Dean sat beside his wife, dressed in far too many layers and annoyed with the strain remaining upright was putting on his back. The church at ______shire which was festooned with flowers for the occasion. Family and friends filled the pews, people of the town joined for fun, and even some of the sailors with whom they crewed were there, making their own, tight knot of men with permanently swarthy faces and rolling sea legs despite many years condemned ashore.

Ms. Moore was radiant. Her dress was modest, as befit her youth, with a high neck and short sleeves that bared her pale arms nearly to the shoulder. Sheer fabric layered over a white slip fell straight to the ground from the high waist, and colorful embroidery of flowers edged the collar and sleeves. Matching embroidery made a thick band around the base, pansies for remembrance, daisies for innocence, violets for fidelity, and one single red rose for true love. Dean was a little sickened that he knew all of that, but Ms. Moore had gushed about it so extensively when her dress had been ordered that there was not a soul in the Winchester household who could not have recited it by heart. A country bonnet with a red ribbon mounted a veil, though the lace scarce obscured the multitude of blonde ringlets that bounced about her face. She completed all with a red shawl which gave her the option to modestly cover her arms should she wish to do so. It was an outfit to make every girl of the county sigh with envy, but she wore it easily and without presumption. The most alluring part, Dean thought, was the sparkle in her eyes whenever she gazed at her husband-to-be.

The feeling was clearly mutual. Dean didn’t think he’d ever seen Samuel happier. He wore a silk jacket in off-white and a red vest. Embroidery in a rainbow of pastels made an abstract pattern along the collar, trailed along the middle, encircled each button hole, and adorned the hem. Lace lightly swathed his hands. His breeks were of cotton and ended in two tone boots, the tops tan, the bottoms black. He wore a rather absurd white top hat, and the watch fob he had finally selected stood out boldly, rose red mounted in gold. As far as Dean could tell, Sam forgot another soul existed in the world from the moment that Ms. Moore came in to view. Beside him, Charlie and Ms. Harvelle wore matching, simpering expressions and dabbed at their eyes with kerchiefs. No one but Dean could have seen that, amidst the folds of their skirts as they sat beside each other, they were holding hands. Jealousy flitted through his thoughts.

“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony,” the vicar, Mr. Murphy, was quite elderly, and his hands shook as he turned each page of the Book of Common Prayers. He’d presided over every wedding in ----cester for a generation. As a younger man, one of his first had been the double-ceremony that had united the two brothers, John and Henry Winchester, to the two sisters, Mary and Gwendolyn Campbell. He’d conducted Dean’s marriage to Charlotte, and if he lived long enough, he’d wed the younger John Winchester to the woman of his dreams. “Instituted of God in the time of man’s innocency, marriage signifies unto us the mystical union that is betwixt Christ and his Church: and therefore is not by any to be enterprised, nor taken in hand, unadvisedly, lightly, or wantonly, to satisfy men’s carnal lusts and appetites, like brute beasts that have no understanding; but reverently, discreetly, advisedly, soberly, and in the fear of God; duly considering the causes for which Matrimony was ordained.”

There was something in the way James Murphy said “carnal lusts and appetites” that was invariably the funnies thing that Dean had ever heard. There was a snarl to his voice, clearly meant to be condemnation of those fornicated, but instead it sounded like an invitation. Dean snorted back a
laugh at the thought of dry, dusty old Murphy having any carnal lusts to speak of. Charlotte gave him a dirty look and he shrugged slightly, quirking his eyebrow in a look he knew clearly communicated *can you blame me?* She smiled and winked at him.

“First, marriage was ordained for the procreation of children, to be brought up in the fear and nurture of the Lord, and to the praise of his holy Name,” the vicar pressed on as if he’d noticed nothing. He’d probably noticed nothing. “Secondly, it was ordained for a remedy against sin, and to avoid fornication; that such persons as have not the gift of continency might marry, and keep themselves undefiled members of Christ’s body. Thirdly, it was ordained for the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have of the other, both in prosperity and adversity.”

A vision came unbidden to Dean’s mind of himself, fit to be wed in a brown jacket, maroon vest, cream shirt and pants, polished black boots, standing nervously before Vicar Murphy. His excited gaze took in the familiar church, the rows of excited onlookers, and the closed doors through which his beloved would enter. Impatience ate at him as he awaited the appointed time.

The doors opened, and Castiel came in, eyes lowered, cheeks pink with happiness or embarrassment. His beautiful black hair bore a crown of flowers, his suit was pure white silk embroidered in rich hues at the cuffs and along the hem. Even his boots were white. Though his face was unmasked, black wings adorned his back, as befit an angel.

“...I will,” Sam’s voice cut through Dean’s fantasy. Sam swallowed so loudly and so nervously after the words that the entire church could hear. Dean grinned.

“Jessica Lee Moore, wilt thou have this Man to thy wedded Husband, to live together after God’s ordinance in the holy estate of Matrimony? Wilt thou obey him, and serve him, love, honor, and keep him in sickness and in health; and, forsaking all other, keep thee only unto him, so long as ye both shall live?” Anger flashed through Dean at the unfairness of it all. What did Ms. Harvelle and Charlie feel for each other that was not expressed in those vows? What did Castiel and Dean share that was not as holy?

“I will,” Ms. Moore said, her eyes alight with laughter as Sam’s face went slack and bemused with pleasure.

Castiel stepped down the aisle, eyes lowered demurely but steps confident, and stood facing Dean. Glancing up to meet Dean’s eyes through short black eyelashes, Dean saw a hint of mischief in them, a promise of things to come, and realized that it wasn’t demure that kept Castiel’s eyes glued to the ground, it was defiance.

Ms. Moore’s father rose and took a position between the couple, took his daughter’s hand and placed it atop the vicar’s. The vicar grasped it gently, then passed it to Sam.

“I, Samuel Lucas Winchester, take thee, Jessica Lee Moore, to my wedded Wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to cherish, till death us do part, according to God’s holy ordinance; and thereto I plight thee my troth.”

Dean would spend the entire ceremony lost deep in Castiel’s eyes, staring into them, seeing every minute shift of pleasure and expectation and promise as they each spoke the words that bound them, two bodies and two minds but one soul. There were tears in Dean’s eyes, because in Ms. Moore speaking her vow Dean could hear the whispering echo of the vows he had already taken and the vows that could never be spoken.

The vicar produced the ring, a thin band of pure gold, and Samuel echoed him, “with this Ring I thee
wed, with my Body I thee worship, and with all my worldly Goods I thee endow: In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Dean’s hand trembled for imagining how he would feel placing a ring around Castiel’s delicate fingers, how it would feel to hold Castiel’s hand in his as they spoke their vows, as they walked in Hyde Park on a beautiful spring day.

Sam and Ms. Moore knelt down, and the ceremony droned on. Dean tried to focus on the moment. After all, Sam would hopefully only wed once, and it would be a pity of Dean missed it for day dreaming. The church was draughty, Dean’s body reminded him that he’d nearly died the weekend before, and there was a tight knot of bitterness in Dean’s breast that he hated himself for feeling. Dean had no right to be sad on the happiest day of his brother’s life.

Finally, mercifully, the ring was on Ms. Moore’s finger, they’d wished peace to Israel, glory to the Holy Trinity, and blessed and “amen”ed every which seeking holy intercession in the speedy production of children. The slightly dazed smile gracing Sam’s lips was a better indication of how soon Dean could expect a niece or nephew than anything God might do, unless Dean very much missed his judgment. The happy newlyweds skipped down the aisle holding hands and the audience pelted them with rice as they rose to follow them out of the church.

As a milling mass, they walked to Lawrence Hall. Dean rested heavily on Charlie’s arm, and listened to her gush enthusiastically about the ceremony as if she hadn’t sat through a dozen like it before, including their own. Despite her happy words, he suspected she’d shared in many of his sad thoughts. Her hand had not left Ms. Harvelle’s the entire ceremony. Perhaps she pictured herself and Ms. Harvelle in matching wedding gowns, exchanging rings. He would have liked that for them, they made each other so happy.

A feast was laid out at Lawrence. Guest or stranger, of gentlefolk or otherwise, anyone who came in peace and wish the newlyweds joy was welcome. A quartet played airs, an impromptu dance broke out on the grass before the manor, and Dean and Charlotte joined in on every festivity as he forced himself out of the doldrums and into the spirit of the event. It was impossible to remain gloomy with Samuel beaming, dazed grin stretching from ear to ear.

It was dark when Dean finally returned to his room and collapsed on the green bedding, fully clothed and too exhausted to change. He was grateful for his fatigue, for it kept any of the troubling thoughts he had managed to quash during the day from returning to prevent him rest. They would still be waiting for him on the morrow, though. He retrieved the third of Castiel’s letters and lay back to read it.

*My Darling A,*

*I am a cad – I fear I am one, I suspect I am. There is so little of matter that I can communicate coherently without risk of giving away particulars I dare not mention. Of late, I have had such that I could explain vaguely yet clearly – it is of import to me, I have no one whom I feel comfortable confiding it in, and I long to share it with you as my friend – yet I can think of no one less appropriate to tell. It’s a contradiction that has had me in circles for a day, but I’ve finally decided – ink to paper, words from my heart to your ears. Please accept them knowing that I do not speak to plague you, but because you are dearer to me than any, and I must tell someone.*

*My relatives have a wide social circle in London, but we are mostly often invited to dine with the ----’s, for they are in-laws. Despite vast differences of world view, the families have remained close. (Forgive me, the reality is far more complicated, but I cannot!) I detest being in their company. My personal opinions are completely in harmony with those of my relative, and completely at odds with those of the spouse and their family. However, though the former has all the virtue, the later has all the prestige and clout, so we are forced to spend night after night listening to self-righteous, self-
aggrandizing nonsense, and are made to feel second class if we dare disagree.

Last night, while in attendance, my eye caught a pair of green eyes. I seek them, I’ll admit, hoping in a desperate corner of my heart that I might find you, though I’ve not the least idea how I would proceed were such a wish actually to come true. They were not yours, but this pair grabbed me, and reminded me of you so powerfully that I my spirit was much perturbed. The owner was a woman, a few years younger than me, and she seemed most distressed by the aggressive, domineering nature of the conversation. Looking at one such – beautiful in a feminine way, sensitive, gentle, with eyes that reminded me so much of yours – I found myself surprisingly affected, and I sought an introduction. We spoke for a time, until polite necessity drove us apart. She is sweet.

She is not you.

But if man must take a wife, I find myself for the first time considering that I might do worse than one such as she. However, she will never own my heart. That will be forever yours, precious A. In all affection,

C.

At the bottom of the letter was a picture of two hands clasped, drawn perfectly true to life. Dean stretched his fingers – his left hand finally beginning to heal from the injuries done it by the broken glass – and lost himself in remembering the feeling of Castiel’s fingers laced between his.

The weeks after the wedding saw life return to an imitation of normalcy at Lawrence Hall. Dean’s health steadily improved, the guests from the wedding returned to their homes, Sam and the former Ms. Moore – who insisted that now that they were family, Dean call her Jessica – took up residence in the master bedroom, and peace, quiet and happiness reigned until John stumbled or Diana fell or, heavens forfend, anyone beat Ms. Harvelle at spillikins. The most anticipated event of the following weeks was a long-planned visit by Ms. Milligan, Mr. Milligan, and Ms. Masters. They’d been invited before the Winchester’s departed London, and were to stay for a week. They arrived late and there was little time for hospitality, but next morning saw the large family group gathered in the sitting room after breakfast, lost in pleasant conversation before the day’s plans commenced – a shopping trip to the village for the ladies, a ride around the park for the gentleman. A lull fell in the conversation, and into it Charlie brought eager words.

“There’s something different about you, Ms. Milligan, I am certain of it,” there was mischievous gleam in Charlie’s eye. Dean looked again at Ms. Milligan’s face, but saw no great change. Her hair was still bright red, her skin pale as cream, her eyes catching the light now green, now flecked in gold, and her smile was unassuming and shy despite months of acquaintance.

As the eyes of the room fell on her, she colored modestly and lowered her fair gaze to her hands. “Am I changed?” she asked. “My aunt Lilith warned me that if I were not careful, I would come home brown. I’ve tried to keep out of the sun.”

“Your complexion is flawless as always,” laughed Jessica. “I am jealous of it. If I do not bring a parasol when we walk through the gardens this afternoon, I will be tanned within the hour.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” shrugged Sam, looking at his new wife with delight. “You’d be just as beautiful.”

“Oh, Lord,” said Ms. Harvelle with a laugh and a knowing eye roll that she shared with Ms. Masters. “Are they like this all the time?” asked Ms. Masters with mock chagrin.

“Since the wedding, it is an endless stream of mutual appreciation,” Ms. Harvelle confirmed. “We
shall all loose our teeth on the sweetness.”

“Shouldn’t it be so?” Ms. Milligan asked innocently. “I should think, if a man and woman are to wed, it is appropriate that they should be blissfully, shamelessly in love with each other. If I could be so with the man I choose to marry, I should think myself the most joyful, blessed of women. All couples begin so, I’m sure of it.”

“La, you are such a romantic, Anna!” exclaimed Ms. Masters. “How can you think such fluff, having seen what you have of the interactions between men and women? Can you imagine your Aunt Lilith and Mr. Novak ever engaging in such rapport? Or your own father and mother?”

“No,” Ms. Milligan confessed sadly. “But I should like to think it was not always so. You must permit me to believe that there was a time when they were a-joy for each other, and that the passage of time has cooled the surface of their passion for each other.”

“Passion for each other?” snorted Mr. Milligan. “My dear Anna, you know I would do anything to shelter your precious innocence, but I suspect I’m not actually bursting your bubble when I point out that Lilith and Mr. Novak loathe each other.” Ms. Milligan looked sadly at the sitting room rug, fingers fiddling uncomfortably with the beading on her reticule.

“We’ve strayed from the topic,” said Charlie. “I wish to know what had you looking so happy before, Ms. Milligan. There was some thought in your head, I’m sure. Though, pray, break no confidences to tell me – it is only if you wish it do I press.”

“It’s not a secret,” said Ms. Masters with a laugh.

“It is if she chooses not to speak of it,” Charlie said firmly before Ms. Masters could further expose her friend. They were always thus, and if Dean had not seen the two long enough to know that they nursed genuine affection for each other, he would wonder at their friendship. Ms. Masters was brash and open to the point of vulgarity at times, but Ms. Milligan often smiled affectionately, indulgently even, when Ms. Masters spoke. Dean suspected that the quiet Ms. Milligan wished she had more of Ms. Masters’ fearless willingness to buck the requirements of polite conversation.

“There is a young man,” confessed Ms. Milligan, looking around the group quickly.

Mr. Milligan rolled his eyes and muttered, just barely audibly, “here we go again.”

“You know Gabriel Novak? He is our uncle by marriage,” Ms. Milligan explained. “He has a nephew, James Novak, who has lived in the city with Mr. and Mrs. Novak. However, circumstances were against us and we’d managed not to meet. However, my father went out of his way to introduce us last month, and I’m ever so grateful, for he is the sweetest...the finest mannered...I like him very well.”

Ms. Masters was making a gagging motion with one hand, drawing laughter from Ms. Harvelle.
“Tell them about his eyes,” she suggested. “Go on, you know you want to.”

Ms. Milligan blushed bright red, but she defiantly said, “It is not as you say, I do not merely find him pleasant to look on, I enjoy his conversation as well. I know we have not known each other long, but when I am with him, it feels like much longer. I’ll not be ashamed of it no matter how you tease me!”

“Amelia Richardson,” said Ms. Masters calmly, the name an admonition. Ms. Milligan made no answer, but she colored and her face fell with sadness. Charlie looked curiously at the two women.

“You and I are school friends, you know, assigned to the same room at Mr. Silver’s finishing school in -----ham. However, Anna was shy, and I was...you can well imagine, I’ve not changed much—”
“That’s not true,” interrupted Ms. Milligan, a quirk of smile on her lips despite her sad eyes. “You are much better mannered now than you were then.”

“Probably true,” murmured Ms. Masters before continuing in her normal tone. “Ms. Richardson was less than a year from finishing, and she was assigned to us as a mentor. Despite the age difference, we grew inseparably close. That summer, we each took a tour of the other’s homes – we spent three weeks with Ms. Richardson in ----, four with my family in -----shire, and the final three with Ms. Milligan in London.”

“Poor Ms. Richardson,” Ms. Milligan said mournfully. “She’d not been in London before, she was not yet ‘out,’ and she was swept off her feet. My father was determined to make her comfortable, and wanted to tantalize the Ton, for he said she was the most beautiful creature he had ever beheld, and waiting a year before allowing society to see her would be criminal. Thus, what we thought would be appropriate entertainments were held for a select guest list, and we all had great fun, at first. I never learned all, but among the guests, there was a man who wooed Ms. Richardson very determinedly. We never learned who, but within a week she was hopelessly infatuated.”

“And within a month, she was completely ruined,” Ms. Masters shook her head. “No matter how virtuous a young man may seem, I always remind myself of Ms. Richardson, left alone and friendless in the world, forgotten by the very people who should have shielded and protected her. There was nothing we could do, we were merely children, and the scandal was such that our parents refused to intervene.”

“She passed last year,” concluded Ms. Milligan. “She and I had maintained a correspondence. She stayed the same sweet girl despite how she was used. It makes me so sad to think of it. I wrote to her parents to enquire about paying my respects, but they never replied.”

“Well, that’s enough of that!” Mr. Milligan cut in jovially. “No more of your lost loves or your current loves or your new loves or your old loves or any of it. If you ladies truly wish to continue such talk, you’ll have to accept that you’ve driven the gentlemen from the room. What say you, Mr. Winchester, Samuel – shall we for our ride?”

Shaking off the doldrums that such a tale of heartbreak couldn’t help but induce, Dean rose and the three of them left the room. They’d planned a modest loop around the estate, a consideration to Dean’s continuing fragile health, but he fully expected that the two friends would take off without him when he grew tired. It was frustrating, with the weather so fine, but there was no helpful for it. If he didn’t husband his strength now, he might be incapacitated all summer, and that was beyond the pale.

As they walked out of the door, Sam enthusiastically acquainting Mr. Milligan with the best riding paths in the area, Dean noticed Ms. Richardson standing stock still in the front room, clutching a basket of tulips with white-knuckled hands. His thoughts reeled for an instant as he came to the inescapable conclusion that the tragedy that had befallen Ms. Amelia Richardson while visiting Ms. Milligan’s family had resulted in their own Ms. Claire Richardson (for she had become very much “their own” in the six weeks since she had joined them), and that the poor child had overheard them so casually discussing the history of her departed mother.

“Dean, are you coming?” Sam stuck his head back into the house with a wide grin. “Mr. Milligan is already mounted. Impala is getting impatient.”

“You’re impatient,” grumbled Dean in a low voice. “I’ll be right there.” He waved his brother away and stepped hesitantly to Ms. Richardson, whose gaze was wide and unseeing. Kneeling directly before her, he said gently, “Claire?”
“What?” she started. “Oh, Mr. Winchester, sir! I’m sorry.” Tears welled in the corner of her eyes.

“Are you alright?” he said with gruff sympathy.

“I’m fine, sir, thank you,” she gave a false smile, but he didn’t push it. “Are these the Milligans?”

“Yes, two of the younger Milligans are visiting. You may meet them if you’d like.” He wondered how that would go over, the mighty Milligans asked to accept the acquaintance of the orphaned byproduct of the ruination of a former friend, but he’d not deny the child the chance if it would make her happy.

“No!” There was a harsh note to Claire’s voice that he’d never heard before. “No, I’m sorry, I just remember my mother maintained a correspondence with Ms. Anna Milligan, and I thought...it’s nothing, sir. I have to put these flowers in water or they’ll shrivel. Please excuse me, Mr. Winchester.”

Someday, Dean thought with bemusement as she flitted away on fleet feet, Claire would stop being terrified of him. He wished he had the least clue what he’d done to inspire her with fear.

Shaking the thought away, he joined his brother and Mr. Milligan in the bright of a summer’s mid-morning to tour the extensive woodlands around Lawrence Hall.

The visit from the Milligans proved the perfect distraction to pass the days before when Dean would have to leave for the May soiree. They were good company, the girls sweet and easy to talk to, Mr. Milligan’s manners greatly improved for the visit to the country that made it clear that whatever stereotypes he’d been raised on were patently false. The Winchesters entertained and talked, showed off their home and their shire, hosted a fete, and a grand time was had. With Dean’s health still hesitant, he found he had just enough energy to meet the social niceties and just little enough that when he retreated to his bedroom at night, he was fatigued enough to fall quickly into a dreamless sleep. Castiel’s ghost yet haunted him, but the pain was eased by the enjoyment of the days, the fineness of spring weather, their approaching meeting, and the love communicated in every line of the five letters he had opened.

If thinking on those letters produced two gray clouds, they were first that Castiel continued to speak of the green-eyed woman; and second, that reading between the lines, Dean found that Castiel was precisely the kind of man with whom it might have been possible to achieve an understanding. Castiel was from a family of strained resources, but wasn’t an eldest son. He had few prospects outside of his ability to use his manners and appearance to achieve an eligible match, and his only resource were the connections of his important relatives in the Ton. If not for his obligation to help his family, Dean would consider speaking to him of an arrangement like Ms. Harvelle and Charlie had. However, there was no means of providing for his family if such were done – it was not like Ms. Harvelle and her mother, for Ellen had been part of their family circle for years, and it was only the two of them to consider. Having reflected on it, he’d let the idea go to wither and die, though the phantom that had once only sat with them at mealtimes now had taken up a place by the fireplace while they sat together, made a seventh at Lottery, and sat quietly and observed while Dean worked on his books.

By Sunday afternoon, Dean was packed, a stage coach hired, and he was prepared for his departure to London the following morning. Traveling by stage, it was plenty of time, and even should the weather turn foul, Dean would be protected and safe. He’d groused about the compromises, but he was the one who made the arrangements, Charlie and Sam and Ms. Harvelle and Jessica rolling their eyes each time he raised an argument against prudence and then behaved prudently anyway. Singer was going with him, too, “just in case.” The groundskeeper had not lived down his shame at leaving Dean as he had, knowing that had he remained with the carriage, Dean would not have been
marooned, forced to ride the post, and then left, ill and alone, among strangers in a strange place. The practical affect of Singer’s guilt was that he was behaving extremely protectively – he’d met Dean at the house after his ride with Mr. Milligan and Samuel with Dean’s dressing gown and a hot toddy, of all things – but also excessively foul tempered. Where his family merely gave Dean exasperated looks for his inconsistent behavior, Singer had gone on several diatribes where “idjit” was the nicest thing he called Dean. He took it all in stride. It wasn’t like Dean was much better at finding the words to tell his family that he cared for them.

Settling early into bed on the night before his trip, Dean propped up a number of pillows so he could sit and read the last of the letters that Castiel had sent him. Unfolding it, he noted in confusion that whereas Castiel’s hand was usually light and smooth, this time the back of the paper showed lines where he had pressed hard, several places where the ink had bled through, and a puncture as the nib had pierced that page. Shrugging off his wonder, Dean read:

My A.,

I am in agony. In two days, I will see you – or I won’t. It is the most unbearable suspense imaginable. At the best of times, thoughts of you distract me in the best possible way, but now? I think about you constantly. I can think of nothing else. Somewhere you sit, knowing the answer to the question that consumes my every waking moment while I wait in desperate uncertainty. Even learning that I was not to see you would be better than this impossible ambiguity.

The paper was slightly wrinkled, betraying the tell tale signs of exposure to moisture: a faint curl to the corners, a rise and fall to the page.

The things I think – the things I want – God, they are killing me, beautiful demon. Reading your wonderful letters, writing my own, I feel I’ve come to know you even better as a person, but it does nothing to assuage the desire that purrs in my gut and stiffens me when I least expect it.

Dean swallowed and exhaled hard. Heat curled in him. With his illness, arousal had been hard to come by even with Castiel haunting his mind, but the words conjured up the sounds, the images, the tastes and smells – the low growl in Castiel’s throat, his awakening cock growing thick and needy as he sat as his desk writing this a month ago, the flavor of his release in Dean’s mouth, the musky, desperate scent of their mutual need. Dean palmed himself through his pants, unsure whether he was trying to quell or bring to fruition the hardness beginning to form. With hungry eyes, he began to read again.

And in those moments, I need you. I sit in the privacy of my room and I see every line of your perfect body, hear every desperate, pleading sound that leaves your mouth when I tease you and touch you and stroke you before I finally fill you.

The mental image was too much. Dean moaned, wishing Castiel could hear him, and began to rub against himself harder. The blue-eyed phantom that followed him around the house hovered by the foot of his bed, watching as Dean pleasured himself. Fully hard, each stroking push sent pleasure pulsing through him, his breath and hand and heart synchronized.

I read through the letters you wrote me and wonder if you crave me as I starve for you. At every hint that you might, the fever grows stronger until I cannot restrain myself, and your name escapes my lips like a prayer. Gorgeous A., sweet A., can you see what you are doing to me? What do you imagine I am thinking, what I am doing, as I write these words?

The mental image came through like a sending, Castiel folded over his desk, head on the table, steamy breath rustling and dampening the paper. With one hand, Castiel wrote frantically, blotching the ink in haste, letters growing uneven as he began to lose control of himself. With the other hand,
Castiel scrabbled at the buttons of his trousers, undid them, lowered the flap over his crotch, clutched himself and stroked. His moan made the paper flutter as in a breeze, the pressure of the quill made a blackened divot on the paper. The rawness of Castiel’s need screamed from every word, drove Dean wild with desire to touch himself, to touch Castiel, to pleasure them both. Fumbling at his covers, he threw the blanket aside, frantically pulled his sleeping gown up, and sighed with relief to finally feel his fingers curl around himself. Panting, he slumped back against the pillows and toyed with his member, running a nail lightly over every spot he knew to be most sensitive — the ridge beneath the head, the veins pumping hot with blood, the slit spitting out the first dribbles of semen. Eyes blurring with lust and longing for a glimpse of blue found the next line of the letter.

*It is the same as what I imagine you doing, reading it. That is not your hand, A., it is my lips kissing down your length as you swell on my mouth. These filthy words leave the nib of my quill as your delicious flavor drips onto my tongue.*

Dean moaned, doing his best to mimic Castiel’s descriptions with his inadequate hand. Every word struck the core of him like a thrust, pulsing through his body.

*Your name from my lips again to the unhearing room – my A., always mine – and my body quakes at the carnal memory of how that possession feels. Your heat envelops me, constricts around me, compels me to take more, take all, over and over again. Good God, A., it feels so perfect, so right. It is life and wonder and joy. I cannot live without it.*

His hand wasn’t enough, it would never be enough. Tearing his eyes from Castiel’s unspeakable words, Dean rolled onto his side and set the letter on the mattress beside him. Hips twitching helplessly against his hand, he reached behind himself and thrust into his tight hole hard with two fingers. “Castiel!” he burst out as that feeling of friction and pleasure like no other hit his head like alcohol, leaving him dizzy and desperate and craving so much more than he could do for himself. Exploring the smooth skin of his interior, he found a spot that a mere brush burst tingling sparks that coursed through his body. It was the barest of flames compared to the pleasures that lay deeper, the pleasures he could not reach, but in comparison to nothing, it was amazing. Pressing against that spot, he thrust in and out, added a third finger as he strained for deeper, for more, for bliss in Castiel’s embrace. Choking moans against his pillows, he read on.

*My hand is the poorest of imitations of that divine feeling. The mere memory of being inside you sends me tumbling over the edge into ecstasy. Your body moves against mine, your lips scream my name, your need for me and mine for you devours the world until there is nothing left but heat and movement and pleasure and your voice like a siren’s drawing me on, begging me not to stop, and I swear to you, A., my beloved demon, I never will.*

“Don’t stop, Castiel,” he whimpered desperately. A nail scraped against that unnamable source of wonder, and he groaned and strived all the harder to touch it again. The hand around his cock moved faster, harder, his body growing tense, muscles contracting against the fingers within him.

*You rip me apart and sear me with pleasure until all thought is gone save the name of salvation writ in fire across my soul – A.! And I realize that I love you and it’s so wonderful and so terrible that I can’t but cry with longing and lust and loneliness and adoration and ecstatic release that I have found perfection yet it is denied me. My most beloved A.!*

In a darkened study, a month ago, Castiel, whoever he was, wherever he was, moaned *Asmodeus, Asmodeus*, and climaxed, his quill jabbing into the page so hard it puckered and punctured and tore through the thick paper. Dean could see it as if it were drawn instead of written, as if he’d stood there and watched. Castiel had written this as his release spilled into his hand, as he’d pulsed with unadulterated pleasure with the remembrance of their time together. The thought tipped Dean over
the edge and a streak of white painted the bedding.

“Castiel,” he moaned, “Angel...my angel...” A second stroke and a second, lesser cascade of joy washed over him as a more white stained his sheets. “Only you...” He milked the last of his orgasm onto his indifferent bed, words falling heavy into the silence of his bedroom.

_I will see you in two days – if not at N.’s, then in my dreams. Your_

_C._

He should have opened the last letter first.

In four days, they would be together again. It was enough. It had to be enough.
The anticipation that had quieted in Dean’s gut during his illness like embers banked for the night flared to life when he woke up Monday morning. With health and the knowledge that they’d be together soon, his desire for Castiel multiplied five-fold was by their long period of physical division, ten-fold by the realization that Castiel was so desperate for Dean that he had committed to paper the most scandalous words imaginable and placed them into Dean’s hands. Merely imagining Castiel’s licentious thoughts as he composed such a missive over was enough to stir hardness in Dean’s breeks during his endless stage coach ride.

As planned, they took the journey slowly, setting a pace to bring them to London by Wednesday night, rather than the less than two days that was possible with a fine team, good weather, no traffic, and a dose of luck. Still, 16 hours in a carriage, even with a friend so dear as Singer, was nigh unbearable. By the end of the first day, Dean was fatigued, his head plagued with bouts of vertigo, and his nerves thrummed with impatience and the inevitable arousal caused by a boring day with little to occupy his mind but thoughts of Castiel composing more such letters to him. Exhausted as he was, Dean lay awake in his room until he could take it no longer, and he stormed to the desk, seized the quill and paper obligingly provided by the innkeeper, and sat to do for Castiel what Castiel had done for him.

With careful consideration, he selected a foot rest from among the items of furniture in the room as his best suited to his requirements. It was essential not merely to write the letter, but to do the actions he described, and there was only one thought consuming him, only one thing he wanted, and he decided that now was the moment to strive to achieve it. There must be a way to give himself the bliss that thus far only Castiel had been able to trigger within him. Dean set the foot stool before the desk. Though it was much lower than a chair, he could still see the tabletop, still reach the inkwell,
and still write. Satisfied, he hitched his gown around his hips. Straddling the stool with a knee on either side, he stuck out his bare buttocks. He stuck three fingers in his mouth and picked up his quill.

Beloved C.,

Every day, every night, I am a well run dry, an empty vessel, a ghost. With my recovery, I have remembered how to want, and what I want more than anything is to be with you.

Removing the fingers from his mouth, Dean reached around himself and was pleased to find his supposition correct, that this angle would afford him better access than any other he had tried. Perhaps, finally, he would accomplish what he so desperately needed. He felt around gently, smearing wetness around his entrance, the feel of rough skin on soft triggering curls of warmth coursing through his body and hardening his arousal.

Thoughts of you clog my mind, blur my vision, arouse me to the point of pain. No matter how I tease at myself, no matter how hardly or softly I stroke and caress and touch, it is inadequate. It is not enough.

He pressed a finger in and a low moan escaped him. Effortlessly, so easy in comparison to his every other attempt, the digit slid inside his body to the knuckle. Anticipation turned to desperate hope. Haste consumed him, he had to know if he could finally give himself even a dram of that glorious feeling that filled him fit to burst when Castiel thrust into him. He pulled the finger out and pressed it in again frantically, rapidly, spreading saliva in himself to ease the way, accustoming him body to the friction, the slight twinge of pain, the heat building behind his eyes.

I hear your voice, rough with need, telling me to kneel, demanding of me what I would willingly give, but I do not mind. When you command me, and I obey. I know it communicates to you as words never could that I am yours, absolutely, to do with as you will. With every movement I attempt to tell you that no matter the masks we wear in our everyday lives, what we do in that room is the barest, rawest, most naked of truths. Into your strong hands I commit my body, my spirit, and my love. Long fingers, slick with oil, accept what I offer, touch me intimately as no soul other has done, as no soul other than yours and mine ever will, and I spread myself, expose myself, for you.

A second finger pressed in beside the first and Dean groaned as both filled him deeply. There was a flare of pain and his body strained against the intrusion, grown unfamiliar after so long. Panting with the need to continue, he held himself still until the muscles relaxed.

The first thrust brings pleasure, tantalizing and unfulfilling, for it is so far from the sublime reality that is having you within me. In place of coarse, unskilled fingers, I imagine your beautiful body, each curve perfect as you take your place behind me and press forward, press inward. My fingers are you, piercing me, you, pouring your desire into my empty vessel and saturating me with unspeakable bliss.

His fingers were thrusting in earnest, in and out as hard as he could, but it wasn’t nearly enough. Unthinkingly, he added a third without pausing in his rhythm. He gasped at how it felt to stretch himself open, similar to what he craved but still so different.

Alone, I am unable to do what you do effortlessly. Alone, I strain and strive within myself, moaning my frustration to an uncaring night. Only my C. can grant me that singular pleasure, only you reach into my core and remake me from the inside. Blank walls hear me begging for you, pleading for you to use my body to take your pleasure, knowing that only in giving myself over completely will I find the ecstasy that is my holy grail.

Light devoured his sight, pleasure peeled through his body, and his fingers hit full on that elusive
center of passion.

C., oh C., you hear my prayers, you guide my hand, I can hardly write for – C., my angel, my savior, my lover, my love.

The next thrust missed, but he knew he was close, and shifting slightly, he found it again, euphoria flooding his thoughts. He could hardly write, he could hardly think, as each time he filled himself, the blunt tips of his fingers pressed against heaven.

You, only you, forever you, your voice rasping my name in my ear, your body enveloping mine, your ownership marked on my skin, left deep within me, etched on my soul, I am yours. Take me, use me, fill me, complete me, and I release your name as my body releases, knowing I excite you as I—

A groan ripped from Dean’s lungs, another, another, he couldn’t stop. Hand gripping the quill so hard it shook, he tried desperately to finish the sentence as involuntary thrusts began to rock his hips, his body on the verge of spilling just from the pounding of his hand.

As I—

His back arched, his head thrown towards the sky, pleasure wracked him. Dean was pulled under, moaning and writhing against the bench, pressing back against his hand as his release stained his gown. His convulsive grip on the quill managed only to compose the letters—

CAS—

Collapsing against the desk, Dean breathed hard. Sense returned slowly, the quiet of the room became oppressive. Embarrassed, he laughed and pushed himself upright, hoping he had not been overheard. He’d not expected it to feel so good, he’d not expected to lose control of himself so completely. Writing, it had been as if he truly shared the experience with Castiel, and that and the discovery of the angles necessary to fill himself had made it profoundly better than any prior masturbation. With a quavering, shuddering breath, he relaxed, sat up, and completed the letter.

There are no words for it, the end point is ineffable, and though I can achieve it alone, it pales beside how I feel when we are together, the way your touch drives me wild, the added pleasure of knowing that, in filling me, you feel as good as I feel being filled.

I’m afraid the inn will charge me, for I’ve broken their quill. Three days, my love, three days until we leave the shadow of this pale imitation of existence to bask in the sunlight of life together for what hours we may. Forever yours,

A.

The remainder of the journey passed uneventfully. Each evening left Dean more exhausted and drained than he had been the previous. It was approaching dawn Thursday morning when the carriage finally arrived at the Toreador in London, and he was grateful that they’d left him extra recovery time. Retreating to his room, he crawled into the bed and slept instantly.

It was after noon when Dean awoke, body aching as if he’d been beaten. He could hardly rise from bed. His head throbbed and his throat ached, and he feared he was relapsing. Forcing himself up, he cleaned himself and dressed. A luncheon was ordered for the parlor and Singer joined him for a quiet meal. Eating made a world of difference, clearing his headache, and Dean concluded, relieved that it wasn’t influenza striking once more so much as it was stiffness and pain from hours on a jostling carriage bench and the unaccustomed damp, dirty air of London playing havoc on his lungs.

Revived, he and Singer ran errands around town and Dean tried his best to ignore the way his
expectations for the evening clutched at his heart and choked his breathing. It was a blessing in disguise that he’d slept so long, for once he was awake and feeling improved, the minutes between him and evening were eternal.

Light yet painted the sky turquoise, the days lengthening towards summer, when Dean arrived at Ms. Naomi’s. He was early, embarrassingly, desperately early, and he feared he’d be turned away at the door to wait, in costume, on the narrow lane outside. However, his concern proved unfounded as he was granted admittance. He was not even the first, which eased his mind. The platform for the musicians was still being assembled, and a handful of costumed men stood in small groups or met with a lover to adjourn to the bedrooms upstairs.

Fearing that it would be many hours yet before he saw Castiel, Dean retreated to the familiar parlor off the ballroom. The marble fireplace was cold and empty in the fine, warm weather. The purple upholstered furniture, dark wood accented with gilding, made a discordant contrast to the orange curtains. The Season was slowly growing stale, now nearly six months old, and the wear of many night’s entertainment showed on the carpet, grown threadbare and gray in places. The furnishings were not so finely made as Dean had supposed when he first saw them. There were many small signs of faded elegance, and as the time passed and people came and went from the room without paying him any mind, Dean wondered if such was always the way – the new, gleaming and shining and exciting, to fade to ruin and wreck over time. It was a sobering thought, Dean’s love with Castiel still so fresh and unexplored, to come to what, exactly? A lifetime of such monthly meetings, with no hope of anything more? He remembered the conversation with Ms. Milligan, Mr. Milligan and Ms. Masters the previous week, the idea that only blind romanticism believed that the early bliss of attachment lasted, that ultimately it faded into the hatred that apparently the esteemed Mr. Gabriel Novak shared with his formerly beloved Lilith Milligan.

Dean shook the thought away. Such maudlin thoughts were for other nights, and besides, he knew it wasn’t true that all love grew stale. Some couples stayed happy, and some didn’t, just as some friendships lasted, and some didn’t. He and Charlie remained happy despite nine years together, his mother and father had been deeply in love until the day she had died, he’d met others. It was not a hopeless case. He wished it felt less like he was reassuring himself and more like he truly believed it.

The thought of Castiel’s eyes washed all troubled thoughts away. When Dean looked at Castiel, he saw perfection given flesh. In Castiel’s every word, every gesture, in every emotion that flickered through his beautiful blue eyes, Dean read gentleness, love, intelligence, interest, humor, honor, devotion. Dean’s love was not that of the moment; it would last. If he could have Castiel beside him, he felt he could face any trial, no matter how steep – even the approbation of society, if he must. The thought of telling Castiel of the potential for a liaison outside of these four walls struck him again, and he quashed it.

A group of men entered the room and took up a spirited conversation, proving an annoying distraction from his introspection. The evening was wasting away and Castiel was still not there. Rising, he did a quick loop through the first floor of the house, but saw no sign of Castiel nor Loki. Discomfited, he made his way back through each, thinking perhaps Castiel had arrived and was searching for Dean as Dean searched for him, and they’d crossed purposes – but still no luck. Turning into a small, private sitting room, he nearly collided with Balthazar.

“Ah, Mr. Asmodeus, a pleasure to see you,” Balthazar said with polished grace. Stepping back, they inclined their heads to each other. “How are you feeling? Better, I trust?”

“Yes, much,” said Dean impatiently. “I am in your debt for the help you gave me last month, and I’m sorry to have been a bother. Have you seen Mr. Castiel?”
“No,” said Balthazar, surprise obvious. “I assumed he’d be with you.”

“What about Mr. Loki?” Dean struggled to keep his words from sounding too much like a demand.

“Loki is unable to attend this evening,” Balthazar sighed, the slightest hint of unhappiness in his voice. “I don’t know why I decided to come when I knew he’d not be here. It is intolerably dull.”

Distractedly, Dean nodded. “Right. Thank you, thanks again. If you see Mr. Castiel, would you tell him I’m in the orange room? I’ll be waiting there.”

“Absolutely,” said Balthazar indifferently. “Have a pleasant evening, Mr. Asmodeus.”

Genuine worry began to eat at Dean. He hadn’t seen Zachariah or Michael, either. Reassured by Castiel’s confidence that there was no danger, Dean had dismissed the men from his thoughts for a month. With his angel missing and those two in attendance, his apprehensions returned, amplified by guilt, for the thought struck him that his neglect of the threat they represented gave them opportunity to strike unopposed. What if they had intercepted Castiel as soon as he came through the door? What if those strong hands with which Michael had demanded that Dean meet his gaze had grabbed the angel’s supple arm and dragged him upstairs? Honest, guileless Castiel, convinced they were no threat to him – would they have needed to manhandle his person? They could have enticed him with honeyed words – told him perhaps that Dean was waiting for him. Shuddering with horror at the possibilities, Dean headed to the staircase and to the bedrooms above.

The night was fully in swing by this hour, and Dean was surrounded by the sounds of men taking pleasure with each other. The hallways echoed with moans and shouts, whimpers and groans, words rent from the souls of men lost in the throes of passion. Disgusted at how his actions would appear, Dean nonetheless took a moment to hold his ear to each closed door, seeking the telltale, unique low rasp of Castiel’s voice, the condescending drawl of Zachariah’s, the authoritative command of Michael’s. He heard none of the three, however, and the relief that flooded through him was staggering.

Downstairs, couples danced across the dance floor, but Dean did no more than glance their way. Neither he nor Castiel would dance with another. Furious, he stalked across the floor, earning stares and affronted body language from strangers that he could not give a damn about as he made his way to the parlor. The room was crowded. The group of men who had joined him earlier had swelled and were engaged in a noisy debate about pugilists, names that were only vaguely familiar to Dean being thrown around to the sounds of violent disagreement or “hear hear for the man!” Grinding his teeth at the inanity of it all, he grabbed an unoccupied chair, set it in the far corner of the room, and slumped into it, arms folded, legs stretched out before him, staring at the door, waiting.

Balthazar entered the room and drew one of the men away, the two holding hands as they trotted to the ballroom. Soon after, the man Dean had seen the previous month in the obscenely orange jacket – his mask in the shape of a lion’s face, Dean noticed – broke into the conversation and soon left with several of the other men. The four who remained gave loud huzzahs that their side of the debate won the floor by default, and soondeparted to “seek victory libations.” Thankful to be alone at last, Dean soaked in the quiet and wondered what he should do. He dropped his head, stared at the white washed ceiling and imagined the eyes of an angel looking down at him, longing more than he could express for the real thing to walk in the door.

“Good evening, Mr. Asmodeus,” a low voice said. Delight flared in his breast and Dean looked up, only to have that hope die in an instant when he discovered to his chagrin that Michael had entered the room.

“Where’s Castiel?” Dean demanded, jumping to his feet. His knees gave an unpleasant wobble, and
he steeled them. The door to the room closed with a click and the squeal of metal on metal as an unseen key turned the long-neglected tumblers of a lock on the outside of the door.

“We need to have a conversation about your manners, Mr. Asmodeus,” chided Michael. “Though why I ever expected better is beyond me. A man such as you...” He shook his head with mock disappointment. Crossing the room, he took up a chair in the sitting area facing the fireplace. “Won’t you join me?”

“Tell me where he is!” Dean shouted.

“Strong words from a man who is struggling to stand upright.” Michael didn’t move, didn’t continue, didn’t gesture, didn’t blink, hardly seemed even to breathe. He met Dean’s eyes with black and he stared. Their battle of wills seemed to fill the silent room with cacophonous noise. Michael knew things he shouldn’t. Michael had commented before on Dean’s green eyes. Michael alluded to Dean’s position in society. Michael was familiar with Dean’s indisposition. Did he know this man? He strained to place the voice, so different from any of his friends at the Club, nothing like that of Mr. Novak, plain and slightly aged and with a slight rasp like dozens he had heard at scores of parties. Nerves thrilling, Dean felt those eyes reading him like a book. He admonished himself that it was all in his head. He was swathed in a cloak, wearing a mask that covered all but his eyes, even his hair was completely hidden. Dean was unrecognizable.

Thoughts crowded atop the supposition, screaming it false. Castiel had seen his body without his cloak, as had Loki and Balthazar. They knew of his illness. They’d returned him to the Toreador, where Dean Winchester was a regular customer and where the staff had known him to be ill upon his departure. It was impossible. Castiel loved him. Castiel would not turn him over to a man who looked at Dean as if unravelling him from the inside. He shook his head. It was all absurd. Michael and Zachariah were after Castiel, not him.

“Please, don’t hurt Castiel,” Dean licked his lips, hating the pleading note in his voice. He couldn’t help it.

The thought of what this man could do to Castiel terrified him.

Michael laughed, a cold, humorless sound like ice along Dean’s spine. He rose and began to walk slowly towards Dean. It was a normal walk, with his hands clasped behind his back, his black gaze never wavering, yet the only word that Dean’s mind could assign to describe it was ‘menacing.’ Trembling, Dean watched with frustration as Michael stopped before him, not even an arm’s length away, and black eyes locked on Dean from within the unreadable face of Zeus, god of justice. Every shred of Dean’s mind clambered for him to escape the man’s dominance, push past him, go to the door – but to what end? To confirm, as he already knew, that he was locked in?

Licking his lips again, Dean struggled against the oppression of that gaze, the way he felt trapped in the corner of the room even though Michael did nothing but stand and stare at him. “What do you want?” he breathed.

Unhurriedly, unconcernedly, Michael reached out and ran his thumb along the bottom of Dean’s mask. The trembling in Dean’s knees grew. Leaning forward, Michael said in his ear, “I want a man.” The hand slipped under Dean’s chin and grasped him forcefully, pulling him up so sharply he was forced to his toes. Through it all, Dean stared into those black eyes, unable to bring himself to stop.

The thought of what this man could do to Dean terrified him.

VIOLENCE/NON-CON FROM THIS POINT UNTIL NEXT NOTE IN BOLD. (Search for
Shuddering uncontrollably, Dean reached up to pull Michael’s hand away, but fast as lightning, Michael’s other hand seized Dean’s. Dean fumbled with his still-healing left, but his grip was too weak, he could find no strength to push the other man away. Michael’s hold on him tightened, his thumb digging harshly into Dean’s Adam’s apple, forcing his head back so far he could hardly breathe. A gagging sound escaped his throat as he tried to tell Michael to stop. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears leaking from the corners.

The Zeus mask smiled at him, Michael’s true expression lost behind stone lips and carven facial hair. Michael dropped Dean’s hand, and it fell limply as Dean found himself powerless to mount a defense. Unseen fingers casually undid the clasp on Dean’s cloak, pulled the thick garment from his shoulders and threw it aside. Beneath, Dean wore only a loose tunic shirt and breeks. He felt horribly exposed and cold.

Castiel...!

“Look at me, Mr. Asmodeus,” said that horrible voice, unperturbed, unalarmed, unstrained, as if tearing through every defense Dean had assembled over a lifetime was as simple as ripping the wings from a fly. *Ripping the wings from his angel.* Spots of color flashed against his closed eyelids. His body screamed for air. He tried to form the words, any words, to make the man let him go, but he couldn’t. “I said look at me.” Maybe if Dean did as he said, he’d be able to breathe, maybe if he obeyed, it would end. He forced his eyes opened and looked into those expressionless pupils. “You are learning obedience. Good.”

The hand came away from his throat and Dean collapsed to his knees, gasping, massaging his neck with his hands. Beneath his probing fingers he could already feel bruises forming where Michael had gripped him tight and pulled him from his feet. Air rattled in his lungs, his vision swam, and the only thought he could hold on to was that he was alive, that Michael had just tried to kill him but he was still alive. He should try to run, he should stand up and throw himself against the door, Michael intended to murder him, had already done something unthinkable to Castiel, and Dean had to escape the prison of that room. Dean set a trembling hand on the floor and tried to rise, but his muscles had no strength, his legs refused to push up off the ground. The only motion he proved equal to was the rapid, involuntary flutter of his chest as he gasped in air and the frantic patter of his racing heart.

Michael, hands once more behind his back, stared down at him. Every time Dean was about to meet those eyes, he flinched away. What would Michael do to him if Dean met his gaze again? What would Michael do if he didn’t? Panting breaths filled and emptied his lungs so quickly that his vision began to spin. The bright colors of the room fuzzed out at the edges of his vision, streaked and twisted at the slightest movement of his head. The black of Michael’s eyes drew him, the only a fixed point in a world that swam and blurred and shifted as if he were asea. The thought triggered a flood of images of places around the world, all distorted, all broken, all completely overwhelming, and the only thing he could focus on were obsidian pupils.

He met Michael’s eyes and froze.

Michael didn’t move, didn’t speak, he stood still as a statue and he stared.

Slowly, so gradually, Dean’s breathing came under control and his heartbeat steadied. The world reassembled around two fixed black points, dim and out of focus and dreamlike. *I’m still sick. This is a hallucination. None of this is really happening to me.*

“That’s right,” said Michael with condescending satisfaction. “Keep looking into my eyes. Everything is going to be alright.”
“What are you...?” Dean moistened his lips and swallowed and the world shattered and reformed in an disorienting instant. Except for Michael’s eyes, they never changed: Polaris guiding Dean towards the unknown, terrifying end of this journey. “Why are you...?”

“I told you,” Michael said, “I want to get to know you better. Stand up.”

Nothing Dean’s thoughts could conjure induced his legs to move. They trembled beneath him, completely unresponsive, as in his mind he desperately tried to convince himself that he had to move, begged his body to obey him. Fear took a hold of his heart as the moment stretched. There was no guessing what Michael intended to do next, no knowing until it was already too late.

The tableau broke as Michael squatted before him and placed a hand beneath Dean’s chin again. Fear narrowed his vision for a moment, but the hand didn’t hurt him, didn’t inhibit his breathing. It caressed him. Softly, hands smooth as only those of a gentleman could be, Michael soothed at Dean’s bruised skin, traced the line of his chin, cupped his cheek. Despite himself, Dean leaned into the hand touching him, so real and solid while everything else crumbled. Michael’s thumb gently slipped behind his ear and massaged a calming line over the sensitive flesh there.

“I asked you too soon,” Michael’s rasping voice was incongruous with the compassionate tone he assumed. “I told you, it’s alright. I’ve got you. Just keep looking in my eyes. Can you do that for me, Dean?”

Tears welled in his eyes. The man knew his name! He knew Dean’s name, he knew his secret, had spoken to him like they were dear friends, and it somehow felt right, like they were sharing a sick form of intimacy. Dean knew it wasn’t, knew it was violent and invasive, knew he was being violated, but he couldn’t find wherewithal to tell Michael to stop, to push his hands away, to flee. If he took his eyes from Michael’s, he’d drown.

“Yes,” he breathed. Relief washed over him. God, he’d been able to speak, thank God.

A finger ran along the ridge beneath his eye. “Good, good,” said Michael encouragingly. “I need you to trust me, Dean. Do you trust me?”

No, no, never, no! screamed Dean’s thoughts in protest. His jaw locked. He’d not say yes for all the world. It was a lie. How could he trust a man who’d hurt him, torn him to pieces, stolen Castiel away? The hand on his cheek tensed, Michael’s palm resting on his chin forced his head back once more. The moment Dean felt his throat constrict, panic welled him again. “Stop, please, stop...”

The fingers patted his cheek like he was a distressed child. “Shh, it’s okay. We can come back to that question some other time. I think you’ll know the right answer by the time we’re done with our conversation.” The gathered tears streaked Dean’s cheeks. This was all wrong. He wasn’t this person, he wasn’t this frightened of anything, he’d seen death before, he’d seen worse than Michael. Rebellion, finally, surged in his gut.

“Damn you,” he mumbled. His body shivered as he tried to free himself from Michael’s gaze, but he couldn’t do it. “Damn you to hell, Michael.”

The hand on his cheek stiffened and shifted down to his chin, Michael’s other hand seized Dean by the throat. Michael pushed him against the wall, rising, dragging Dean with him, until Michael stood upright and Dean’s toes strained to touch the floor as Michael held him. Their gazes held steady even as the bright colors of the room’s furnishings melted and oozed together like candle wax, Dean’s breath gurgling helplessly in the saliva trapped in his throat. He was choking, he couldn’t breathe, his legs were an agony of thousands of stabbing pins, his arms twitched as they tried to obey his need for
them to lift, to fight, but he couldn’t. He just couldn’t.

“I knew you wouldn’t disappoint me, Dean,” there was triumph in Michael’s voice. Dean didn’t understand, none of this made any sense. Didn’t Michael want him to surrender? How could the man sound so happy about Dean insulting him? A slight relaxation of the grip around his neck allowed a trickle of air through his nose, and he managed meager half-swallows until the liquid cleared from his throat.

“I don’t know what you want,” whispered Dean desperately.

The thumb pressed into his windpipe again. “In the future, you will listen when I speak to you, Dean. I’ve been very clear about what I want. I know you remember. Tell me – what did I say?” All he could see was black, nothing but black, Michael’s eyes swallowed all color, swallowed the world. Dean’s thoughts frantically scanned through the things that Michael had said to him.

“Get to...know you...” he managed. The tension against his throat eased, but not enough to stop the agonized protestations from his lungs that he needed air right now nothing was more important everything came second to the need to breathe. “A man...want...a...man...”

“That’s right,” said Michael, and Dean could hear his cruel smile. The hands instantly came away from his throat and Dean coughed, eyes streaming. He’d have fallen but for Michael’s body suddenly pressing against him. Strong muscles crowded Dean to the wall, a powerful arm slipped into the crook of his arm and supported Dean’s weight, a knee spread Dean’s limp legs apart, and Michael’s erection pressed horrifically into Dean’s crotch. A firm grip seized Dean’s chin just his head began to loll to one side. Nothing broke that endless black stare. Michael’s silk-clad body rutted smoothly, easily, against Dean’s hips.

“I’m a little disappointed,” Michael continued, his words breathy. “I’ll teach you to be hard for me, Dean. I’ll teach you to want you this as much as I do.”

“Burn in Hell, you son of a bitch,” Dean managed. The words had no bite to them, his body remained a paralyzed prison, but at least he’d said them. At least he wasn’t just giving up. Wouldn’t that be easier? He’ll kill you, he’ll actually kill you, he’ll hold his thumb against your throat, and he will kill you.

A whisper of a moan escaped Michael’s lips and he thrust hard against Dean’s body. “Yes, Dean,” he panted. “I knew you had it in you to say such pretty things to me. For all that veneer of manners, you’re still a country booby squire, the son of a sailor. I thought surely you had a little fight in this pathetic, pretty body.”

“Fuck you.”

In a flash, Michael moved his hand from Dean’s chin to the top of his head, tangling his fingers in Dean’s hair and pulling him up. Michael shifted his weight forward, getting his legs between Dean’s so he could push his hardness against Dean’s hole through their pants. Dean bit his lip against a surge of shame and disgust, teeth nipping so deeply he began to bleed. The pain was surprisingly welcome, small and discreet and finite, something he could focus on that wasn’t completely overwhelming. Michael slammed Dean’s head against the wall and Dean saw spots as more pain flooded in, but he didn’t let it distract him. He let the pain in his lip consume his attention. A small thread of reason began to return.

“Did you do this Castiel?” Dean said, voice roughened by the abuse to his throat. Michael laughed, a rich, throaty sound. “Did you?” Dean demanded, but his only answer was Michael’s continued rutting against him, into him, each strike of Michael’s cock against him a violation no matter that it
didn’t invade his flesh. “Did you hurt him? I swear to God if you’ve laid a finger on him I will—”

“What will you do, Dean?” said Michael mockingly. “What can you—” Michael’s hand returned to his throat, not squeezing, just threatening, reminding. “—do to me? You’re so naive. God doesn’t give a damn about the oaths of men like you. I have no need to harm a hair on Castiel’s head to get exactly what I need from him. You have what I want, and you will give it to me.” As Michael spoke, he emphasized the words by thrusting and by a thumb pressed hard against Dean’s racing pulse. Michael had Castiel, had his cooperation. Rage, betrayal, and unspeakable grief washed away the fear that had consumed Dean.

“No,” breathed Dean.

“You will,” Michael’s hips pushed into him hard.

“No,” Dean managed more forcefully. His arms finally responded, he got them up in between himself and Michael but he was too weak to push the other man away.

“It’s just a matter of time,” whispered Michael, his voice a breathy promise.

Gathering every reserve, Dean moistened his mouth, gathered every drop of thick saliva and coppery blood, and spit on the mask of Zeus. Red streaked against the alabaster, pooled between the carven lips. “I said no,” snarled Dean.

With a shudder, Michael’s hand tightened on Dean’s chin and his hips stuttered through his climax. A guttural, reedy laugh bubbled from the horrible man. “I always...get...what I want...in the end...Dean...Winchester.” Michael’s eyes closed in ecstasy, and for the first time Dean was free of that all-consuming black gaze. He squeezed his eyes shut, tears coursing down his cheeks. The arm supporting him was removed, the grip on his throat disappeared, Michael stepped back, and Dean slumped to the floor, sobbing.

“Never,” he choked out, “never while I live and breath.”

RESUME READING HERE IF YOU SKIPPED VIOLENCE/NON-CON

“Naive, Dean,” Michael chuckled. There was a scraping of wood against wood and the distinct whisper of stirred air as cloth shifted. “So very naive. You’ll beg me for it before I’m done with you. Open your eyes.” Dean gave a shake of his head that he hoped came across as defiant. “Don’t be a child. Open your damn eyes.” A hand closed over his throat, he couldn’t breathe, his vision was going white, Michael really would kill him...Dean forced himself to open his eyes. Michael was sitting in the chair that Dean had previously moved into the corner, posture easy and relaxed, limbs loose from the afterglow of his release. He wasn’t touching Dean, he merely watched. Dean took a shaky breath. It was in his head, it was just in his head, another hallucination. Like he’d had at the inn. Like this entire nightmare of an evening. Like Castiel’s affection for him? He barely constrained another sob. Their gazes locked in again, the black the only constant left in Dean’s shattered thoughts. “What kind of man do you think I am, Dean?”

Only one word presented itself to Dean’s mind, and he said it unthinkingly, “I think you’re a monster.”

Michael chuckled again. “Still pretending to be a child. Only babes in arms believe in monsters, Mr. Winchester. I am a connoisseur.”

“Go to Hell,” Dean said defiantly. Words were the only defiance he had, his only weapon. He felt like a man naked before an army.
“Here is what’s going to happen now,” said Michael conversationally. “You are going to think about everything I’ve said, and draw the only possible conclusions. Then, you are going to return next month, and demonstrate to me what an apt pupil you’ve been.”

“No.”

“I hold all the cards, Dean,” Michael’s voice oozed smug superiority. Dean wished he could argue the point, but Michael was right. The man had held every trick in the deck before he’d even dealt Dean into the game. He knew who Dean was, he knew about Dean’s perversion, he had Castiel...Dean’s heart felt like a fist was crushing it. His lip throbbed, reminding him that he was still his own man, no matter what Michael did. It was up to Dean what happened next.

“You can’t make me come to London,” Dean snapped.

“Come, now. If you think it over, I think you’ll come to realize just how much you stand to lose if you defy me,” Michael’s cruel smile was once again evident in every word. Instead of frightening Dean, though, it solidified his anger. A drop of saliva and blood fell from the bottom of Zeus’ beard and fell on the pink silk of Michael’s coat, staining it.

Images flashed through Dean’s mind, of Charlotte and Ms. Harvelle – no, they were safe, no one knew their secret – of Samuel and Jessica – there were no secrets there, they were as blissfully content as they appeared to be, and Sam’s past was long since put to rest – of his children – Ellen and Ms. Moseley would eviscerate anyone who tried to lay a hand on either of them – of Castiel – another sob burst from Dean. Castiel was already lost to him, had been lost to him all along, based on what Michael said. You trust the man who assaulted you over the man you love?

A voice taunted in Dean’s mind. He didn’t know. He didn’t know what to believe. Michael calmly retrieved a kerchief from the pocket of his coat and clean the spit and blood from the front of his mask.

“The answer is still no,” Dean growled. “You can’t expose me without exposing yourself.”

“Is that so? Who am I?” sneered Michael. Dean made no answer. “Well, Mr. Winchester? Say the name.” Dean scowled at him. He knew he’d heard Michael’s voice before, but no face was associated it. Some forgotten stranger encountered at one or two or a dozen of a lifetime of parties, that if only the right trigger came, Dean would be able to place. Until then, the man was a cipher in a Zeus mask. “That’s what I thought. Defy me for now. I don’t mind. The hunt is not any fun if the prey has no fight in it. Like I said – I always, always, get what I want in the end.”

“You don’t scare me.”

“Well I do,” said Michael with grim delight. “You’re terrified. It’s rather exhilarating to behold, honestly. So, I’ll make you a deal. You nurse that feeling, you hold it in your breast, you keep it close and cherish it. I’ll proceed as I will, and check in with you from time to time, and when you’re ready? You know where to find me, Mr. Winchester, and you know exactly what I will expect in return. Have a wonderful evening, Mr. Asmodeus.” Michael rose, straitened his jacket, crossed the room to the door and tapped it three times. He looked back over his shoulder, caught Dean’s eyes, and said, “You might wish to don your mask, my darling.”

The door opened. The sounds of music and the laughter of people who hadn’t just spent an hour locked in nightmare leaked within, and with a burst of desperation Dean found the strength to scramble across the room, grab his mask and tug it over his head. The thought of all those happy, beaming men seeing him raw and exposed was unthinkable. Fingers scrambling along the carpet, he found the cloth of his cloak and seized it, wrapping the enveloping fabric over his body. Face and body concealed, he crawled back to the corner of the room and slumped against the wall, eyes squeezed shut against silent tears.
What in the world was he going to do now?

Dean wasn’t sure how long he lay there, Michael’s words echoing in his empty thoughts. At some point, his tears stopped, his eyes slipped open, and, wide-eyed, he watched the people coming and going from the room, watched the narrow view of the dancers that passed before the door. The ebb and flow of the soiree continued around him as if the world hadn’t ended, and he felt even more like a ghost than usual, excluded from the normal flow of life, invisible and forgotten. Only Zachariah – Mr. Alder, he thought vaguely – acknowledged him, lips curling in an arrogant sneer before he turned back to his conversation. Dean’s mind was blank of anything but stunned disbelief. That hadn’t really happened. That couldn’t have been real. There was no way a night that he had anticipated with such burning joy had transformed into such a horror. His teeth chattered and cold shivers coursed through his body, trembling his shocked limbs uncontrollably.

Castiel.

He bit back a wail of despair, still barely cognizant that he wasn’t a ghost in truth, that others would hear if he made such a noise, hear and wonder. For the first time since they’d met, Dean thought the name of his angel – *his* angel! – and felt no happy despair, no tingling contrast between hot desire and bitter loneliness, no fearful apprehension tempered by warm affection. No soft, loving blue eyes danced before his vision. With startling clarity, Dean’s thoughts began to race, pieces falling together to form an appalling picture of the sequence of events. Of the small number of players in this tragedy – Dean, Michael, Zachariah, Loki, Balthazar, and Castiel – no one but Castiel could have constructed Dean’s true identity from the tiny hints that “Mr. Asmodeus” had left scattered around Ms. Naomi’s home. Perhaps, *perhaps*, Loki or Balthazar could have done it – Loki’s carriage had taken Dean to the Toreador, after all – but Loki and Castiel were clearly associated, and they arrived together, and it was inconceivable, after what Michael had said, that Castiel had not played some role in what had come to pass.

Wasn’t it?

Castiel had seen Dean’s body and heard his voice. Castiel possessed Dean’s letters. Castiel was aware that Dean had a wife, that he had children. Castiel knew when Dean had left London. Castiel and Dean had both removed their masks, with only their say so that eyes were kept appropriately closed. Castiel had stayed with him in the blue room while Dean was unconscious from illness and could have peered on his likeness at any time. Castiel had arranged for a carriage to return Dean to his hotel. Castiel had drawn Dean’s likeness to near-perfection on one of the letter’s he had given Dean. Michael had said Castiel had helped him.

*Do you trust me?* whispered Michael’s voice in Dean’s head. *I think you’ll know the right answer by the time we’re done with our conversation*

In the depths of his heart, Dean couldn’t believe it of Castiel, and that, he thought, was what hurt worst of all. A vast preponderance of evidence indicated that Castiel had betrayed him to Michael, sold him out to a monster, abandoned him.

*I have no need to harm a hair on Castiel’s head to get exactly what I need from him*

In the depths of his heart, Dean still adored Castiel more than he’d ever dreamed possible. *My angel, Castiel*...a sob escape from his lips before he could prevent.

“You should go home,” a soft, sympathetic voice pulled Dean from his simmering, slowly coalescing thoughts. Balthazar looked down on him, comedy mask locked in a rictus of humor that mocked Dean.
“Yes,” Dean breathed. He blinked his tears back and set his hands under himself, but wasn’t able to rise. Balthazar reached out, offering help, but Dean ignored him. He didn’t need this man’s help. At best, Balthazar had indifferently allowed Dean to stay trapped with Michael when he might have interfered. At worst, Balthazar was complicit in all, had helped Castiel and Loki to betray Dean.

Castiel, why?

Grabbing the edge of the chair, Dean got his feet under him and hauled himself upright. Unsteadily, he took a hesitant step. Balthazar’s eyes bored into him, piercing through Dean’s mask, and a pit of fear formed in Dean’s stomach. It was too similar to the way Michael stared at him. Mustered every ounce of dignity he had left, Dean brushed past Balthazar, walked across the room, skirted the edges of the ballroom, and made it back to Ms. Naomi’s foyer. A sensed presence following in his wake, Balthazar suspected, Michael or Zachariah, he feared. If they followed him out into the street, if they pursued him to his inn, what would he do? His heart began to beat faster, fear clutching at his throat, making it more difficult for him to breath. He closed his eyes and took two slow breaths, to remind himself he could, he could breath. Damn it, there wasn’t a hand around his throat, then opened his eyes and looked behind him.

No one was there.

With a shaky sigh of relief, he stepped outside into the dark of a late London night. The night had grown chill, a wet, misty breeze promising rain bringing the aroma of spring flowers mixed with the rank stench of offal and excrement, the unique smell of the Thames. Dean’s steps quickened as he approached the end of the lane, desperate to get out of sight of the house before anyone could follow him.

“Asmodeus!”

The world shattered like struck glass, black schisms tearing through the dim streets, swirling darkness that threatened to drag Dean into the abyss. Locked knees were all that kept him from collapsing.

Footsteps ran up behind him, thin leather scraping on paving stones, a man’s breathless pursuit. Dean refused to turn around. He couldn’t bear to look.

“Asmodeus, at last!”

The steps trailed to a stop, each more hesitant than the one before.

Stay away from me.

“What did you say?” Castiel said uncertainly.

“I said stay away from me,” roared Dean, rounding on him. Castiel was dressed as for the soiree, thick folds of cloth hanging limply in the damp air, wings midnight dark, mask sporting its eternal porcelain smile, painted pink lips, faint blush at the cheeks. His eyes were black in the darkness and Dean’s stomach twisted with nausea and fear.

“Asmodeus...” How dare Castiel sound so confused? How DARE he sound so hurt? “I...I’m sorry. When I arrived, the servants refused me admittance. I knew if I waited outside long enough, you would have to come out. I didn’t mean to—”

“You didn’t mean to? You didn’t mean to?” Dean was too distraught, too furious, too hurt, too afraid, to stop the words shouting from his lips, echoing into the stillness of the city streets. He laughed helplessly, hysterically.
“I said I’m sorry,” said Castiel with despair. “Why are you so upset? What’s happened? Are you recovered from your illness? Please, talk to me!” He reached out a hand towards Dean and Dean stumbled back. He couldn’t meet Castiel’s eyes, couldn’t look at his body, couldn’t figure out where to turn his gaze.

“Don’t act like you don’t...” Dean bit the words off. He didn’t want to talk about it. He didn’t want to see Castiel. He wanted to flee to his room, bury his head under the pillows, and never emerge.

“Please, Asmodeus,” Castiel pleaded, words snagging on a sob. “I don’t understand. I waited. I...”

“Stop talking,” Dean interrupted.

“I love you,” whispered Castiel. Dean’s heart was wracked with pain and guilt. I love you too, I love you even though you...Seeing Castiel so obviously in distress was awful. However, the greater part of Dean repeated the litany of Castiel’s crimes over and over again, and though Dean yet loved, he could marshal no evidence to defend Castiel. The words Castiel spoke were a lie, must be a lie. Just because Dean’s love was misplaced, that he loved a charade, didn’t make the love simply vanish. He looked at the angel before them and saw the object of his affections, the subject of so many dreams, his appearance untarnished and perfect despite what Dean knew, and it was agony.

“Don’t follow me.” Turning on a heel, Dean started deliberately down the street.

“But...”

“Don’t act like you don’t know what this is about,” anguish filled the words. Dean couldn’t help it, he hurt so very much, and even now part of him want to seek solace in Castiel’s embrace, to bare all, to be told that he was loved and shown that he was cared for. However, the dream of Castiel’s comfort was washed away in an image of Michael confronting him, using every word Dean might say to Castiel against him.

“I don’t,” there was a hint of anger in Castiel’s voice. “Won’t you tell me? Please! Don’t you trust me, Asmodeus?” The shuffle of footsteps trailed behind Dean.

Do you trust me? Michael’s voice taunted Dean.

“I said don’t follow me,” snarled Dean over his shoulder. “I never want to see you again.”

The dull sound of flesh hitting the ground sounded behind him, but Dean couldn’t bear to turn around. If he saw Castiel now, he’d break, and he’d be lost.

“Asmodeus!” Castiel wailed.

The word flogged at Dean’s steps, drove him to run though he felt perpetually a step from falling. He tore the mask from his head and fled. Down the street, away from Castiel; around the corner, away from Castiel; along the banks of the river, away from Castiel; through the warren of streets and alleys between him and his destination, away from Castiel. He had to get away. The phantom of Castiel trailed him – a figment in truth, the man Dean loved had never existed – to the Toreador, where he stumbled into the common room, panting with exertion, heart clenched in pain, fear, guilt, horror, grief.

“Are you well, Mr. Winchester?” asked the hesitant nightwatch.

“I’d like a bottle of scotch to take up to my room,” Dean managed breathlessly. The bottle was provided on the instant, along with a tumbler from which to drink.
Retreating to his room, Dean locked the door. The room was small but nicely appointed, a fire keeping the chill of a spring night at bay. Shaking over took him, his breath stuttering in his lungs. He backed away from the door, staring at it, expecting it to open at any instant, expecting Castiel to walk in, expecting Michael to walk in. Dropping the bottle and glass onto the desk, he shoved the chest of drawers in front of entryway. No one could come in unless he moved it. With a steadying breath, he collapsed into the desk chair, filled the tumbler, and drank it down in one enormous gulp that spread heat through his entire body and fuzzed his distressed, overwrought thoughts. He immediately poured a second and downed it as well. A third followed before his hands began to steady and his breathing to calm. The world was pleasantly distant, the pain someone else’s. Removing his cloak, he heard the sound of crinkling paper. It tore at his ears like the sharpening of knives. Scrabbling amidst the cloth, he found the hidden pocket and withdrew the eight letters he had written to Castiel that month. He set them on the desk, poured himself another drink, swirling the liquid before he took a sip. What now? What now? Tell me what to do, Castiel, my love! Tell me why you did this to me!

Dean took a drink and consigned the letters to the flames.

Chapter End Notes

So. I've read a lot of Destiel fic, and there's always that obligatory point where the author posts an apology and you're like...oh, crap. I told myself I'd never post such a thing, it doesn't help, it just makes the reader dread what's coming.

Guys, I'm sorry. Writing this chapter literally made me cry. I edited it this morning and felt my heart breaking all over again. I've never felt so *guilty* about putting words to print in my entire life. This chapter was planned since the beginning, but...ugh. I'm so sorry. :(  

I know a lot of people don't read profiles, and this is the first long fic I've shared so ya'll don't know me or what to expect from me, so here, without making any promises or giving any spoilers for this specific fic, is a direct quote from my profile about what kind of fic I write:

"Expect I'll only be writing Supernatural fics. Expect they'll all end up Destiel. Likely, most will be E rating. Cause when my brain gets tired, all it wants to do is write smut. Go fig. Likely, most will be happily ever after...but no promises!"

Anyway. For those who've decided to skip part or all of this chapter, here is a brief synopsis of the events that have befallen our poor heroes. I will strive to make this accurate while leaving it vague enough to not be upsetting. If it's still too much...I'm sorry, I tried, but I wanted to be sure there was enough detail that subsequent events would make sense. :(  

Synopsis of Chapter 6:
Dean makes the journey to London by carriage, finding it extremely fatiguing since he is not completely recovered from his illness. Along the way he writes Castiel a smutty letter. Upon arrival in London, he rests, tries to recover, and conducts a little business. Impatient, he goes to the May Soiree early.

The evening passes very slowly, as Castiel is not there. Dean searches the house for him, without luck, and encounters Balthazar, who tells him that Loki is not in attendance
for the evening, but Castiel should be. Alarme, worried that Michael and Zachariah have snared his beloved angel, Dean looks through the house again, but finds no sign that Castiel has been there.

Retreating to the parlor where Dean has spent much of his time in the house (the one with orange walls, not the blue bedroom!), Dean waits for Castiel. The room empties of other people.

Michael surprises him, and someone outside the room locks them both in.

Dean demands that Michael tell him where Castiel is. Unswayed by Dean's theatrics, Michael remains calm, Zeus face unreadable, the only visible feature of his body his black eyes, with which he stares at Dean. As Dean grows more intimidated, Michael physically assaults him, chokes him, forces Dean to maintain eye contact with him and obey his orders. He reveals that he knows Dean's true identity, and uses emotional manipulation to ensure that Dean is never sure how Michael will react to his behavior. Frightened, Dean hyperventilates. Michael asks Dean to trust him, and Dean defies him. The defiance excites Michael, and he ruts his clothed body against Dean's clothed body, while trying to force Dean to concede to allow him more.

Dean refuses him.

Michael tries again, informing Dean that "I have no need to harm a hair on Castiel’s head to get exactly what I need from him." Dean is horrified by this information, feeling betrayed and lost, but he continues to say no to Michael. The continued defiance excites Michael further.

When he's done, Michael informs Dean that "he always gets what he wants in the end," and tells Dean that he expects that the next time they meet, Dean will consent. He scoffs at Dean's attempts to argue back, and warns Dean that Michael will expose him and make his life complicated until Dean gives in. On this note, Michael leaves.

Dean tries to recover, but he's extremely upset and clearly in shock. He reflects on the fact that the only one who knew enough about his identity to figure out who he was is Castiel. It breaks his heart, because he loves Castiel still, can't stop loving him just because Castiel apparently betrayed him. Dean tries to convince himself that he shouldn't trust Michael, and is very conflicted about the whole thing.

Finally, Dean musters the strength to leave the soiree. When he steps out onto the street, Castiel is there. Furious and upset and unsure what to believe, Dean loses his temper at Castiel, who is confused and very hurt. Dean ends the conversation by informing Castiel that he never wants to see him again. As little as he wants to believe Michael, believe that Castiel would betray him, he can think of no other way that Michael would know who he is.

He returns to the Toreador Inn and gets hopelessly drunk, destroying the last batch of letters he wrote to Castiel even as he despairs that he loves Castiel and doesn't understand why the other man would do this to him.
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With a gasp, Dean awoke from the most horrible nightmare, heart racing as he jerked upright in bed. Groaning, he collapsed back onto the soft mattress. God, it had been unspeakable! Michael had attacked him and tried to kill him, had spoken his name and threatened him with exposure. Castiel had betrayed him, and Dean had been forced to accept that he would never see his angel again, that his angel had never existed at all. His heart pulsed with agony. It was the worst series of events he could imagine. Too many late nights, too much time in horribly uncomfortable carriages, too much exertion after his illness, too much stress leading up to the trip to London, too much anticipation, and – judging by the way his head hurt – too much to drink, all combining to plague him at night.

A hand went to his throat and felt the unmistakable bruises imprinted upon his flesh. His tongue tasted the tang of blood on his lips from where rent his skin.

It hadn’t been a dream.

“Oh, God,” he moaned in despair to the uncaring room.

It was Friday morning.

The shadow of Dean Winchester arose from bed. He stripped off his clothes from the night before, wrinkled and stretched from being slept in. He washed the blood from his chin and shaved his stubble slowly with a quaking hand. The dull reflecting glass showed him dark purple and black contusions around his neck and throat. He sifted listlessly through the clothing he had brought, wondering how he could tie a cravat to hide all. His usual style would never do, but he didn’t dare let anyone see, and dared hope that Singer wouldn’t take the least note of how Dean styled his neckerchief. He wet a cloth and scrubbed his body, noticing additional bruises on his arms, his chest, his leg. He couldn’t remember how he’d come by all of them, and that scared him as much as the memory of what had occurred.

*With a hand around his neck, Michael’s thumb pressing into his windpipe, Michael’s eyes stabbing through his skull.*

Moving like he was yet in a dream, Dean got dressed. Home. He had to get home. Images of a ship flittered through his mind, a tiny cabin crowded with men and boys, some younger than he and Sam, some old enough to have despaired of earning their epaulette. A wild desire seized him – board a ship, take to sea, escape, flee, never look back – but he thought of the gorgeous azure ocean reminded him agonizingly of Castiel’s beautiful eyes, and Dean realized he could never go to sea again. Being enveloped in that much blue would be torture.
Lawrence Hall loomed large in Dean’s mind: the old, rectangular brick mansion, enormous paned windows fronting the park, tile roof black, the west tower topped by a white dome. He’d been born there and lived there with Mary and his infant younger brother for the first five years of his life, lost among the cozy rooms and draughty hallways. When he’d returned in ’93, it had been as a young hellion, nine years old, raised by the rough men of the Audacious and he’d be damned if he’d let any number of cultured, respectable land lubbers tell him what to do. He was going to a midshipman, and by the time he was done he’d be a hero like his father, and he’d win all of the prize money, every groat of it, and the whole country would know his name.

The events of his formative years changed him, and by the time he returned to Lawrence Hall in ’03, he was reconciled to the idea of life on land. He missed the sea dreadfully, but he also missed land, missed the rise and fall of horseflesh beneath him, missed the smell of the forest after a rainstorm and the feel of firm ground beneath his feet. Lawrence was home. The idea of returning now was no less horrifying than the idea of returning to sea, though. The prospect of being immersed in love and affection into which was incapable of entering was a sickening prospect. While he’d nursed his love for Castiel and bemoaned their limited time together, he had felt parted from his family. How much worse, would he feel now, betrayed, heartbroken, blackmailed, and...his mind struggled to assign name to what Michael had done to him, but none seemed adequate, none seemed right. Michael had wronged him, violated him, assaulted him, but none captured the full magnitude. And not a word could he breathe to his family. Feeling trapped in his own body, a prisoner able to see the world at large but incapable of interacting with it, Dean moved mechanically through his toilette.

There was a knock on the door.

“Yeah?” he said, voice almost unrecognizably rough.

“We hittin’ the road, idjit?” Singer’s scruffy growl was easily audible through the wood.

“Yes, sure, Bobby,” he called back, rubbing his temples.

There was a long pause.

“You alright, boy?” asked Singer at length.

“I’m fine,” he snapped. “Why?”

“You ain’t called me Bobby since your pop came for you in ’98.”

Dean’s stomach sank. “I’ll be out in a few minutes,” said Dean gruffly. “Go order the carriage, I’ll meet you downstairs.”

The sound of ever-quieter grumbling accompanied Singer’s departure. Dean turned back to the mirror and attempted to tie his cravat in a fashion that hid the marks that Michael had left on him without looking ridiculous. Neither goal was accomplished. The neckerchief was an absurd concoction of folds and flounces, and even the overcast skies wouldn’t be adequate to hide the stains along his chin and neck. There was no help for it. He had to leave the room eventually, had to face Singer, had to see his family. Pushing the chest of drawers away from the door, he left to face the rest of his life.

Early June

“Dean, what the hell happened in London?” There were people who thought Charlotte Winchester didn’t have a temper. “Don’t you dare tell me it was nothing. You’re no Beau Brummel to deck
yourself in this absurd frippery,” she emphasized the point by swatting her hand at the neckerchief that covered Dean from chest to chin, “and it hasn’t worked anyway. Your neck is brown and yellow from sternum to stubble, and your lip is infected and swollen.”

“I fell,” he said, same as he said when Singer asked, same as when Sam asked, same as when Ms. Mosely asked.

“Dean Winchester, you are the worst liar I have ever met,” she snarled. There were people who swore that Charlotte Winchester had the sweetest disposition in the world, though some of those people changed their tune when they met Jessica.

Dean did his level best to maintain his calm. Her shouting at him was more intimidating than he would credit. It was an effort to not cower, made worse by the way she was staring him down. No matter how he shifted to avoid the eye contact, she kept at it.

“That…that…that angel of yours did something to hurt you, didn’t he!” Fury painted her normally cheerful features, and it would have been comical in any other circumstances. “Didn’t he?” Those people who thought her serene had never seen Charlotte Winchester when someone hurt those she cared about.

Her eyes drove through him and he grimaced and dropped his to the floor. “Leave be, Charlie,” he muttered.

“Don’t try to deny it,” she snapped back. “Tell me, and let me deal with him! When I’m done…” Charlie stalked the floor before Dean’s desk like moving was all that kept her from wringing her hands in her skirts as if she was wringing a neck. The thought made Dean shudder, and he was grateful that she’d grown so angry that she didn’t notice his reaction.

“I’d rather you didn’t,” God, Dean sounded plaintive. He should be angry, he should argue and yell, have some spirit and some fight. All the fight was gone from him, though. The mess of letters on his table was a reminder of how exposed he was. If she looked through his papers, if she noticed one in particular…there was no way she could know what it meant, yet all he could think was that she would see all and she would judge him coward, judge him weak. With difficulty, he mustered the appearance of energy. “Don’t! Stop trying to find him. It’s over. I won’t be going to London in June. It was an absurd indulgence, and a waste of time. I’m finished with it, and you should be too.”

Furious, she wheeled on him and screeched, “Oh, I’ll find him. I will find him! And when I do I’m going to rip his wings out feather by feather, don’t think that I won’t…”

“Please,” his brief flare of temper withered before her onslaught, and he sank back in his chair, exhausted. He couldn’t keep the catch out of his voice. Oh, Castiel… “Just stop. It’s alright.” All he wanted was a drink, all he wanted was to forget that any of this had happened to him – was still happening to him.

Her steps halted immediately and she closed the space between them. Dropping to her knees, she reached out to set a hand on his cheek, her eyes widening in shocked amazement when he flinched away. She paused, a hairsbreadth from touching him, and he steeled himself to keep still, to accept her. With an effort of supreme will power, he met her eyes. They were beautiful, bright green, and worried. At least they weren’t black. The effort of equaling that gaze was too much, and he blinked repeatedly before finally surrendering and looking away, staring at nothing in the space between them. “You haven’t met my eyes in a week, Dean,” she whispered. Hesitantly, she cupped his face, and Dean cringed but didn’t break the contact. “Even with everything between us, you’ve never avoided my touch before. You’ve been ill from drink every morning. I’m not trying to pry, but please I’m worried about you.”
Tears swam in Dean’s eyes, obscuring his sight of her supportive gaze. “I don’t want to…I can’t talk about this, Charlie. I’m sorry. I can’t. Please, stop asking, and please, please stop looking for Castiel.”

A single tear overflowed, and Charlie tenderly wiped it away from his eye. Drawing his head forward, she kissed him gently on the forehead. “As you wish,” she said sadly. “I’ll try to keep Sam from coming in here in a week and having the exact same conversation with you. But Dean, my love, whatever this is, you have people that want to help. You’re not alone.”

The words yes, I am, were on the verge of bursting from his lips when she finally broke contact and left his room in a swirl of long skirts and tassels. With a defeated sigh, Dean went to his liquor cabinet and poured himself a glass of port. He took a sip and returned to his desk, collapsing limply into his chair. The liquid sloshed, precious drops splashing on to his hand. His eyes fell on the letters on his desk.

The first, on formally embossed and water marked letter head, written in a fine, loopy hand, read:

To the honorable Mr. Dean Winchester,

I regret to inform you that your membership at the Travellers Club has been terminated, pursuant to Subsection 4.6a of the Club’s Requirements for Membership, to which you pledged your agreement on 6th September of 1813. To wit:

“If any member of this Club shall conduct themselves at any time in a manner unbecoming a gentleman, his membership will be forfeit forthwith upon receipt of proof of such.”

Yours in friendship,

G. Fitzgerald III

The letter was a mystery to him. The only requirement to be in the Club was to have travelled more than 500 miles away from London, a measure Dean easily passed. He’d met most his closest friends amongst their membership. Yet, without even an inquiry, he’d been dismissed. Though he had no proof that his second letter was related, he couldn’t convince himself that it wasn’t.

Dear Mr. Winchester,

I wished to send you a brief note to let you know that I am thinking of you. Be good, Dean.

M.

The only mystery was, what had Michael told the Club about Dean, and how far would word spread? Shuddering, he balled the paper up and threw it into his unlit fireplace.

Late June

Dean had thought the phantom of Castiel gone, left dead in the parlor of Ms. Naomi’s home. He was wrong. The ghost following him everywhere he went in Lawrence Hall. When Dean woke up in the morning, the sad-eyed man stood by the nightstand, trailing diaphanous fingers through the water basin without stirring the least ripple. When Dean dressed, blue eyes gazed upon him hungrily, the only stare he encountered now that did make him uncomfortable, arousing Dean even as misery threatened to overwhelm him. When Dean rode, imagined faint pressure around his waist spoke to the mirage mounted behind him, draped body pressed against him, mask pressed against Dean’s
shoulder and cheek, laughing as leapt over a stile.

At every meal, Castiel watched him from the empty seat at the table, never wavering, never fading, never forgiving.

What if he’d been wrong about his precious angel? What if he’d hurt him, spurned and rebuked him, for nothing? He’d not even given Castiel the chance to defend himself. What an ass he’d been! All of it was Dean’s fault. If he’d been stronger, he could have resisted Michael. If he’d been braver, he would not have been cowed by a pair of impassive eyes and a face hidden behind a mask. If he’d been a gentleman, he would have stood before the man he adored and demanded an explanation. Instead, he’d been a coward. At every moment that had required courage, Dean had balked. It shamed him and filled him with self-disgust to think of it.

I want you, I need you, forever, I love you! Angel of Thursday, why did this happen?

The evidence against Castiel remained, though. When he felt less forlorn, Dean’s thoughts scanned through his reasoning and could find no flaws. Though the apparition that haunted him might shake his dark head and sigh, Dean knew in his head, and feared in his heart, that a conversation with Castiel would have done nothing but exposed Dean further to Michael’s machinations.

Regardless, Dean’s adoration lingered, a shadow over every day, a presence in his fondest nightmares and worst dreams, and a memory of love and arousal that he chased without ever approaching.

Sunset on the night of the June Soiree found Dean sitting in his study and wondering questions he’d never know the answers to. A bouquet of roses on the mantle, placed there by a sad Claire who continually glanced at him with a melancholy face and thought he didn’t notice, leaked their soft scent through the air, an oppressively romantic counterpoint to his wistful thoughts. Did Castiel think of him still? Did Castiel hate him? Was Castiel in London in the arms of another man? The thought made Dean sick to his stomach, bile stinging his throat.

Had Michael expected Dean to come?

Black filled Dean’s vision and he gasped. A hand flew to his throat, each breath desperate and strained. Unable to fill his lungs, he took increasingly quick, increasingly shallow puffs of air. His heart jumped and skipped and raced. He couldn’t breathe, monstrous fingers like talons dug in to his throat, choking him, his lungs burned with agony, his thoughts raced in panicked helplessness, and he couldn’t stop it, nothing could stop it, he wasn’t strong enough. His hand seized against the table, a white knuckled grip that hurt his flesh, arm so tense his muscles knotted. It wasn’t real, it couldn’t be real, just another hallucination, like so many that had plagued him since his fever, since the month before. Thinking it brought no sense, no reason. If it wasn’t real, then why couldn’t he breathe? He needed air, he needed the hand on his throat to go away, he needed ...

A glimpse of blue tore through the all-encompassing abyss into which Dean had tumbled. Focusing on it, Dean’s study resolved gradually from the darkness. The phantom of Castiel leaned across the desk, gently cupped Dean’s fist, ran fingers up his arm, leaving behind nothing but a trail of goose pimples. Though he knew it to be no more real than his fears, no more real than the black of Michael’s eyes striving to absorb him, Dean found comfort in the mirage. The feeling of something gripping the flesh beneath his jaw faded, the terror urging his lungs and heart to frantic action calmed, and Dean felt self-control returning. Weak and exhausted, he crumpled against the desk, massaging one hand with the other to ease the cramps he’d caused as he’d convulsively tensed. The specter drew back and watched him, leaning against the desk, arms folded to support his quirked head, held at a slight angle as if studying Dean.
Reaching into his pocket with a shaking hand, Dean withdrew the locket. He’d carried it with him always, as he’d vowed to do. Though he’d taken it out often and ran his fingers over the bronze until all the gilding had worn off, he’d been unable to bring himself to open it and gaze upon the likeness of the angel – not his angel any longer – in a month. His finger touched the clasp and the locket sprang open. Bright blue eyes met Dean, and his eyes swam with tears as he gazed upon the perfection whose sight he had denied himself for a month. *How do you always save me, most beloved Castiel?*

There was a knock on his door.

“**Yes?**” Dean snapped gruffly, snatching the locket shut and pocketing it.

The door opened, and Ms. Harvelle stepped in. “**Mr. Winchester, there’s a lady...a woman...to see you.**” She veered between a scowl, a sneer, and confusion, all writ large on her expressive features.

Puzzled, Dean frowned. It was late for visitors, and he certainly entertained no women at such an hour – as Ms. Harvelle well knew. “**Did she give her name, Ms. Harvelle?**”

“No, Mr. Winchester,” Ms. Harvelle finally settled on bewilderment, giving him a mue of uncertainty, a helpless gesture and a shrug. “**Nor am I familiar with her. She claimed, crassly, that you would know her, and that her business was with you alone.**”

Sifting through thoughts still sluggish after his attack of fear, Dean tried to think of anyone among his acquaintance who might behave in such a fashion. “**Bring her here, I suppose,**” he decided at length. His desk was a mess, he realized in embarrassment. His abstraction over the preceding weeks had caused his work habits to grow slothful. Hastily, he sorted through the papers before a stranger could see the disorder, making a pile of letters he’d answered, a second that still required his attention, a third of notes and figures, a place at the fore for the alert his banker had sent that one of his investments had met with an untimely, and costly, reversal. That one would require he refigure his budget for the entire year, for he’d been depending on the return revenue to fund his projections. For a moment, anxiety about want of funds spun out of control.

“**Mr. Winchester, may I present a miss of little repute?**” Ms. Harvelle interrupted Dean’s thoughts with a sardonic smile.

An unfeminine snort from behind her heralded the arrival of a woman Dean had hoped never to see again. In all her dark-haired glory, Ms. Ruby Cassidy brushed by Ms. Harvelle, giving her a negligent wave of her hand as if she were dismissing a servant, or perhaps discarding a piece of refuse. She wore the same arrogant sneer as always, though now it brought out the beginnings of lines around her eyes and cheeks. Her dress was floor length and deep blue, elegant finery that bore all the subtle signs of hard times. Missing beads, torn lace, a slight rent that revealed the pale muslin beneath: Ms. Cassidy had attempted to dress up for the night, but it was no wonder that Ms. Harvelle had named her *woman* instead of *lady*.

Dean rose and adjusted his jacket. Ms. Cassidy stared at him defiantly and Ms. Harvelle eyed them both curiously. “**You, then, are my caller who feels such need for secrecy?**” Temper flared in Dean’s breast. “**If I recall correctly, the last time I saw you, I swore you would never set foot in this house again. So, to what do I owe this honor, Ms. Cassidy?**” Ms. Harvelle started, eyes wide, to hear the stranger named. Their time had not overlapped, Ms. Cassidy had been several years removed, blissfully, delightfully removed, from Lawrence Hall before Ms. Harvelle had taken up residence.

“**Mr. Winchester,**” Ms. Cassidy’s rich, seductive voice hid the same laughter it always had, as if the woman knew a joke that, if you were very lucky, she might someday share. The voice had always
grated on Dean’s nerves, but it had captivated Sam. His brother had gone to obscene lengths to learn the promised joke, to no avail, for as Dean had seen from the first but been unable to convince his brother, the joke was always on whomever Ms. Cassidy was speaking to. Ms. Harvelle was staring daggers at Ms. Cassidy’s back, but the fallen belle merely glanced over her shoulder and said, “you may leave.”

“Unlike you, Ms. Harvelle is welcome anywhere she wishes in my home, and may order those here as she wishes,” Dean said tightly, closing the space between them so that he could loom in her personal space, arms crossed over his chest. Laying hand to her would be ungentlemanly – though he’d been tempted many, many times, she’d egged him on deliberately, he thought – but crowding her and intimidating her was fair game. “Get out of my home, Ms. Cassidy.”

“My, my,” her brown eyes sparkled with contempt and delight. With a deft flick of her wrist, Ms. Cassidy lifted a folded fan and gave Dean a disgusting, coy swat on the arm. “Aren’t we confident? No curiosity why I’m here?”

“I’ve always known exactly why you were here,” growled Dean. “And once, despite all I could do, you nearly succeeded. However, I’d say your chances now are roughly equal to someone taking 14 tricks at Whist. Samuel recognizes you for what you are now. Leave us in peace.” Over Ms. Cassidy’s shoulder, Dean could see Ms. Harvelle trying to get his eye as she mouthed what he thought was the word “Charlotte.” Dean gave a slight shake of his head.

“There is a rumor about the Ton,” said Ms. Cassidy. Ms. Harvelle pantomimed grabbing Ms. Cassidy’s arm and dragging her from the room. Dean shook her off again.

“Yes, Samuel is married – delightedly so – elated so,” Dean rolled his eyes.

“Not about your brother, Mr. Winchester – about you,” Ms. Cassidy’s lips curled into a smile, callous, her expression inexplicably victorious. A chill went down Dean’s spine. Ms. Harvelle pretended to sneak up behind Ms. Cassidy and choke her, and the world lurched nauseatingly around Dean.

“Get out,” he said quietly.

“Is it true?” she broke in to a delighted grin.

“Get out!” With a ragged breath, Dean stopped himself short of laying a hand on her. At the edge of Castiel shook his head sadly, and even without seeing the ghostly face, Dean knew his mind, for it was the shadow of his own conscience. His temper caused him nothing but trouble, his anger the first time he spoke with Michael had spurred the man on, his fury with Castiel had burnt bridges. He had to learn how to restrain himself, or he would continue to ruin all in moments of passion that, when burnt out, left him hollow and alone

“Because everyone knows that I was in the house a great deal around that time, and thus was uniquely placed to observe all,” she pressed on, voice growing higher pitched in haste. “A word from me could confirm, or deny, and who to doubt?”

Around the house? That time? The confusion that crashed about his ears proved an excellent emollient to his temper. His mind quickly scanned through the year and a half during which this harridan had plagued Sam, drawing him into a web of dangerous behavior, debts and obligations, late night rendezvous, compromising situations. Meanwhile, Dean had courted Charlie and they’d been engaged and wed. Only with Charlie’s help had Sam been saved and rehabilitated, and only her impressive skill at gathering and subverting information had repaired Sam’s tarnished reputation. He stared at Ms. Cassidy blankly. Ms. Harvelle lifted her arms like a boxer, circling her fists as if on the
verge of striking.

“Yes – now I have your attention,” cooed former vixen.

“I have no idea what you are talking about,” Dean managed, at a loss for how to engage when they were clearly speaking different languages.

“Don’t lie, Mr. Winchester, you’re no good at it,” Ms. Cassidy sniffed, clearly believing she’d gained a point on him. “Let’s talk business.” Ms. Harvelle’s eyes narrowed, she mouthed a string of what were unmistakably swear words, and ducked out of the doorway, out of sight, disappearing with a faint rustle of skirts. “It is within my power to either confirm this rumor, and allow the Ton to think you a cad, or deny it, and protect your precious reputation.”

“And what would you want in exchange for this help?” Dean had no intention of helping her at all, but he could think of no explanation for her strange innuendos and hoped to draw her into revealing enough details for him to piece it together.

“A thousand pound, a reintroduction to polite society as your trusted friend...” she trailed off and flashed Dean that victorious smile. “...and a chance to speak with Samuel.”

“Right,” Dean said slowly. “And if I don’t do as you’ve asked?”

Ms. Cassidy assumed the innocent air that had once her specialty. As a youth it had become her, but on a woman in her 30s it merely looked a parody. “ ‘Oh, Mr. Smith,’ ” she batted her eyelashes. “ ‘Tis only too true, for I was an intimate of the Winchesters, and the elder brother was no less wild than the younger, only better at hiding his profligate behavior. To bring a young person of such potential to such ruin – to compound the crime by years of neglect – to cap it now with his present behavior? A scandal, a true scandal, and I can speak to its absolute veracity. My soul weeps for those poor children!” Her eyes swam with manufactured tears, her expression was a diabolical combination of shock, distress, and just a glimmer of satisfied humor, and she dabbed overdramatically at her eyes as if with a kerchief.

“Here’s the problem with that,” Charlie’s no-nonsense voice interrupted before Ms. Cassidy could continue, the red head stepping into the room, hands on her hips, a furious glint in her green eyes. “You’re a painted trollop and no one will believe a word you say.”

“Excuse me, I...”

“Excellent point, Mrs. Winchester,” snapped Ms. Harvelle, stepping in to flank Charlotte. Dean gave them both a grateful look.

“Mr. Winchester, I will not be insulted in this...”

“Ms. Cassidy,” Charlie cut her off. “Allow me to be perfectly clear. First, we will give you nothing. Second, you will leave this house and you will never return. Third, you will speak to no one about your suppositions. Somehow, you have continued to worm your way into the homes of those who should know better, but as a whole society recognizes you for precisely the fraud that you are. There is no threat you can make that is credible, because there is no one of the least credit who will take you seriously. You pose no danger, Ms. Cassidy. Whatever power you might once have possessed, over the Ton, over the Winchesters, I think we both know that now you are no one. Be grateful for what little you retain, and know this: if you come after my family I will end you. There will not be a pig sty in London that will welcome you by the time I am done. Do I make myself clear?”

“Rather overstating your clout, aren’t you, Mrs. Winchester?” Ms. Cassidy’s voice was arrogant, but
her eyes had the haunted look Dean had only seen the few times he’d actually managed to get her on
the ropes. She’d always been depressingly good at twisting his attempts to oust her to her own
advantage; that Sam had believed her over Dean for so long had been particularly painful.

Stepped up until the two women were standing virtually nose to nose, Charlie repeated, “Do I make
myself clear?” They stared each other down, Charlie’s sweet face an unreadable mask, Ms.
Cassidy’s locked in a scowl. Using the slight difference in their height to every advantage, Charlie
shifted and loomed menacingly.

The dark-haired beauty’s mouth twisted into a petulant frown and her eyes dropped, and Charlie
pressed her advantage, maneuvering around Ms. Cassidy to force the woman towards the doorway.
Closing in, Ms. Harvelle helped, and as Dean watched in bemusement, the two women herded the
third from the house.

“You’ll regret this!” Ms. Cassidy said with one final burst of rebellion as Charlie slammed the door
in her face.

Brushing her hands together as if knocking flour free, Charlie shook her head. “Good riddance!” All
the hardness gone from her eyes, Charlie turned to Dean. “What was that about?”

“I have no idea,” confessed Dean, and explained Ms. Cassidy’s suggestions and threats. By the time
he was done, there was a considering, pensive look on Charlie’s face. “Do you think she’ll make
trouble?” She met his eyes, and he was proud of himself for holding her steady gaze. He’d been
working on that, really trying, and he’d gotten much better over the past few weeks, though if the
room was dark and shadowed, or if the eyes were dark brown or black, he could still feel fear claw
at his throat when he met them.

With a dazzling smile, Charlie reached out and patted his cheek, expression growing even more
pleased when he didn’t react poorly to the gesture. “I’ll never let her, dear,” she said. There wasn’t
the least shadow of doubt in his mind, in that instant, that Charlie was up to something. Watching
from the doorway to his study, the phantom of Castiel nodded his enthusiastic agreement, though
Dean had no idea which of them Castiel was concurring with.

August

Dear Mr. Winchester,

The Season has come to an end. I hope you have found your summer an edifying one. There will be
further lessons in the fall – it is the time for hunting, after all. Flee as you will, I’ve no need to give
chase. You know where to find me when you are ready.

M.

Though the letter was already burnt, the words were seared into Dean’s mind. He scrubbed sweat
and the traces of tears from his eyes, extremely glad for the former to hide the latter from his guests.
August was proving unusually, abominably, hot, and Dean was miserable. The arrival of company
had done little to assuage his unhappiness. Ms. Milligan, Ms. Masters and Mr. Milligan were as
always of great cheer, not a care in the world: young, carefree, unattached, and naive. It was a vision
of youth that Dean had not experienced. Even at sea he had always had responsibilities, and from
the moment of his inheritance, he had become a man by necessity. With the blight upon his heart, mind,
and soul, Dean found them even more removed from himself than usual, and it was impossible for
him to mind their conversation.
The bruises may have faded from his face, but the nightmares and panics remained. He’d learned some strategies for dealing with the anxiety that ate his mind, that snuck up on him and could turn the most innocuous interaction into a life or death struggle to keep from losing his mind, keep from betraying the invisible terrors stalking him. This was normal, now. This was life, now. There were mornings when he could scarce make himself rise from bed. There were times he would meet someone’s eyes and all he could see was the mask of Zeus and all he could hear was an arrogant chuckle that took his pitiful attempts at self-defense and ripped them to shreds. However, he thought generally he was doing better.

And then he’d receive another letter, and his fear would surge and cascade, and paranoia would possess him. He’d reflect on what Michael said to him, and on the events of the past months, and know that he had every reason to be frightened.

It was little things: Ms. Cassidy showing up at his home, a letter from a friend declining an invitation, a sly look from an unknown gentleman visiting -----shire. Taken alone, none were of any import. Taken as a whole, they formed an unmistakable pattern. Every reversal that the household suffered, every friend grown cold, every financial setback was a painful reminder that in the shadows, out of sight, a monster – a connoisseur, Dean thought with a shudder, throat constricting uncomfortably – lurked and moved against him. When a curt letter came from one of Charlotte’s old school friends cancelling an invitation to visit, when Samuel’s offer to purchase a nearby home was summarily turned down despite it being quite generous, when Ms. Harvelle returned from town furious that a group of men had made lewd suggestions to her about her relationship with the Winchester men, Dean knew it was not a coincidence. Each was part of a greater whole, with Michael perched in the background, a Machiavellian puppeteer making his family dance on his strings, maneuvering Dean until he’d have no choice but to speak that single, terrible word: yes . It terrified Dean, woke him in the middle of the night choking and gasping for air that would have come freely had he only been capable of relaxing his body, but he could not . Even as his ability to cope day to day improved, a dread foreboding built in his mind that the worst was yet to come. Tomorrow, or next week, or next month – it would arrive.

Yet the days passed, and the weeks passed, and the months passed, and the other shoe did not drop, and Dean watched every event pass by him and he wondered what it all meant.

A shriek pierced through Dean’s reverie. “Oh, Mr. Winchester! Good heavens, Samuel! Is it not the most – oh, I am shocked and thrilled and – but it is the most wonderful thing!” Ms. Harvelle laughed breathlessly and fanned herself with a hand, Ms. Milligan and Ms. Masters exchanged smiles and beamed, and Charlie grabbed Jessica’s hands and led her in an impromptu dance. Sam, for his part, had a dazed, dumb look on his face, a smile like his was simultaneously excited and completely petrified. Mr. Milligan merely looked confused.

Dean shared the sentiment.

“Congratulations, Mr. Winchester, Mrs. Winchester,” Ms. Milligan said politely, her cheeks pinking modestly for some reason.

“Someone fetch Ellen, we must tell her.” Charlie said, grabbing Jessica into a fierce hug. “And Ms. Moseley, she’ll wish to know as well.”

“No, please—” Jessica looked chagrined.

“None of that now,” said Charlie firmly. “I’ve borne two under their every minute attention, and if I cannot pass that torture on to another it will all have been for naught.”

Pregnant. Jessica must be with child. In an instant, Dean’s face went from bemused to what he
suspected was a very good mirror of Sam’s. He shook off both in a heartbeat and leapt to his feet. “Sam!” he cried, catching his brother in a huge hug and dragging him from his seat. “My Sammy, going to be a father.”

“Yeah,” said Sam as if he’d just learned the news himself. “Get off me, Dean.” Ignoring him, Dean patted him hard on the back, pushed his brother away to take in his scowl, and hugged him again. “I said, get off!”

“Come on, you know you love it,” said Dean with unrestrained delight. Good news, he thought, finally some good news. Damn, they had earned it. The dazed expression on Sam’s face finally broke into an enormous grin that made him look a decade younger, and he returned Dean’s embrace enthusiastically.

When the hubbub and joy and congratulations finally died down, Charlie turned to Ms. Milligan with an avid expression. “Ms. Milligan, how goes it with your angel?”

The sense of family, of unity, died in an instant as if a door had been slammed in Dean’s face. Thoughts of Castiel flooded his mind, all the most innocent, most endearing - the smile shining in his eyes, the feel of his hands when they danced together, the glee in every word of banter he spoke. Dean’s hand went unthinkingly to the pocket that contained his watch and the attached, cherished locket. Charlie’s eyes caught his, widening slightly, narrowing, and Dean colored and pretending he was merely checking the time.

“Oh, Mrs. Winchester, pray do not tease me when I tell you I think myself well on the way towards being in love,” Ms. Milligan said with more warmth and passion than Dean had ever heard in her voice. Her cheeks had a delicate pink glow, and her eyes scanned the room and met each observer in turn, a defiant, brilliant green.

A sad gaze caught Dean’s own for a moment, dark and, he noticed for the first time, rimmed faintly in red. Ms. Masters, of all people, offered him the silent commiseration of unknown shared pain before she broke in to a wide, mocking grin and declared, “No, no, do not believe a word she says. Allow me to tell you about Mr. James Novak...”

**September**

Basic woodworking was never a skill that Dean had expected to learn, but then, he’d never expected he’d ever need to make anything with his own hand. Surely, anything he required could be commissioned from a skilled craftsmen. Dean’s time was better spent managing his estate, entertaining, seeing to his affairs, and the slowly easing struggle to maintain his sanity. With the advent of fall had come more set downs, more friends distancing themselves, and Dean still hadn’t the least clue why. However, pleasures were also mounting. Jessica was with child and aglow with it. The weather was mild enough for outdoor activities and a large party of Dean’s friends were coming in October. He’d received no new letters from Michael since the end of the Season.

Dean no longer dreaded how he might react if a member of his family met his eyes, no longer feared that he would cringe from their touch. His dreams were less plagued by specters, his time alone less tormented by anxiety. At times he still felt like he was divided from those he loved, a sad spirit on the outside gazing in on the warmth of their pleasures, but then, he’d always felt like that some of the time.

The lingering vision of Castiel was ever in the corner of his eyes. For better or for worse, the attachment that Dean had once feared transitory had only grown. He was more certain that he loved
Castiel now than he had been at any time before, now that all hope of remedy was past. The months had done nothing to quench his ardor, and he still sought blue eyes everywhere he went.

The dreams that had once come nightly, that had departed with the coming of Michael and nightmares, returned as the evenings grew longer and colder. Dean awoke with to the sensation of strong arms wrapped around him, of firm muscles pressed against his back, of hardness wedged between his cheeks. Half-remembered dreams of never to be repeated passion hardened him. The desires that faded while his spirits were oppressed returned, bittersweet and much regretted.

Looking back, Dean could see how foolish his behavior had been. He'd risked his entire family safety and security - for what? Love making. Of all the childish, selfish things to do! He'd decried the virtue of others for doing similarly yet somehow led himself to think it entirely different when it was his needs that were being unfulfilled. He had brought all of this on himself, Castiel's betrayal, Michaels blackmail and torment. He was to blame for the cloud of misfortune hanging over the Winchester family. Never again. He would be a monk - live a celibate life - as he should have from the first.

Hence why Dean had learned woodworking. His efforts were juvenile at best, but they’d produced what he’d required, a simple cylinder, sanded and polished perfectly smooth so that there was not the least snag. A tool for pleasuring himself was not the sort of thing he could walk into a woodshop and commission. No one could ever know that he possessed such a thing, and before he’d ever begun creating it, he’d devised the means by which he would hide its existence, a locked box tucked behind a loose stone in his fireplace.

Holding his handiwork now, he ran a finger along the smooth length and felt an answering twinge and tingle of anticipation in his member. His breath quickened instantly, his body squirmed against his mattress at the dim memory of long-unfelt pleasure. He’d meant to take this slowly, but it had been months since he’d been filled, not since...pain blanked his vision, sadness gripped his heart, weeping blue eyes met his, and Dean pushed all the thoughts away. Such bliss was never to be achieved again. He would pleasure himself. He set the wooden length aside and dipped three of his fingers into a jar of cooking oil he had set beside the bed. Turning on to his side, he gently felt about his entrance. Hot longing filled him, each slight brush of calloused skin on sensitive flesh forced his gasps to mewls of need. Over and over again he graze over the outside, coating it with oil, letting the slick moisture seep inside, until he rutted against the bed in impatience.

The first finger pressing into himself did not match the bliss that he remembered, did not even come close to past pleasures. It slid in easily, nearly to the knuckle, and it felt good, but his mind did not reel, his hard cock did not throb in response, that desperate core of want that nestled in his belly was completely unaffected. Immediately, he added a second finger and began to push in and pull out, and as before it felt pleasant and was entirely dissatisfying, inadequate, wrong. It was not enough, it was clearly far from being enough. Fear began to whisper in his mind, that yet another thing had been stolen from him that night in May, and he forced the thoughts away, forbade them from giving full voice, fearing the whisper of panic that struggled to win purchase against the warm glow of pleasure in his body.

A third finger joined the others, and his body began to loosen and suffuse with ebullient warmth. With a faint groan of relief, he pressed into himself, filling himself with the fingers, smearing his insides with the lubricating liquid. Pleasure mounted, his cock ached for his hand to close around it, and all thoughts but continuing faded to the background. Coating his free hand in oil, he prepared his creation, coating it thoroughly. The slick hardness of it was enticing beneath his fingers, and in his mind he heard the whispered memory of a moan in a low, rough voice.

Asmodeus.
Dean moaned hugely. God, Castiel’s voice drove him crazy. He pushed it away. That was gone forever, and dwelling on it would only make the pain in his heart worse. Nonetheless, need flogged him as it hadn’t before. He had to feel that length inside himself, had to feel it move. Withdrawing his hand, he took hold of the cylinder, lined it up against his hole and pressed it in. The initial contact was difficult, painfully so, but as soon as Dean was breached the rest slid in smoothly. Filled deeply, Dean groaned in profound satisfaction, his body reacting automatically to urge his rear harder against that glorious intrusion.

So good, so good, how I’ve missed you, my angel.

Despite the urgent voice pleading in Dean’s mind for him to pump into himself, he forced patience and waited as his muscles eased and tension faded. He wasn’t able to wait long. Taking a hold of his member with one hand and the end of the cylinder with the other, he began a slow rhythm, pumping his cock and thrusting deep within himself. Friction heated him from within, each movement driving him higher, satisfying the need that had eaten him from his earliest arousals as a youth, before he’d understood what it was that he craved. He smeared his early release over his hand and stroked harder, pushed in harder, adjusting the angle as he sought that perfect place. No matter how he tried, though, that eruption of bliss escaped him.

Frustrated, Dean rolled onto his stomach, got his knees under himself and hitched his rear into the air. One hand reached around and behind him to continue the punishing, wonderful pulse inside him, the other continued to pull and tease at his cock. His hips bucked into each plunge of the length. Needy moans leaked from his lips, punctuated by mumbled, semi-formed imprecations that after all the work he’d done, after how long he’d been without, he still couldn’t find what he needed.

Glancing back over his shoulder, he sought his own hand working, thinking perhaps he’d see some clue of how he should adjust his actions.

A vision struck him powerfully, Castiel naked and gorgeous and glorious on his knees behind Dean, his fingers buried within Dean, stroking his own cock as he prepared to penetrate Dean, to take him and complete him and pleasure him as no one else ever would. What are you doing? mouthed Dean. Blue eyes flashed open and met his, black rimmed in luminescent blue and liquid with desire.

Saving you.

Pleasure coursed through Dean’s body, unspeakable, unbelievable, undeniable bliss.

“Castiel,” he cried in pleasure. “Good God, my angel, thank you!”

Again and again the length found him and hit him and again and again he cried out, body quaking with how good it felt, hand stuttering to maintain his oil-slickened grip, strokes faltering as the thrill of it left him weak.

“Castiel,” the name was ripped from him once more. Dean’s mind filled with his angel, the joy of his laughter, the smoothness of his skin, the sound of his voice when he’d told Dean that he loved him. One more strike into his most sensitive place and he was done, release splattering to the bed beneath him, wooden length forced from his body by muscles contracting uncontrollably. Breathing hard, he collapsed to his bed in a mess of oil and spunk. Even the touch of the cloth brushing his skin was erotic and an echoing burst of pleasure drew further spent moans from him.

I am yours!

He’d never say yes to Michael. He was Castiel’s, heart and soul, forever, no matter how the other man had hurt him. Though they never meet again, Dean accepted that he would love the angel for
the rest of his life. The thought was simultaneously agony and ecstasy, and the combined pain and pleasure of it lingered in his chest long after he’d cleaned up and gone to sleep, curling up and finding a home in dreams of happiness in simply being together.

October

“Mr. Winchester,” said Mr. Lafitte, very seriously, the drawl he had acquired during his time in the United States blurring out the harder syllables.

“Mr. Lafitte,” Dean took a proffered hand and nodded with a look of intense scrutiny bordering into suspicious.

Light glinted off icy blue eyes, crinkled lids beginning to twitch, and Mr. Lafitte could not hold his grimace. He broke into a wide grin, and Dean laughed, truly laughed, a feeling he’d missed for so long he’d forgotten how good it felt. The two men caught in a rough embrace. “It has been too long, my friend! I’m glad you could come.”

“I’d not miss fall at Lawrence for all the tea in China,” drawled Lafitte. The open smile was tempered by a hardness, and in that look Dean read much: that Lafitte had heard the rumors, whatever they were, that he believed not a word of them, that he was there to show support for his friend as much as for plaguing the fowl of the park.

“Mr. Henriksen,” Dean greeted the next of the party. The dark skinned man smiled, showing perfect teeth and faint warmth in his usual restrained way. “Mr. Ashley!” The tall, lean man caught Dean in a hug without the least pause to consider the more restrained possibility of a handshake. “Has Mr. Fitzgerald decided not to attend?”

“In light of all…” Mr. Henriksen grimaced and tried again. “Winchester, we know you. We were your friends when the rumored events took place. We know the impossibility of their truth, that no such woman was in your social circle, that no man such as yourself would dream of the improprieties being bruited about as your crimes.” Dean hated, loathed, despised the chill that came over him, like being caught in a gale that in an instant divided him miles from the pleasant, close comraderie he had enjoyed moments before. A man such as himself – what did that mean? What did his friends think of him, what did they suspect? He knew his face must have fallen, because Lafitte put a supportive hand on his shoulder.

“You know how much it means to him to have charge of the Travellers Club,” Lafitte explained. “He’d not allow a whiff of scandal to touch him, and he convinced himself that to come to your home would not be merely to sniff the scandal, but to douse himself in the cologne of it, to return to society reeking of it and thus by implication condone it. It was quite an extended metaphor, actually. You’d have laughed to hear him struggling to complete it.” Lafitte chuckled, but there was no humor in the sound, and Dean sighed. “Few are foolish enough to bring the matter up to us, but when they do, we give them what for. But you know society, they must have something to speak of, and if there are no truths to be had, a lie will do just as well.”

“ ‘Sides,” said Ashley, running a hand negligently through the absurdly long hair that curled limply around his shoulders, “anyone has met Charlotte knows she’d disembowel you if you even dreamed such a thing. And she’d know, somehow she’d know. Never met the secret that woman couldn’t learn.”

“Is she truly so perspicacious as that?” a new voice intruded into the conversation. They were a large
party arrived at Lawrence Hall, his friends and their wives and a few of their eldest children, servants and a handful of other acquaintances. The women were sharing raptures at their reunion within the house, while Dean stood on the lawn with his friends, as delighted in seeing them, if perhaps not so shrill. However, Dean had not previously noticed that Mr. Gabriel Novak was one of the crowd who had come to call on him. There were nearly a dozen gentlemen in total, some better known to him than others. If a hunt was in order, Dean was always pleased to have his circle enlarged by his friends bringing friends, and he firmly believed the more the merrier. The group gathered now were especially appreciated, a tangible demonstration that even among those who didn’t know him, not all believed whatever scandal Dean stood accused of with some mysterious woman in his past.

“Cleverest thing I ever saw,” drawled Lafitte. “For a woman, that is.”

“Don’t let your wife here you say that,” Henriksen said.

“She thinks Mrs. Winchester clever too,” said Lafitte, confused.

“I meant the other part,” Henriksen rolled his eyes.

“Mr. Novak, it’s a pleasure to see you again,” said Dean. The man scowled at him, and Dean drew back, surprised, and tempered his enthusiasm. “I know that we are only minimally acquainted, but I have long regretted that I did not have the opportunity to thank you for your timely rescue the last time we met.”

“Rescue?” asked Ashley, looking curiously at both men.

“Yes,” Mr. Novak said, displaying none of the open, guileless behavior that Dean had seen in him before. “Mr. Milligan and Lord Walker had him in a prison of words, and happily pressed their every advantage. It offended me to see their poor manners, so I intervened.”

“It was truly appreciated,” Dean said with all the sincerity he could muster. “I’d have you know, we don’t stand on ceremony at Lawrence Hall – though you are just appeared on our doorstep unexpected, you are in the company of friends, and we are not unacquainted. The weather has been exceptionally fine, and the fertile summer has my woods flush with birds. I can promise you excellent hunts, if you can be prevailed on to join our party for a few days?”

“I do not wish to intrude,” said Mr. Novak coldly.

“Anyone who can stand up to the intimidating Mr. Milligan is welcome in our home” Charlie came up behind Dean with an opening, welcoming smile.

“May I introduce you to my wife, Mr. Novak?” Mr. Novak inclined his head. “Mrs. Charlotte Winchester, Mr. Gabriel Novak.”

“This is a delight I had not expected,” gushed Charlie. “I have heard so very much about you, and about a certain relation of yours, that I have longed to make your acquaintance.”

“Indeed?” Mr. Novak’s head quirked slightly, an eyebrow shot up in surprise. “From whom could you have heard so very much?”

“Perhaps you did not know that my wife is intimate friends with Ms. Anna Milligan, and my brother with Mr. Inias Milligan?” said Dean.

“Ah,” a wry smile overtook the man’s expressive face. “That does explain much. If Ms. Milligan is as full of my nephew as he is of her, I can only guess what paroxysms of nonsense you have endured.”
“Do stay with us, if only for the first week,” importuned Charlie. “It would be cruel not to satisfy my curiosity.”

There was a long pause, a considering look on Mr. Novak’s face. He met Dean’s eyes, gaze so dark and harsh that Dean flinched away as he had not done for weeks. With pursed lips, Mr. Novak turned his attention to Charlie, and the open, ingenuous hope of her expression melted the sternness from Mr. Novak’s face.

“Come, Novak, how can you refuse such polite insistence?” interjected Mr. Henriksen. “I told him he should stay with us, you know, make a grand party of it, but he pled that he had no invitation and would never presume. So you see, I’d the right of it – Mr. and Mrs. Winchester are my friends this decade and always the souls of hospitality - and you must remain.”

The faintest of decisive nods marked Mr. Novak’s concession, and he pinioned Dean with one last fierce look before giving Charlie the warm, mischievous smile that Dean remembered from the party at Mr. Milligan’s. For a heart wrenching moment, Dean felt his throat constrict as it crossed his mind that Mr. Novak might be Michael, but he was able to shake the thought away before anxiety stole his reason. Despite the harshness of his gazes the two men bore little resemblance. Michael had been of Dean’s height, able to look him in the eye, his body lean and sinewy, whereas Mr. Novak was well short of Dean and broad. “It would be my pleasure,” Mr. Novak said. “I particularly look forward to speaking with you, Mrs. Winchester. James speaks of Ms. Milligan as of an angel—” Dean flinched at the word “—and I long to know more from one who knows her better.”

Charlie laughed. “She speaks of him just the same, and I long to know just the same. However, lovers’ assessments must always be taken with a pinch of salt. Having listened to all she’s said most assiduously, I find I have questions, many questions, that I long to have satisfied.”

“Once again, we are in agreement, Mrs. Winchester,” said Mr. Novak. “I hope that in the days to follow, we’ll be able to satisfy each other’s inquiries.”

The words passed around Dean, and though he heard them, he could assign little meaning to them. He thought of his own angel, the shadow of whom stood down the road by the stables, importuning Dean with blue eyes to bring Impala forth and start the long awaited sport. It was more proof that the shade Dean’s imagination conjured bore little resemblance to the man who had once told Dean in all seriousness that the indoor pursuits Castiel preferred were the opposite of Dean's preferences for an active life, as if the two could not coexist. Using the excuse of opening the front door to admit his friends, Dean turned away. With one hand, Dean gestured invitation into the house, and with the other, he rubbed a finger over the closed locket of his lost love, lost because Dean had driven him away, lost because Castiel had forsaken him. As Mr. Novak walked by, still speaking animatedly with Charlotte, he gave Dean a surveying look, pausing to obviously take in Dean’s thumb rubbing the smooth, circular locket, long since worn to dark bronze, and he ended by meeting Dean’s eyes and scowling. There was one amongst the company in his home, Dean thought, who believed all the worst rumors about him.

In the depths of his oppression, Dean would never have imagined what a pleasure it would be to have his friends with him. Even a month before, he’d longed for yet dreaded this time of companionship, looking forward to the sport and the noise, but fearing that he’d continue to feel distant gloom even in the company of many. Those fears proved unfounded. There was some awkwardness at first, but as all members of the company grew to know each other better, the tension faded away, and Dean felt happy for some days as he’d not felt in a long time. It was a time of pleasures prolonged, of friendships iterated and reiterated as they had been repeatedly over the years, and of new friendships formed. None were more changed than Mr. Novak, who extended his stay to near-on three weeks before he finally departed with Henriksen to visit a mutual acquaintance who
lived a little ways southeast. His words as he left were particularly heartening.

“Winchester, I fear I have misjudged you badly, and done you wrong in the process,” Mr. Novak said with perturbed sincerity. “I allowed my opinion of you to be swayed by others. Though my own limited impressions of your worth had been extremely positive, others whom hold my absolute trust abused you in such terms as I could not but assume that I’d misunderstood the type of man you were. Having spent these days in your company, in the company of your most remarkable wife, the charming Ms. Harvelle, and the frankly nauseating Mr. Winchester and Mrs. Winchester, I have come to see that I had the right of it, and to believe that those who spoke to me have been grossly misinformed – deceived – deliberately misled – in short that some massive misunderstanding stands at the core of all. When I return to Ton for the Season, I will seek to remedy it, and I hope that you will be pleased to be welcome in my home as an equal and a good man, to be seen by all to be above my suspicion no matter what lies society yet spreads. My family could use an expanded circle, and I think my nephew James would particular benefit from being exposed to your example, and that of your unusual family. Until January, fare you well!”

December

Dear Mr. W.,

It is my pleasure once again to invite you to a gathering of the finest minds of the Ton, to be held at my home on Thursday, January XX. The usual rules apply. As this is the first soiree of the Season, please considering joining us for a fete to be hosted at our new accommodations at 7 ----- Place. Your friend in fraternity and discretion,

Ms. Naomi

Dear Ms. Naomi,

I regret to inform you that I will not be attending any further events of this nature. You have been a superb host, but I have not found the discourse to be to my liking. I am forever in your debt for your kind attentions, and remain your servant,

D. W.

Dear Mr. Winchester,

It is with interest that I learn you have no intention of attending further soirees. I was right about you. This is proving a most entertaining hunt. I eagerly anticipate seeing you in the Ton in January.

M.

Dean stared at the letter he’d received from Michael, arrived mere days after his own was posted to Naomi. His heart raced as thoughts cascaded one atop the next.

Ms. Naomi was the person who selected the men to attend, the person who created the guest list, who sent the invitations. Ms. Naomi was the only person in the entire process who knew Dean’s real name, who must know it in order to send the letters. Only Ms. Naomi could have known of the reply Dean had sent. The inescapable implication was that Michael was privy to information that Ms.
Naomi possessed. The bottom plunged from Dean’s stomach as he stared at the letter that Michael had sent him, horror destroying everything.

Michael might have learned his name from Ms. Naomi. Castiel might have had no hand in it. Dean might have walked out of Ms. Naomi’s house that night into the arms of one who loved him and received strength and healing and understanding. Castiel might not have wronged him. Dean’s heart had been right all along, his head deceived. Vertigo rocked the world and Dean clutched his head and collapsed, retching on the carpet before the blazing fireplace in his study.

No, no, this can’t be real, this can’t be happening, I can’t have ruined all for naught, I can’t have rent, annihilated, demolished, my dearest love.

Two pinpricks of black in a sea of purest white obliterated every sight, every thought. A scream ripped from his throat, or so he thought, he couldn’t tell. What was real, what wasn’t, had he even received a letter at all? No air, no breathe, I can’t...I’m going to die, he’s going to kill me.

It’s no more than I deserve. I tore the wings from my angel, for nothing, for a suspicion, for a lie. I trusted a monster over the most beautiful creation of divinity. I killed Castiel.

Blue eyes stared at him accusingly. The world spun to nothing, and Dean was aware of no more.

The distinct sounds Dean heard when he awoke set the scene for him as well as if he’d opened his eyes. The distinct hiss and whistle of wind hitting crackling flames named his bedroom. The soft chiming of a distant clock indicated midday. The punch and puncture of a thread-bearing needle piercing cloth told him he was not alone, the susurration of swallowed imprecations told him his companion was his wife. There was a faint clatter of wood as the embroidery was set aside, a rustle of fabric as Charlie made some adjustment to her position.

“Dean, I shared your bed for four years. I know how it sounds when you are awake.” Coloring, Dean opened his eyes to have all suppositions confirmed. His wife wore a sad smile, a cap on her head against the growing fall chill. Dean’s jaw ached, and he set a hand to it with confusion and no small amount of alarm. “We were drawn to the study by obvious sounds of distress and found you lying on the floor, choking and crying out, impervious to all attempts at communication. Samuel had to punch you to prevent you lashing out, and we brought you up to bed.” Profoundly embarrassed, Dean licked his lips and looked everywhere but at her. Nothing was said, and he found himself coloring under her continued, unswerving attention. Finally, nervously, he met her gaze, flinched away, met it again and held on, allowing the green eyes to offer him unquestioning support.

“Here is what I know,” she said quietly. “That something dreadful happened when last you visited London. That you have not been the same man since. That you are doing better than you were. I know that we as a family have suffered a series of reverses that appear unrelated, but that taken as a whole suggest a systematic effort by some person or persons to bring grief to this family. I know that rumor has been deliberately and maliciously spread that you are responsible for the ruin of Ms. Amelia Richardson and that you are the father of Ms. Claire Richardson, that you are reputed to have furthered that sin and my shame by bringing the child into the house. I am keenly aware of the impact that this rumor has had on your respectability and honor, and on my own place in the perception of society. It has rebounded on to Sam, reminding people of his buried past, and stirred whispers that sin is bred in the bone. It has practically ruined Jo in the eyes of the world, for she has no one to face slander on her behalf but us, and all look at her living with us and wonder. There is more, financial setbacks, slights, whispers, but that is the core of it, and I have done all in my power to mitigate, to quiet, to prevent, and to remedy. However, every whisper is a spore that can grow into a new rot of fungus, and each I root out, it seems two more take root. Without knowing the initial source of blight, there is only so many letters I can write, so many favors I can call in, so many
avenues I can explore, before I am thwarted.

“I have honored your wishes and not spoken of this for half a year, though all who love you have watched you struggle alone, have watched and wondered. I've prevented all, even Samuel, from demanding you share whatever burden you are carrying. If you rebuke me now, I shall not ask again, and I will not hold it against you, for your behavior shows all the signs of coercion and forced secrecy, and I could never blame you for succumbing to such. However, I will take the matter from your hands, as you well know me able, and handle it as best I see fit. While we are in London, my options will multiply, and I will use every tool in my power to protect this family. So, dear husband, kind and caring Dean, I ask you one more, one last time: Who has hurt you so? Who is the author of our misfortunes?”

Dean’s brow lowered in troubled thought, he snagged his lip with his teeth, and his mind cried out that this was his burden to bear, that they must never know. And he recognized it as nonsense. They already knew so much, supposed more. They would learn all, and if they must he’d rather they learn from him. With a rough sigh, he said, “Are Sam, Jessica and Ms. Harvelle waiting in the hall?”

“Damnation, Dean Winchester,” snapped the muffled but distinct voice of Ms. Harvelle, “what must I do to compel you to call me Johanna?”

“It’ll never happen, Harvelle,” Dean called back gruffly, smiling despite himself. “Get in here, all of you.”

With guilty looks all around, his family clambered into his room with a shuffling of feet, a brushing of cloth, and mumbled concern for his health. “Listen well, because I’m only going to say this once,” Dean said. He gazed into each face and looked at them, truly looked at them, for the first time since May. “You’re my family, and you’ve gone behind my back.” Sam started guiltily. His eyes mirrored concern, his brow was furrowed so deeply in tension, his mouth drooped so, that his expression would have been comical had Dean not recognized it as his most sincere expression of worry. “I’m disappointed.” Jessica gave a squeak, a hand going to her swelling belly as she colored bright red, but defiantly refused to avert her dark eyes. “I’m disappointed in myself.” Ms. Harvelle’s scowl broke into a smile brightened with surprise and wonder, like the sun emerging after a storm. “I would do anything for you, except, apparently, trust you. I’ve already lost one person I loved because I could not bring myself to trust them, to trust my heart. I’ll not lose any others.” Sadness painted Charlie’s features at his words as she guessed what they meant. Dean’s heart quavered. A moment lengthened, silent, as all looked at him and he looked upon each in turn.

“Michael. His told me to call him Michael. And in March, he…” And Dean told them all that had passed between himself and the black-eyed man who embodied his nightmares. As he spoke, he realized, with agonized despair, that no blue-eyed angel haunted his room. Castiel was truly gone.
Obligations and Engagements

Chapter Notes

A/N: IMPORTANT
I've made a minor retcon to the end of the last few lines of the previous chapter.

I've never tried to write a book before where I'm publishing it as I go - usually I have the freedom to tweak earlier plot points as necessary to accommodate changes I make. For the most part I've managed to operate within that constraint, but this time, there was no way to make things go as they must without clarifying something that had been my intention all along, but was not stated clearly the way I initially wrote it. To whit, the very end of Chapter 7 now reads:

“Michael. His told me to call him Michael. And in March, he...” And Dean told them all that had passed between himself and the black-eyed man who embodied his nightmares. As he spoke, he realized, with agonized despair, that no blue-eyed angel haunted his room. Castiel was truly gone.

The arrival of the Winchester family in London was largely unheralded, greeted with only a smattering for cards and invitations. They rented a large house in their usual neighborhood, several streets away from the height of fashion, with enough room to accommodate Dean, Charlie and Ms. Harvelle, Samuel and Jessica, the children and Ellen, Ms. Moseley, Claire – even Singer, who for the first time in Dean’s memory had decided to make the trip. Everyone behaved as if they thought him on the verge of nervous collapse, and it was extremely frustrating.

Especially because it was true.

Somewhere in the city of London, Michael was waiting for him, had promised him that when Dean returned to the Ton for the Season, they would have words. Dean had no intention of saying yes to the man, but he was frightened. Refusing him to his face was unimaginable, facing him alone and not giving in was inconceivable – a reality he had not attempted to communicate to the others, for he knew he’d not be able to convey how frightening Michael was. Charlotte had told Dean to put his trust in her, and he was doing his best, but it was impossible for him not to grow increasingly anxious. Every passerby who bumped him on the street, every stranger who stared at him too long, every chance encounter with a vague acquaintance who eyed him sidelong, took on new, terrifying meaning. He couldn’t help but wonder what they knew, who they might tell.

By contrast, the out-and-out slights were much easier to take. When he encountered Mr. and Mrs. Fitzgerald on the street and they snubbed him before an entire block teeming with London’s most respectable, his temper flared with genuine anger that felt fantastic in comparison to the furtive, apprehensive, timid behavior that he was growing to loathe in himself. He was especially proud to have kept that burst of fury well under his control. Charlie had exaggerated greatly when she’d claimed afterwards he looked on the verge of attacking them both with his bare hands.

The best of all, of course, were the votes of support. In a show of solidarity, Lafitte, Henriksen, and Ashley were boycotting the Travellers Club. On their first morning in London, Dean received a calling card printed on fine stock in elegant lettering, with a handwritten note on the back, Lafitte’s
nigh-incomprehensible scrawl inviting him to the first meeting of the Intercontinental League to be held the next evening. The event was a breath of fresh air to his ever-strained lungs. His friends were there, as were many acquaintances from his time at the Club. Though none said it outright, there was a clear implication that all had left because of the slander that had been sustained against Dean, and it left him with a warm glow and the feeling that Dean could weather even the worst that Michael could throw.

That was, until he started thinking what the worst actually was. While ruining a young gentlewoman such as Amelia Richardson was shameful, and everyone shook their heads to think of a bastard child taken in, most spoke the words while quietly ignoring similar behavior in their own families. What was it the reliable Squire Western had said? “Won’t think worse of a man for begettin’ a bastard – no, women may like him the better for it!”

If Michael revealed to society that Dean was a sodomite, the scandal would ruin him. Even Charlie and Ms. Harvelle’s relationship coming to light could not destroy the standing of the Winchester family so surely as if the beau monde knew that Dean was a fancier of other men. Buggery was unnatural, plain and simple, so far as society saw it. While he’d remain the owner of a manor of some worth, his scrip would be denied at polite establishment, his amity would be anathema, his presence and opinion never sought. Conducting basic business would be impossible, and he would likely have to step down, leave all to Sam and hope that his brother was not tainted by association. The thought was a curtain lowered between him and the events surrounding him, and he sighed that it seemed to be ever thus. Any entertainment, no matter how delightful, served only as the distraction of the moment. The hard reality always returned and left him lost and alone.

Despite himself, he sought out blue eyes to bring comfort to his aching, lonely soul. His heart sustained love for Castiel, cried to find the angel and beg his forgiveness for the crime that Dean had committed against him. Lafitte caught Dean’s eyes, gaze misty clear in the dimness of his parlor. Ashley’s eyes were blue as well, tinged with cold around the center. A Mr. Freeley, who Dean vaguely recalled from the Club, had eyes that read as gray, and Mr. Zeddmore’s were enough like the angel’s that Dean actually did a double take until he realized the hair was completely wrong. So was it everywhere Dean went, as in the previous Season, except now his search felt even more futile and pointless. He hadn’t the least idea what he would do if he actually found Castiel. Probably flee the city, he thought with a sad chuckle.

Ms. Milligan’s card was received at the house in the same batch as had brought Lafitte’s, and the morning after the first meeting of the Intercontinental League saw the usual group assembled in the parlor at the Winchester residence at 13 ----- Place. The early part of the visit was passed in happy declarations about the accommodations the Winchesters had found, the fashionableness of the street, the tastefulness of the furniture and notions, the pleasant way the light diffused about the room in the mid-morning, and the way not a hint of a draught disturbed the curtains. To all of this feminine intrigue, Dean could add little, but Samuel and Inias were in a corner making their own plans, so he was left to sit dumbly and pretend vague interest. The conversation grew increasingly dilatory, the observations increasingly inane and pointless. That the ladies were interested in things that did not interest him, and vice versa, was entirely reasonable and not at all out of the order of things. Though he found it dull even at the best of times, he could still tell the difference between when they were having a conversation of matter that simple was not in an area that engaged him, versus when they were talking and talking and saying nothing. Indeed, one of the things he usually liked about Ms. Milligan and Ms. Masters was that neither was the least inclined to nonsense. If Ms. Milligan had nothing to say, she said nothing, and if Ms. Masters had nothing to say, she changed the topic to one in which she could engage.

Today, Ms. Masters entered into laughter and agreement as required, but otherwise she seemed listless, a far cry from her usual pert self. And Ms. Milligan...
“Have I mentioned how fine the pulls are?” Ms. Milligan said breathlessly, indicating for at least the third time the thick tasseled silken ropes that held the curtains back from the windows. “That color is sheer perfection! Would you describe it as crimson, or perhaps wine? Blush rose, maybe...” Charlie and Ms. Harvelle exchanged a glance. Dean found himself watching Ms. Masters, the tightness about her eyes, the shadows beneath them. She’d lost weight, as well, shed some of the roundness about her face. Her dress, a lovely green today, did not fit her well, loose around the bust and waist, suggesting that the change had been recent. “I do believe I could stay in a room such as this forever! I am so glad it is yours to let for the Season, Mrs. Winchester.”

“Not forever,” corrected Charlie. “We have it ten weeks, and then back to Lawrence Hall once more.”

“What is ten weeks?” said Ms. Milligan, her cheeks coloring with conflicting emotions. “It is but the blink of an eye! Oh, how I shall miss you when you are gone! The let out of the Season will be a sad bore without your company.”

“You will have to write me very often, then, and I will write you back – as we have done previously,” Charlie replied with an indulgent smile.

“Your letters have been such a comfort for me,” Ms. Milligan confessed. “If not for them, and for Ms. Masters, I do not know how I would have borne all.”

“Tut,” Ms. Masters said, and though it was the kind of thing she said when she was bantering, Dean could hear the hard edge behind it. “Don’t play coy. It is not I who has kept you happy these ten months past, not me whom you so look forward to seeing.”

Ms. Milligan went crimson – the same shade as the curtain pulls, Dean noted – and awkward silence fell.

“Has something happened?” It was Jessica, sweet Jessica, come with them despite being in increasing expectation of her confinement, who tentatively broached the question. Tension instantly seized Ms. Masters features, and she looked away.

Looking all around, Ms. Milligan bit her lip. “It’s not a secret,” she said quietly as if convincing herself, “it’s simply not widely known yet – not official announced – but I break no promises to share it...” Decision made, she looked up, fine red curls bouncing about her glowing face. “Mr. Novak and I are engaged!”

“I knew it!” snapped Ms. Harvelle, thrusting an arm into the air victoriously. “Did I not tell you so, Charlie? By Candlemas, I said! None of your Lady Day!”

“You win the point,” Charlie conceded with a smile. “And never am I so glad to lose a wager in my life! Ms. Milligan, I am so happy for you! Of all I know, I’ve met few who deserve affection so well as you.” Charlie’s eyes flicked to Dean for an instant, so briefly that he thought he might have imagined it. Perhaps he was supposed to say something, acknowledge the event in some way? The only person who had ever shared a confidence of such a nature with him was Sam, and he could hardly treat Ms. Milligan as he had when Sam had shared news of his engagement to Ms. Moore. It was generally considered ungentlemanly to provide a lady with that much alcohol. Ms. Harvelle, he noticed, was watching Ms. Masters, whose face was impassive but whose hand was clenching her pale green skirts, rumpling the delicate fabric.

“I wish you joy,” Dean said gruffly, hoping he was not crossing some bound of propriety by opening his mouth. Charlie gave him a hard look he did not understand at all. He quirked an eyebrow at her questioningly, but she merely sighed.
“Thank you, Mr. Winchester,” Ms. Milligan said shyly. “Perhaps I should not have said anything so soon, but our official announcement will is imminent, and as I hope you will be in attendance at the time...” Curious looks were directed at her from the assembled. “...Well, I suppose Mr. Winchester and Mrs. Jessica Winchester won’t be able to attend, but the rest of you...oh, but I am such a ninny, I’ve forgotten to give you the invitation.”

“You’re not a ninny,” declared Ms. Masters, far too warmly. She took a deep breath and continued. “I have it here.” From her reticule, she took an elegant stamped sheet of paper sealed with wax and passed it to Charlie. Taking it, she cracked the seal and the opened it.

“‘Be the talk of the town!’ ” Charlie read aloud. “‘The party of Mr. and Mrs. Dean Winchester are requested to attend a Ball of Pleasure to be held at 3 North ------ Street on Thursday, January 15th, to begin promptly at 4 o’clock P.M. Your Hosts, Mr. Adam Milligan and Mrs. Lilith Novak.”

“Mr. Milligan invited us to a ball?” asked Dean abruptly, unable to mask his surprise. From the way Mr. Milligan had treated him their one dinner together, he couldn’t believe the man would sully his establishment so a second time. After all, Dean was a mere bumpkin, whose family must be ill-mannered as well, and not fit company for a ball thrown by the Adam Milligan of 3 North ------ Street.

“Well, I’m afraid, as you expected, I must decline the invitation for Jessica and I myself,” Sam interjected from his aside with Inias. “We will be leaving that Monday to return to Lawrence.”

“Drat! Mr. Winchester, I was counting on you to give me solace of an interminably dull evening. You were invited because of me,” Inias said. “I asked father if I might bring you and he said, ‘why not bring the whole lot of ’um?’ ”

“No such thing,” Ms. Masters rolled her eyes. “Mr. Novak asked him to. His wife is, after all, serving as hostess for the event. The two families are forever intimate. Mr. Novak told Mr. Milligan of your solicitous hospitality last fall, and bemoaned the state of our reputation due to the cloud of slander that has followed you. He suggested that, as you were a good man, and ‘the best of the country squires—’ ” Dean snorted, and she tilted her head curiously.

“Just something Mr. Alder once called me,” explained Dean quickly.

“Anyway, he said it behooved men of polite society to be seen with you, to help dispel the rumors,” she finished with a faint shrug. “Mr. Milligan agreed, and Mrs. Novak added your names to the guest list.”

“I asked him to invite you as well,” Ms. Milligan colored. “I wished you to be there, to share in my happiness, and to meet my fiancée.”

“Psh, nonsense,” Charlie said with a dismissive gesture.

“What? Will you not be able to come?” asked Ms. Milligan, her distress apparent. “It was presumptive of me, I apologize.”

“Of course we will be there, Ms. Milligan,” laughed Ms. Harvelle.

“But we will not wait two weeks to meet your young man,” Charlie continued. “I expect Mr. James Novak in my parlor next time you visit, else I will tell Ms. Moseley that you are to be denied admittance!”

“Well, we can’t have that,” said Inias with a grin. “I’m sure we can convince him to come along.
He’s a little retired about the edges, but when he’s out of his shell he’s a game one. Now, Mr. Winchester, your brother has been telling me about a pond you know south of the city, and I have got to see the truth of these perch for myself. What say you, fine way to spend a chill afternoon?”

The days of the Season passed thus, in visits received and returned, in parties and dinners and fetes, the same life of idol pleasure it was each year. Escaping the repressive paranoia induced by attendance at public gatherings, Dean spent much of his time involved in the formation of the Intercontinental League, which in a matter of days was quite out of Lafitte’s control. Those who had attended his mockingly-named dinner decided to make a real club of it. Soon, there were drafts of rules and requirements for admission – must have set foot on at least three continents being the primary – and inquiries were being made for a permanent space. As silly as it was, Dean found it a truly welcome distraction. At Lafitte’s and at his own home were the only times he did not feel the eyes of strangers upon him, did not feel the strings being pulled. They were the only two places that he could be absolutely sure he would not turn around and find himself being faced down by two black knives masquerading as eyes in a mask of Zeus.

The carriage was made up and ready to go early the Monday before the Ball to bring Samuel, Jessica and Ms. Moseley back to Lawrence for the remainder of her pregnancy. Once the child was born, Samuel would return to the city and Ms. Moseley would help Jessica with the remainder of her confinement. After many hugs and well-wishes were exchanged, they set off, and the family took a hasty breakfast in preparation for a busy social day A card left on Sunday warned of Mr. Gabriel Novak’s intention of visiting Monday, and the Milligans were anticipated as well, with all the promise of bringing Mr. Novak’s long-anticipated nephew. Even Dean found himself curious to meet the man who excited so much interest since the preceding year.

Mr. Novak arrived early and was shown into the parlor by Singer, serving with much disgruntlement as the butler for the household. The short, spirited man took up residence in a free chair as if he were a permanent fixture in the room. “Mr. Winchester, Mrs. Winchester, Ms. Harvelle, it is a pleasure,” he said happily. “And I hear you are to attend the ball on Thursday – I’m not misinformed, am I?”

“No,” said Charlie affably. “Are we misinformed that it is to your credit that we received the invitation?”

“One good turn deserves another,” he replied with a shrug. “Though I am not sure that there is any definition of ‘good’ that includes subjecting anyone to my brother in law for longer than is absolutely necessary.”

“Come now, he can’t be so bad as all that,” laughed Charlie.

“Yes, he can,” Dean disagreed with a smile and a shake of his head. “This is a man who looked me in the eye and suggested that I was simultaneously too dull to form my own opinion yet too foolish not to voice it anyway. You should be glad you’ve not met him, Charlotte. You will hate him, I promise.”

“The more you say such things, the more I look forward to it,” Ms. Harvelle said with mischievous grin. “It has been long since I’ve been to a ball.”

“You’re joining us, Ms. Harvelle?” said Mr. Novak delightedly. “Oh, that is perfect. All the idle tongues and empty heads will be so scandalized. The things they will say!”

“Well, I dare hope one of them will say them to my face,” Ms. Harvelle said with an adorable huff, hands going to her hips. Charlie watched her fondly. “I would love to tell them exactly what I think of the idea that I am maintained at Lawrence Hall to keep Mr. Winchester company!”
“Do, do,” Mr. Novak encouraged. “It’s been far too long since I’ve seen a truly excellent set down, not since Mr. Freeley – a brother in law, my sister’s husband? I believe you have his acquaintance, Mr. Winchester, he is helping form that League of yours – told my wife, oh, what was his exact turn of phrase? ‘Lest Mrs. Novak doubt my appreciation of her figure, I must share that I am extremely fond of her backside, for my sight of it always means she is about to go. Would that I had the delight of such a view at all times.’ ”

“Oh, Mr. Novak, that is too much!” gasped Charlie, though she choked on a laugh. “She is your wife!”

“Until you have met her, you haven’t the least idea what the limit is,” said Mr. Novak, his look belying the joviality of his tone. “Some marry for convenience, some for affection, some for wealth, some to protect their families. I made the mistake of trying for all four, and failed in every respect.”

The room was spared having to come up with an answer for this sad reflection on Mr. Novak’s life by the arrival of a large party, led by Mr. Milligan, whose face fell the moment he realized that Sam was not in the room, but perked up once more when he espied Mr. Novak. Ms. Masters followed, her eyes wide and dark and her lips fixed in an inexplicable challenge, a shout of defiance to anyone who dared look upon her. Behind her was Ms. Milligan, flushed and fidgeting. She was flanked by a tall man, perhaps a little shorter than Dean, who was entirely engrossed in the task of retrieving Ms. Milligan’s slipping shawl. All that was visible of him was a mop of black hair, and Dean felt a chill he could not identify in the pit of his stomach. Uncomfortable, he fingered the thick, nubbed fabric of the arm chair, eyes wandering the room, unsure why he was disquieted.

“Ah, James,” Mr. Novak said, good humor immediately restored. “I’m glad you didn’t come up with yet another reason it would be inappropriate for you to attend.”

“My apologies, uncle,” the young man spoke, and Dean’s blood turned to ice, breath catching in his throat. **No, it can’t be, not now, not here, not after all this time.** “I was merely concerned about the impropriety of arriving, unmet, in the home of strangers.” Low and slightly rough around the edges, rich with dignity, totally incongruous with his slim, muscular body clad in a modest, tastefully cut black jacket, blue vest, shirt and breeks in cream, and black Hessians. Delicate fingers lifted filigree laced from where it trailed on the ground, skin smooth enough that the fragile cloth did not snag as he placed it back around Ms. Milligan’s shoulders. Over her shoulder, she gave him an a look of shy, beaming affection. Dean clutched the arms of his chair so hard his fingers began to grow numb. A phantom hand clutched his throat, he could feel it, a thumb pressing against him so hard it was beginning to cut off air. Black spots danced before his eyes.

“Not strangers,” drawled Ms. Masters, “not when they are already intimates of your uncle and your affianced.”

“Friends you haven’t made yet, Novak,” Mr. Milligan joked.

Ms. Milligan stepped into the room, finally granting James Novak entry. The new arrival scanned the room to quickly take in the denizens, brilliant blue eyes in a youthful, smooth-skinned face with thin pink lips examining the ‘friends he hadn’t made yet.’ Though he’d not doubted what he’d see when that gaze finally lifted, Dean’s heart shattered to see those eyes. It took every exertion he was capable of not to cry out, not to leap to his feet, not to scream in agony and wail in despair, not to rush the length of the room and escape the suffocating atmosphere for the freedom of the hallway and madness.

**Castiel, my angel.**

The chair gave him the support to sit upright. His jacket constrained him to short breaths, puffed in
and out roughly. He locked his eyes on his knees. If Castiel should meet his gaze – if he should recognize Dean! – he couldn’t begin to imagine what the outcome would be, and he couldn’t bear to think of it. The thought that he would see hatred, disgust, disappointment in those orbs that had once looked on him with such love was beyond what could be borne. He heard Mr. Novak speaking, as from a great distance, “James, it is my pleasure to make you known to the Winchesters. We have here Mr. Dean Winchester, a squire from the north; his wife Mrs. Charlotte Winchester; and her intimate friend Ms. Johanna Harvelle. I’m afraid you are too late to meet the younger brother and his, Mr. and Mrs. Samuel Winchester, as they’ve removed just this morning to the country for her confinement. There are several other members of the family about – they have the two most delightfully obnoxious imps, Mr. John and Ms. Diana – and Ms. Harvelle, was that Mr. Singer I espied in the livery of the house?”

The reply was too soft to pierce the rushing sound that seemed to envelop Dean’s head. He knew he was being abominably, suspiciously rude, but he could find nothing within himself that would compel him to look up and risk meeting those perfect eyes again.

A brush of warmth against his hand caused him to jerk away, clasping the offended limb to his chest as if wounded. “Dean, are you well?” asked Charlie softly. Her face swam into view, pocked and malformed by the swirling black that ate into Dean’s vision. Green eyes bored into his skull, and he gave a faint shake of his head. Help me, please help me, please make him leave, please make him stay, dear God do not let him know me. “Is something amiss?” He gave another shake of his head. Without thinking, his hand trailed down to his waist pocket, where the locket yet remained attached to his watch chain. He had sworn he would keep it on his person no matter what and he would never break his word, not to Castiel.

“I’m fine,” he said, a little too harshly. “It’s a pleasure.” A slight glance upwards to see startled faces was the best he managed by way of politeness, but it seemed to do, for everyone took their seats and conversation began. It was completely impossible to parse what was said into words, but he was able, through an exercise of desperate necessity, to keep himself in the room. Slowly, his breathing began to return to normal, his composure gradually restored. If Castiel had recognized him, he would surely have said something by now. Sidelong, Dean looked towards the man, the most perfect specimen he’d ever laid eyes on, and saw not the least hint of peculiar interest in Dean, nor the slightest hint of familiarity. A whisper of concern, perhaps, about those expressive eyes, as he noticed Dean’s gaze and sought to meet it politely. Dean looked away to prevent such a disaster.

“Tell us of your interests, Mr. Novak,” said Charlie, showing every ounce of her good breeding to the newly arrived guest.

“I am fond of painting,” Castiel replied. Though it was unmistakably the same voice, it was softer, more careworn, each word carefully considered. “I read a great deal.”

“He writes poetry,” said Ms. Milligan, giving Castiel the most affectionate look. Dean’s heart lurched, and his pulse began to speed again. She truly loved him. Covertly, he tried to detect signs that Castiel – James, he corrected himself, the name filling his mind like it had been there all along, attaching to the image of his masked love and fitting like a second skin – returned her regard. He was attentive, his gaze warm, his manners impeccable, yes, he must be in love as well. It should not hurt so much to know that his love had moved on, found another more worthy of his laughter and his glittering eyes. “He wrote one about green eyes, it was so beautiful I wept for it.”

“Might you be prevailed upon to share some of your work, Mr. Novak?” Ms. Harvelle asked avidly.

“Perhaps some other time,” demured James.

“Please, Mr. Novak?” Ms. Milligan turned upon him with pleading eyes. “I know what a modest
creature you are, but it is fine, so very find, and I can promise you will not find a more appreciative
audience. The Winchesters appreciate poetry more than any I’ve ever known, though ‘tis a pity Mr. Samuel Winchester is not present, for he loves it best of all.”

“I...” chagrined, James looked upon the expectant group watching him. Dean felt so much sympathy
for him. He was young yet, as Dean had always supposed, a quarter century if that, and though he’d
always been forward at the soirees, he had been protected by a mask. Here, he seemed diffident and
a little lost among so much attention. The urge to shield him from exposure was powerful and
compulsory.

“That’s a bit strong, Ms. Milligan,” Dean kept his voice quiet in an effort to obscure it. “How would
you feel if such a demand was made of you upon first acquaintance with a large group?” Shocked,
Ms. Milligan once more matched the curtain pulls.

“Oh! Yes, you haven’t seen, have you?” Ms. Milligan happily latched on to the change in topic. “I keep
forgetting which visits have been paid, when, in relation to which events.” A silver chain
dangled around her neck, the pendant lost amidst the lace atop her neckline. With a graceful hand,
she lifted it free.

Shimmering blue stone twinkled in the light, white lines forming as it shifted slightly, crossing to
form a star in the depths of the sapphire. Dean choked on nothing, the world disappeared, the echo of
Castiel wailing his names chased him down dark pathways of thought that ended with him crashing
into Michael and being entrapped by black eyes.

“Pray, excuse me,” he gasped. He stood up abruptly, startling Charlie such that she tumbled back
into her chair from where she’d leaned forward to gaze in awe on the beautiful gem. Every eye in the
room turned towards him, and the image twisted like the parlor was being sucked down a vortex.
Each breath rattled in his throat, and he strained to keep from collapsing and begging Michael to free
him from his torment. “I fear I am unwell...I...perhaps another time, Ms. Milligan, Ms. Masters, Mr.
Milligan, Mr. Novak, Mr...” As he made his hasty, clumsy way across the small room, he forced
himself to look at each face in turn, even the last, so long sought, so much more beautiful in person
than in even his dreams. He momentarily met those eyes that he’d have known anywhere, would
have been able to pick out from any millions of similar, and saw nothing. James looked upon him as
on a stranger. At least Dean had that small relief.

Dean made it through the door and to the hallway, feeling every eye on him as if a room full of
masked Michael’s all stared him down. Dean’s fingers fumbled at his pocket where he bore the
locket, always, I’ll keep it with me always, no matter what. The hallway teetered around him, and he
gutted himself on the banister of the staircase. The door to his study was feet away, but each breath
was more difficult than the last, and his sight of the house was growing distant, his vision forming
long tunnels that stole the light of the world away from him.

With a last flare of energy, he practically leapt through the doorway, kicked it closed behind himself,
collapsed to the floor and sobbed as he never had before in his life. Each inadequate gasp served to
fuel further tears, his lungs burning as he swallowed salt, his stomach churned with thick mucus. His
body was wracked by paroxysms of sorrow, hands clutched to his face as if he could somehow
through mere gesture deny the heart-rending misery of what he had just seen.

The angel, in the arms of another. The angel, turning over the gift of Dean’s heart to a new love.
The angel, happy with Ms. Anna Milligan. The angel, looking upon him unknowingly, unable to recognize him.

At least James looked happy. At least James wasn’t hurt. At least James had moved past the grave wound that Dean had dealt him. If James had ever been Dean’s, he certainly wasn’t any longer. Castiel was dead, but James lived and could find much-deserved joy. As much agony as Dean felt, knowing that James would be alright counted for the world.

I’m like you, I don’t care for the female form.

Could James truly be happy, even with so sweet a wife as Ms. Milligan? They would be living a lie, and her kindly smiles would not last forever when she realized her husband took no pleasure from her touch. Dean had lived that lie for years, knew how painful it was even when both parties fully understood the compromise they’d made. James would have no such mutual comradeship to make the burden manageable. He would have to find some way to live that lie, and suffer for it; or, he’d have to deny the falsehood and push his wife away, and cause Ms. Milligan to suffer for it.

If only you could hear my heart: I love you, only you, forever you...I’m sorry!

“Mr. Winchester?” a soft voice spoke hesitantly. Dean could not move from the floor, could not make himself stop crying, could not find any ability to control his body, could see nothing but the face he could finally assign to the fantasy that had consumed him for a year. Gentle, small hands brushed his hair back. “Sir, can I get you anything for your distress?”

“No,” he managed, his voice hoarse and broken beyond recognition.

“I’m sorry I intruded, sir,” Claire whispered. The hand vanished.

“Please.” Dean was so lonely, so agonizingly lonely. “Please, stay.”

“If you wish it, sir,” she said. Thin arms wrapped around his head and drew him to lean against her chest, and she hummed a quiet, soothing tune that echoed through her body and into his. All strength gone, Dean cried against her until he ran out of tears, until he ached all over from heaving, until all he could do was lie still and quiet and unmoving and stare at nothing, and see nothing, and feel nothing.

He gave the necklace to another. How could he?

He supposed an hour or more must have passed before he felt Claire shift slightly, adjusting her weight, moving one of her hands from his line of sight. He didn’t move. What was the point? The only hope for today was for it to end, for him to collapse into his empty bed, beg that sleep give no dreams, and pray that the morning brought some relief from the pressure compressing his chest. A pair of slipper-clad feet stopped before him.

“Is he asleep?” Charlie’s voice was hushed.

“I don’t know, mum,” said Claire helplessly. “I didn’t know what to do.”

“I think you’ve done excellently,” said Charlie, dropping to her knees in Dean’s field of view. Glassy-eyed, Dean watched impassively as she set a hand on his cheek. He couldn’t even feel it, his eyes burned, his flesh tingled, his body felt like it belong to another. “Dean, is that man – is James Novak your angel?”

A dry sob choked from Dean’s lungs and he squeezed his eyes shut. Not mine.
“Why didn’t you tell me you were still so very much in love with him? Why did you tell me to stop seeking him?” Though the words could have been harsh, there was not the least hint of condemnation in them, only love, affection, concern. They hurt so much the worst for that. He’d held back what had passed between him and Castiel when he’d told his family about Michael, restrained by shame and the conviction that they did not need to know it in order to solve the problems confronting them. If he were honest with himself, he knew also that he could not stand to bare himself so completely, even to them.

“I killed him,” Dean whispered hollowly.

“You didn’t,” she said. Dean’s eyes opened against the grit that filled them to find her staring at him, eyes rimmed with tears of sympathy. “He was sitting in our parlor until not ten minutes ago, quite politely concerned that his host had taken ill and adorably distressed at the propriety of a party of pleasure continuing while you were indisposed. He’s a beautiful, amiable, delightfully engaging young man. I can see why you were – are – so taken with him.” He’d been wrong to think he had no more tears; fresh ones made paths down his cheeks, tumbled from his nose and the edge of his cheek to fall in Claire’s lap.

“It hurts, Charlie.”

“Have faith in me, love,” she murmured. She settled onto the floor and lifted him like a child, freeing Claire from his weight. “Thank you, child – please fetch some tea for Mr. Winchester.” The girl rose and departed. “I promised I would help you fix this, and I will.” Holding his head up, she waited until his eyes met hers. “Do you trust me, Dean?”

The bottom fell out of Dean’s stomach. With a shudder, he convulsed away from her, pulling free of her arms.

_Do you trust me?_ Michael’s voice whispered from the past.

“No!” he snapped gruffly, speaking not to Charlie but to the suddenly vivid face of Zeus. God, what a _fool_ Dean had been!

Black eyes met his, his lungs seized, and he slumped helplessly back, seeking as much distance from her as he could manage though his body was barely responsive.

“Okay,” Charlie murmured. “Wrong question. Or the right question, too soon. Shh, shh, it’s okay.” She crawled to him, enfolded him in his arms, and rocked him like a child. Green eyes replaced black, and Dean met her gaze, allowed it to serve as his lifeline. “It’s all going to be okay. I won’t let you be alone.”

It was true. He wasn’t alone. He wasn’t alone, just lonely all of the time.

“Thank you, Charlotte,” Dean said. “I do not say that nearly enough. You are the best thing that’s ever happened to me.”

There was an insistent tapping on the door.

“Come in, Claire,” Charlie called.

“I am not your lady’s maid,” the unmistakable voice of Mr. Gabriel Novak was audible through the thick wood. “Mr. Winchester, Mrs. Winchester, I’m sorry to intrude, but may I come in?”

Pulling himself closer against her body, Dean shook his head. “I’m sorry, Mr. Novak, this isn’t a good time,” Charlie said.
“There is never a good time for some things,” said Mr. Novak, a kind of flippant, indifferent agreement in his voice. “However, this is the time nonetheless. We must talk about James. I’d rather not do so through the door, but I will if you refuse to admit me.”

“Dean,” murmured Charlie. “I could speak with him, without you. You don’t have to...”

With another shake of his head, Dean let her go and sat upright. “It is odd enough for him to return, to wish to speak about...” Dean’s voice was thready and hoarse, his body felt weak and tenuous, but the panic had faded. “Let’s hear what he has to say. Would you help me up?” Nodding, Charlie rose and pulled Dean to his feet. Together, they installed him in his desk chair, Charlie standing at his shoulder. The faint, reedy tune of a waltz whistled through the door as Mr. Novak waited impatiently. “Come in,” Dean managed, sounding far more together than he actually felt.

The door opened and Mr. Novak came in. In the bright light of the study, his face was more lined, looked more tired, than Dean recalled even from the visit in October, his hair streaked with more gray. His brown eyes, far from holding mischief and laughter, looked sad but were hard as iron. Not a word was spoken as he closed the door and approached, boots making a muffled thump at each step on the carpet as he came to a stop opposite the desk. Charlie’s hand fell to Dean’s shoulder and gave him a reassuring squeeze. To his surprise, Dean looked upon Mr. Novak’s visage and felt calm, even when he met those dark eyes and held the gaze.

“I believe I’ve handled this badly,” Mr. Novak began, the words a pained admission. “It seemed a good plan when I conceived of it. James’ obvious disinterest in women deserved an outlet, and I knew a place where he could...” There was a moment’s hesitation. “Based on my observations, I assumed that this was a topic of conversation that could be broached before your wife, but just in case I’ve been much deceived, this would be the moment for Mrs. Winchester to leave.”

“There are no secrets between my wife and I,” said Dean gruffly, and though he couldn’t see her face he could feel her smile in the warmth radiating from her body. It still wasn’t quite true, for Dean had not yet confessed all that had passed between himself and Castiel that last night, but that was the only confidence that had not been shared, and he intended to as soon as possible. A niggling suspicion told him “as soon as possible” would be before the end of this conversation.

“I thought as much,” Novak nodded. “May I say, Mr. Winchester, you have a remarkable family. I envy you that.” Dean inclined his head in polite thanks. “As I was saying, I knew the kind of place that Ms. Naomi’s soirees were, and thus I knew no harm would befall my nephew while he was in my company.” Ms. Naomi’s name was imbued with sarcasm and disgust that made Dean wonder just what Mr. Novak knew of the woman, the hostess who had betrayed Dean to Michael’s appetites. The faintest of shudders passed through him, his breathing hitched, and Charlie’s other hand came to rest powerfully on his other shoulder, an anchor, a support.

“You’re Loki,” said Dean bluntly.

“Guilty as charged,” Novak made a bow that would have done the stateliest of court functions proud. “All was well, at first. James was able to explore his desires and confirm what had been obvious to me from the time he reached puberty. No one caught his fancy, which was ideal, for what could become of such an infatuation? As long as he was enjoying himself and his activities remained casual, it was honestly a delight to see him so inhibited. With his face hidden by a mask, he was a far cry from the timid, repressed creature I knew him to be normally. All was well, until he met you. I didn’t learn of your existence until the next day, when I awoke late to find him cleaned, dressed, dined, and encamped at his writing desk, drawing like a man possessed the likeness of a green-eyed man. As the locket in your pocket surely attests, he is quite skilled.”

Startled, Dean instinctively reached to his pocket and withdrew the piece, opening it. The face of an
angel peered out at him. For the first time, Dean looked upon it having seen the original, and knew that every ghostly pale line that hinted at the contours of the rest of James’ face was placed with as much precision as the glimmer of light that gave breath to eyes, the suggestion of moisture that gave wetness to the pink lips. “I recognized that on your person when I visited Lawrence, though I already had determined that James’ masked demon was none other than Mr. Dean Winchester. The boy is too good an artist for his own good – though he had never seen your face, he replicated what little he had beheld and all that he had felt and touched, and I knew you as soon as we met at Mr. Milligan’s dinner.”

Anger seethed in Dean’s gut, that Mr. Novak could have united them at any time, that he’d been divided from his love at a time when things still could have been fixed by the arbitrary whim of a virtual stranger. He repressed it, though. They had been strangers, and in a world with such men as Michael, Novak had been wise to guard his nephew. Dean’s own actions proved that.

“It was a cruel thing you did, bringing him here today, knowing the truth as you do,” said Charlie coldly.

“No more cruel than what Mr. Winchester did to James last year,” retorted Mr. Novak, and there was cold anger in his voice. “I was quite convinced to loathe you for that, despise the lot of you. James’ costume at the soirees was not chosen by chance. He has the soul of an angel, and once had the innocence of one as well.”

“What did you do, Dean?” asked Charlie with concern.

“No secrets?” asked Novak with a quirked eyebrow.

Before Dean could answer, a faint patter on the door interrupted them, followed a moment later by Claire. In one hand, she bore a tray with teapot, cream, sugar, spoon, cup and saucer. In the other, a small bouquet of brightly colored flowers. Flushing as the gazes of the adults fell on her, she brought Dean the tray, set the vase on the mantle, and departed, closing the door behind her.

Buying himself a moment to collect his thoughts, Dean poured the tea and sampled it. Hot and bitter, it burnt and stung his tongue, sent a burst of dizzying energy through his body. With a deep breath, he sought to explain himself. “Things were told me...there was a preponderance of evidence to suggest that Castiel – that James – betrayed me to Michael.” The words were dredged from the depths of Dean’s mind, like sucking the gangrene from a wound that had been allowed to fester in the heat of summer. “Castiel approached me on the street immediately after...the events of that night...I thought him responsible – though it tore me apart to believe it – and rebuked him when he spoke to me. I told him not to touch me. I told him...” Dean swallowed a mouthful of tea and tears filled his eyes. “I told him I never wished to see him again. I could not face him – I fled – I never heard so awful a sound as him calling to me that night. It is as I said, Charlotte – I killed him.” The comforting hands on his back kneaded at tense muscles, keeping him grounded, keeping him whole.

“You nearly did in truth,” there was implacable anger in Novak’s voice, his eyes gleaming silver-green like honed metal. “I feared for him last summer – he hardly ate, he slept little, he drifted through his days as a phantom lost to the world. However, his spirits revived at length – he is young, has the resilience of youth, that tender strength that sustains mortal wounds and emerges somehow alive and stronger for it. Ms. Milligan’s attentions did not hurt, for they reminded him that though one might not love him, there were others in the world – I do believe he returns her love, though not in the way either of them would wish it.” Dean grimaced at the thought, looked away from Mr. Novak, who did not continue to speak until Dean forced his gaze back.

“In October, I brought me to Lawrence to satisfy my curiosity, to see the beast who had nearly murdered one of only two people in this world I can honestly say that I love. You...were not what I
expected,” Novak confessed. His anger broke into sympathy. “Your grief was evident in every tired line of your face. Your inability to meet the eyes of even your dearest friends spoke of some grave injury of spirit. My interpretation of events had been that you had rebuked James because you’d found a more satisfactory arrangement with Michael, or that you had decided the risks were not worth the rewards in attending such events and that you would return to the safety and obscurity of a country living and the marriage I presumed to be a sham. That I was much in error in every significant regard was immediately apparent. And meeting your charming wife...well, as I said, you have a most remarkable family.”

“I was wrong about him,” Dean confessed, excising the last of the poison in anguished tones. “Ms. Naomi gave my identity to Michael. Castiel had not the least hand in it. In my heart I could never believe he would hurt me so, but I didn’t know what else to think, to believe, for I knew someone must have betrayed me. Indeed, I even thought you might have done, Loki – Mr. Novak—”

“So I might have,” Novak conceded with a wry smile, the familiar mischief making a momentary appearance in his eyes.

“—but life has taught me the simplest explanation is usually the truest, and who more obvious than the angel who had shared my bed and my many hours at each previous event?” A tear tumbled free. One of the hands on his shoulder reached down, tilted Dean’s head back so that he could meet Charlie’s eyes, her supportive smile lining her face. “I only learned my error in December. If I had known sooner, I’d have...I would...” He shrugged helplessly. He’d have done something, he was sure, though he’d not the faintest idea what. “But I knew...I knew all along...even believing he had sold me to a monster, I never ceased to love. Though I believed the image of perfection I’d first beheld a lie, even that guilt could not tarnish my heart’s longing for the angel. Knowing as I do now that he is innocent?” There were no more words. Dean hadn’t the clue how to proceed.

“Why have you come to us, Mr. Novak?” asked Charlie shrewdly. “Clearly, you have known all nearly from the beginning, yet you have held your peace until today.”

“Because today, I learned the last piece I was not sure of: that Mr. Winchester yet loved James,” explained Novak. “That was why I came today – to assess their reactions to each other. Mr. Winchester’s recognition was apparent the moment James entered the room, though how my foolish nephew could sit feet from the object of his affection and not recognize him is beyond me! The parade of emotions on your face was nearly painful to behold, and had the Miligan party been any less engrossed in their own concerns, they would have read you as a book. I saw pain and regret, and most of all, I saw regard and affection, and I knew that the sincere affection I have for my nephew and my knowledge of his feelings would not allow me to remain silent any longer.”

My knowledge of his feelings ...Dean quashed the hope those words threatened to nurture in his breast.

“A respectable man I know once rebuked a room of puffed up popinjays to their arrogant faces by saying, ‘it is in the interests of all gentlemen of good conscience to recognize the privileges of birth and accept the burdens that accompany those privileges,’ ” Mr. Novak was grinning now, and Dean recognized his own words, his set down of the attendees at the Milligan dinner so very long ago. “I am not a good man. I have no pretensions to such, and never have. I have stood aside while many have been injured. I knew what Michael was and have said nothing, done nothing, because me and mine were not impacted. Well, I have reaped what I have sown, and nearly lost something dear to me as a result. I am come today to accept the burdens that accompany the privileges I have never felt the least qualms in accepting. We are not yet well known to each other, but I hope that with my candid relation of all, and my exertions to rectify my own mistakes, we shall become so in the future.”
This announcement left the room silent for a moment. For Dean’s part, he was completely ready to accept any help that might see him reunited with Castiel – James! – and see his family freed from Michael’s influence, but he was unsure what he could do. The ability to throw off their scourge had never been his, he’d been too lost in his own pain, his own struggles, his own torment, and his own responsibilities. It was, he acknowledged, for Charlie, precious Charlotte, to say their course of action, and for him to agree with whatever her decision was. Thus, it was fitting that it was she who spoke first.

“So now we must fix this,” said Charlie firmly. “Michael yet plagues us, and I would learn his identity and free my family from his influence. Your nephew is poised to enter marriage to a young woman who deserves far better than to be sacrificed to the lies we must all pretend to. My understanding, based on things Ms. Milligan and Ms. Masters have said, is that Mr. Novak is the second son of a clergyman of large family and small income. That he has no inheritance. That he was sent to live in London in the hopes that his handsome appearance and charming manners would secure him a wealthy, positioned wife. That in so doing, he would stabilize the family’s precarious position and facilitate the marrying off his less...personably endowed siblings.”

Novak laughed. “You paint a fine picture with words, Mrs. Winchester. It is as you say.”

“These, then, are the challenges we must surmount,” Charlotte lifted a hand from him and ticked off points on her fingers. “Firstly, to turn the tables on Michael. Secondly, to end the engagement without harming either young person. Thirdly, to rectify the misunderstandings between your nephew and my husband.”

“Oh, is that all,” murmured Dean faintly, feeling more than a little overwhelmed at the prospect.

“You think there is yet a means of bringing James and Mr. Winchester together?” a smile played on Novak’s lips.

“I do,” asserted Charlie confidently. “This past year I have seen every indication of a most devoted, lasting love on the part of my husband. Have you have seen the same on James’ part?” Dean shook his head – Castiel could not possibly still harbor feelings for him, he had given the necklace away to another! – but Mr. Novak nodded faint agreement. Desperate, distant hope set Dean’s heart pattering.

“There are ways to bring such things about – believe me, I have seen it happen.”

“That you have, that you have – a remarkable family,” chuckled Novak.

“What do I need to do?” asked Dean, a rush of exhilaration added to the strains of the day leaving him light-headed and dizzy.

“Rest and recover your spirit,” Novak instructed. “Find strength where you can to face the coming trials. Attend the ball on Thursday. Your wife and I will take care of the rest. If you will excuse the two of us? There is a great deal to be done, and very little time in which to accomplish it.”

“Thank you,” Dean breathed. “If we can...if you can...anything you are able to accomplish is appreciated beyond my ability to express.”

With a final pat on Dean’s shoulder, Charlie stepped away. “Mr. Novak, if you’ll come with me...?” The two left the room together, speaking too quietly for Dean to hear.

Left alone in his study, Dean’s thoughts skimmed over everything he’d heard. A great deal made sense now, but there were still so many mysteries. His heart, however, focused entirely on two simply pieces of information, and try as it might, his head could not deter the attention.
Gabriel Novak's knowledge of James' feelings ... Novak nodding agreement to Charlie's query about James' attachment ...

The feelings stirred by the wild, impossible belief that James might care for him screamed for outlet. Hands shaking, Dean withdrew a sheet of paper and took up his quill to write the words he suspected he’d never find the strength in himself to speak aloud, feared that even could he say them, the opportunity would never arise.

Dearest Castiel – Dearest James,

Through what miracle events have conspired to acquaint me with your true identity, I know not. The suggestion that we have, in all likelihood, repeatedly come within moments of meeting thanks to our mutual acquaintance, is mind-boggling, yet such is surely the case. I sat in your company for a span, and found myself incapable of saying the least word to you, incapacitated to do naught but attempt not to stare. To have a face set to the angel in my dreams – to have a name – how beautiful, how handsome, how lovely you are to my sight! I will not burden you with the explanation of how I came to act as I did. Your true conduct has been so far above reproach that I’ll not shame both of us with the confession of what I believed you to have stooped to. Instead, I write to say—

Nay, but the language English has for such a confession is so hopelessly inadequate. To declare ‘I am sorry!’ does not begin to convey the depth of contrition in my heart. I ask no forgiveness, for there can be no such for the crimes I committed. Instead, I merely say, that in the very depths of my heart, in the mired reaches of my soul, I am sorry, I have wronged you, I am to blame, and a lifetime would not suffice for me to make amends. Heap any approbation you see fit, put any name to the crime you deem appropriate. I will own it and plead my guilt, and offer no defense for the undefendable, offer no evidence as mitigation. No matter what befell me, it can neither justify not excuse what I did to you.

I know it is an extreme chance that this letter will ever find its way to your hands, and that the possibility of forgiveness is even more remote. However, if you do come to read it, and you believe nothing else of what I have written, I beg you please believe that my heart has never wavered, will never waver, and that every piece of my flawed self screams regrets to the unhearing heavens for the wrong I have done. I love you, angel of Thursday, and shall ever remain your Asmodeus,

D. Winchester

Folding the letter and sealing it, Dean resolved that his wife and Gabriel could see to Michael and Ms. Milligan, but Dean would speak to James. It was not their place to resolve the errors he had made, he must find the strength in himself to set it aright.

Chapter End Notes

A/N: Three things.

First, in case you are wondering - I keep referencing Squire Western and Squire Allworthy. These are two characters from Henry Fielding’s "The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling." Published in 1749, Tom Jones is one of the first works written in English that fits the modern definition of "novel," and it's really delightful. It's the tale of Squire Allworthy, his nephew Mr. Blifil, and his adopted son Tom Jones, on the one hand; and Squire Western, his sister Miss Western, and his daughter Sophia on the others. A great deal of drama, mischief, humor, raunch, and turns await the lot, and the end makes me
smile, and all in all I highly recommend it. The book is available free from Project Guttenberg (it drags at times but stick with it...) and I positively ADORE the BBC version that was made as a mini-series in the 90s, not least because the actor playing Jones is hot and we get several extended shots of his completely bare, mighty fine posterior. If you watch shows like Doctor Who, you'll also spot familiar faces among the actors and actresses. :) Note that the quote in this chapter isn't exact, it's my memory of the quote. I actually did look up the actual quote, but decided...my memory of it was close enough, and why would Dean remember the quote word for word anyway? (the way I remembered it was slightly closer to what I was trying to convey, story wise, without actually changing the original meaning).

Second, I woke up this morning with a pounding headache, minor muscle aches and an aching runny nose. Not so sick as Dean after his unpleasant journey, but still, not well. Chapter 7 was, as you likely noticed, very long, and as a result I also fell behind on my time table. Thus, consider this fair warning: there's a pretty good chance that I won't get Chapter 9 up until Sunday. I always feared I'd end up a day behind...but I did try to push through to get you to a place where I wouldn't be leaving you on the absolute worst of cliffhangers when I did so. :)

Thank you all so much for the kind feedback and kudos, and I hope that now that things are starting to come together and be explained, you are finding it to your liking. We're more than half-way through...!

Third, just for fun, I tossed in a couple random references to other fandoms I've been in at various times. So, if you spotted them and wondered - yes, there's an intentional nod to Harry Potter and to the band Motion City Soundtrack stashed amidst this chapter. :)
An Evening of Frivolity at 3 North ----- Street

Chapter Notes

A/N:
Warning: This chapter contains further violence and emotional manipulation in the vein of chapter 6

It also contains an minimal amount non-consensual sexual behavior.

As you, dear reader, have made it this far already, and the content this time is (in my opinion) milder than last, I will not be going to the length of labeling and providing synopsis. HOWEVER, if you would like such, please feel free to message me and/or comment, and I will be happy to amend and add such.

Thanks for reading, and sorry I missed a day! I'm back on track now. :)

“Mrs. Winchester, you are a vision in purple,” Mr. Novak said graciously as he stepped in to the entrance foyer at 13 ----- Place. He cut a dashing figure in a gray-green jacket of impeccable cut, a black vest, and perfectly white cravat and breeks. Even cleanly shaven, there was a shadow over his upper lip, and his hair was elegantly combed back from his face to curl about the base of his neck. To combat the winter chill he wore a coat and a hat, and he bore a walking cane that appeared, inconceivably, to be pure silver. “May I introduce you to my sister and brother-in-law?”

“Of course,” Charlie was glowing with excitement and anticipation for the evening. Dean wished he felt similarly. Anxiety ate at his stomach, twisting it until he felt ill. The evening would be spent in company with strangers, friends of Mr. Adam Milligan who surely shared his views on the distinctions of rank and the differences between the eleganza of the city and the gauche hicks of the countryside. Most would believe the worst of Dean’s family, and any man’s smiling face could be a mask shielding the identity of Michael. Further, there was the official announcement of the engagement between James Novak and Anna Milligan to anticipate, in light of which Dean’s hope of speaking with James privately seemed particularly ill-founded. The letter of apology he’d composed rested in his pocket, and he had no clue how he was going to bridge the gap between carrying it on his person and presenting it to the object of his affection.

“Mr. and Mrs. Freeley, Mr. and Mrs. Winchester – Ms. Harvelle,” Novak hastily gestured around the circle, putting name to face. Ms. Harvelle was dressed as for battle, her dress a steel armor gray that shimmered with strands in silver, pink rosettes gathered at the sleeves and waist, nestled in her curled blonde hair amidst a chain-thick length of dull metal, and along the bottom hem and upon her shoes. Her arms were clad in mauve gloves, and her face was set in a smile backed by a hard challenge in her eyes. If an Amazon could step from the Greek Isles of old, Dean beheld one in Johanna Harvelle that evening.

“A pleasure, Mrs. Winchester,” Mr. Freeley’s peculiar, perfect accent tripped from his tongue lightly. In their time together at the meetings forming the Intercontinental Club, Dean had learned that his
unique, distinguished lilt was the combination of time spent in Scotland, France and the Americas, as Lafitte’s drawl was owed to New Orleans and Dean’s own sometimes rough accent could be traced to years among the lower decks. In the dim light of their entryway, Dean was struck powerfully by a memory of misty eyes peering at him from beneath the mask of comedy, a lyrical voice saying, you should go home.

Mr. Freeley was Balthazar. Mr. Gabriel Novak’s lover at Ms. Naomi’s soirees was his brother-in-law.

As Mr. Freeley leaned forward to place a dainty kiss upon the pale purple gloves that sheathed Charlie’s arms, Dean glanced at Mr. Novak. His brows were lowered, eyes drooped, lips showing the barest hint of a pained frown. Dean felt a wash of sympathy for the two men, brought together by marriage to be relations, nursing attraction and – judging by Mr. Novak’s expression – affection that must be kept secret from all, wives and family especially.

“Thank you for help to form the Intercontinental League,” said Charlie. “Mr. Winchester has been able to speak of little else, he is so enthused to be involved.” She truly was stunning, dress in dark purple scattered with cream insets, cream ribbon ruched at the neckline and hem, strings of pearls strung about her neck to crest her bosom and dangle down, swaying and faintly clattering at the slightest movement. Her hair was bound ornately with cream cloth, pearls and feathers.

“Nonsense. It is I who am in the debt of Mr. Winchester, Mr. Lafitte and Mr. Henriksen for proposing the idea,” Mr. Freeley said with a faint shake of his head. “The Travellers Club had grown interminably dull. Any jackdaw with money enough to tour the Continent could gain admittance and speak of Rome and Madrid and Paris as if they’d seen all there was of the world, and scoff at those who dared claim that there were wonders in the Americas or Asia or Africa to rival those of our familiar European shores. Tiresome, spoiled coxcombs, every one.”

“Dear Mr. Freeley, your language,” admonished Mrs. Freeley, quiet and spiritless. As a couple, their dress that was all that was proper and rich, but all the ostentation was on his part, rich satins and silk brocades made jacket and vest. Mrs. Freeley’s purpose in dressing appeared to be camouflage, clothing selected to enable her to fade into the background of a sitting room as much as possible. With her shy affect and downcast eyes, Dean thought her a painful glimpse of the future that awaited Ms. Milligan, though he had trouble imagining Mr. James Novak allowing her to grow so withdrawn and lonely. James had none of Mr. Freeley’s selfishness, the narcissistic indifference of the man who had surely suspected what Michael might do while secluded with Dean yet done nothing to help Dean.

Black eyes staring at him from amidst a crowd; a room full of the finest of society ignoring him save for one, following him everywhere he went; tension between his shoulder blades knowing that gaze was always on him, always gone as soon as he sought them.

“Well, shall we to the ball?” said Gabriel brightly, taking Mrs. Winchester’s hand in his own and leaving Dean to escort Ms. Harvelle to the street. “You must await the delight of meeting my wife until we arrive, for she is already there entertaining.”

It was going to long night.

A barouche awaited them on the street, driver perched atop negligently holding the reins of horses as impassive and bored as himself, black lacquer gleaming in the gas lights running the length of the street. To seat six within the box was impossible, but after several moments of polite deferrals and “no it should be I because...,” Dean was installed beside the driver, the three ladies snugged in a line in one seat facing the two gentleman in the other. With a cluck and the flap and smack of leather on horseflesh, the carriage made the journey to 3 North ----- Street.
The night was misty and chill, ominous, and did nothing to improve Dean’s spirits. Damp tangle
in his hair and crept through every layer of his clothing, leaving his skin clammy and his throat raw. It
was a feeling disturbingly reminiscent of the sensations that washed over him when he was made
prisoner by his fearful memories of Michael’s assault, and he wished he were in the box with his
friends and family, instead of seated on the roof with a stranger. The warmth of conversation reached
his ears over the metallic ring of hoof on cobblestone and the creaking rattle of wood, and he clung
to it and focused on steadily breathing the air tinged with the aroma of horse manure and human
waste, the fragrant perfume of the city.

Before the Milligan home all was chaos. Numerous carriages were stopped, men hopping out to
hand the ladies down to the street, servants dashing to and fro to gather their master’s belongings,
drivers clucking to calm horses overwhelmed by the activity and noise. Murmured complaints at the
cold and the harshness of the ride were interrupted by the raptures of the younger generation,
delighted at the prospect of an evening of frivolity and dancing, conversation and games, and if they
were very lucky, a flirtation with a new beau or an established favorite. It was all foreign to Dean;
even in his youth he’d had little interest in such forms of spending a night. His own pursuit of a
spouse had been done at smaller, more intimate gatherings in his own neighborhood, and he’d met
Charlotte while she’d been visiting relations. This was her scene, the world she had ‘come out’ into
and had spent several years dwelling in, unable to find a husband, before she retreated to the quieter
fringes of Society in pursuit of someone more suited to her needs. As Dean helped first Mrs. Freeley
and then Charlie from the carriage, he was struck by the contrast between the two. How lucky he
had been, how blessed beyond his merit, to have a wife such as she.

Taking up Charlotte’s arm as they navigated the maze of arrivals, horses, and boxes, he met her
startled eyes and said warmly, “I do not say often enough how much I love you, my darling.” A
jubilant smile won over her entire face, and he returned it feeling oddly shy. Thus warmed by
affection, flanked by Ms. Harvelle, the three went in to face the lion’s den.

Stepping into the large entry foyer of Mr. Adam Milligan’s home was like transitioning into another
world. Gone were the gray, dimming streets of London. Within all was aglow with tawny
candlelight, lustrous gilding, rich fabrics, polished wood, the finest furnishings that money could buy.
The people were no less embellished. Men in perfectly fit bespoke garments and stiff-starched
cravats gathered in small groups or strode through the rooms in boots polished to a high sheen,
staring through monocles or rapping on the floor with the points of their canes. Women in the latest
Parisian fashions showed expanses of fair skin barely shy of immodest thanks to carefully placed lace.
Gowns in every color of the rainbow, gathered at the waist and intricately accented with lace, beads,
braiding, fringe, or embroidery, made them appear as so many fancy birds in an aviary. Fair necks
wore chains of gold and silver, bracelets clad wrists, earrings dangled from ears, and piled ringlets of
hair were painstakingly arranged with silk flowers, pearls, chains, feathers, and wraps. Creamy arms
were kept warm with shawls, and slippered feet moved daintily across the carpeted floors.

Friends met and spoke, acquaintances were made, partners were chosen for dances, and couples
sought dark corners in which to indulge in forbidden intimacies. Groups of young, unattached men
snuck covert glances at similar groups of young women, some shy, some coy, some brazen, some
seductive, some disinterested, some desperate. Men of means secluded themselves in rooms where
the youths and women were unwelcome to discuss politics and management, travel and the sort of
intelligence that scorned its rightful name - gossip. Dowagers and chaperones took up positions on
the couches and chairs, holding loud conversations with their fellows about the latest fashions, the
latest addition to their families, the latest assembly at Almack’s, and the latest scandals.

Whispers of that last followed Dean, Charlie and Ms. Harvelle through every room they entered. As
anticipated, they found few acquaintances among the attendees. Those in attendance were titled,
fashionable, well able to spend the entire Season in the Ton, and had no hobbies beyond those that
drew the interests of their fellows. They existed solely to be merry and popular. The disappointment was not a surprise; inquiries among their friends had established that none of their intimates save the Milligans and Novaks would be present. Nonetheless, Dean felt like he had a target painted on his back. A nervous tickle up his spine told him people were watching him, and every glimpse of eyes on him caused Dean to jerk his head around, fearing to look upon a black gaze. In his heart, he knew Michael haunted the premises, preying on the weak. Charlie and Ms. Harvelle sensed the tension as well. As loud talk dropped to murmurs in their presence, as fans were covertly pointed at them and then the motion was hidden in the flick and swish of a woman cooling herself, as dandies paused to look down their noses before moving on with dainty sniffs at jeweled snuff boxes, it was impossible for the Winchesters not to be aware of how much they stood out.

Nevertheless, the afternoon faded into evening. The rooms grew progressively more crowded, the people became more rambunctious and uninhibited, the temperature increased, and the light dimmed. Mr. Novak and Mr. Freeley made a conscientious effort to introduce the Winchester party around, and there were many conversations that began with, “and do not worry what I may suspect of you for I have been much about town and I know how infrequently those sorts of rumors or true, I never put any stock in such!” Indeed, by the time the dancing had begun, Dean had the sense it was coming to be a badge of honor and distinction to have met the Winchesters, the ‘best of the country squires,’ so honored as to have been invited into the elegant Milligan household. As the Ton had it, the Winchester’s manners were as good as could be expected, scarce distinguishable from that of high society; their dress was extremely fine if perhaps a little dated; their taste impeccable considering that which they had been exposed to. In short, they bore all the usual slights, and Dean was disgusted to find he was grateful for Novak and Freeley for surely shielding them from worse.

A servant bearing a fine brass bell made circuit of the rooms, informing all that at precisely half-past nine, the presence of the guests was requested in the grand ballroom. Dean had thus far avoided the main hall, but there was no choice but to repair there, though there was not the least doubt what was to be shared. Creepers encircled Dean’s heart and compressed it, the wine he’d imbibed soured within him, and his smile became painfully fixed, muscles tense, as he anticipated the public announcement of that which put to rest once and for all the wishes he’d once harbored of finding a younger son capable of reciprocating Dean’s love and prepared to be satisfied with a small establishment in the country. Though younger sons abounded, and some might even share Dean’s inclinations, none would own his heart save Castiel, azure-eyed angel of Thursday.

The chamber orchestra played a light air to accompany all into the room, rapidly crowding and growing close. Breathless couples bemoaned the loss of the dance floor and retreated to the sides of the room. Mr. Milligan, done up to the nines, took the stage. It was moments before the curious chatter subsided, and Dean took in the man’s youthful features growing lined and tired, the hard set of his tight-lipped mouth, the neutrality of his green gaze as he scanned the crowd. The dais was raised, and Milligan surveyed the room as a king on a balcony looked down upon his subjects. Under that commanding presence, no shouts or bells were needed to bring silence, and soon all peered avidly, expectantly, at their host.

“It has been a year since I had the pleasure of introducing you to my daughter Anna,” Mr. Milligan said softly in a carrying voice. He made a gesture, and Anna emerged on the stage. Eyes downcast and faint blush made ruddy by the dim light, she was nonetheless radiant. Her garb was the finest of the house, delicate peach tulle layered over maroon, threaded and accented and punched with gathered green ribbon. Her dark red hair was woven with gold and emeralds and peacock feathers, and her eyes seemed to gather the light, glowing viridian as she dared to glance upwards and take in the audience who focused upon her. The star sapphire had been mounted on a length of black velvet and clasped her throat closely, glittering in the hollow at the base of her neck. Cowed, she looked down, eyes flicking left, where Ms. Masters stood in a suitable fashionably dress, lovely in deep blue while not fine enough to upstage her more prominent friend.
“You will wish her joy as I announce that the ties between the Novak family and Milligan family have grown stronger – Anna is engaged to wed Mr. James Novak.” There was a smattering of polite applause, and an equally overwhelmed James took the stage, blue coat and paisley red vest perfectly fit to his fine body, black hair tamed into a semblance of order, blue eyes captivating. Biting his lip, he looked up and gave the audience a shy smile, then stalked to stand behind his bride-to-be, taking her hand with a gesture that was practically defiantly. With a shared laugh, they exchanged a look that clearly relaxed both of them, tension leaving shoulders, faces calming. They turned together back to the crowd, smiling awkwardly at the increase in volume in the face of their obvious affection.

Charlie seized Dean’s hand and gave it a firm, reassuring squeeze before wrapping his arm around her shoulders.

“Couples, assemble, for my daughter and son-in-law-to-be will be leading the next dance, and then shall receive visitors in the Louis XVI room,” Milligan announced. All exited the stage, the floor began to clear, and dancers took the floor. To honor their host and his daughter, even those not participating arrayed at the fringes of the ballroom to observe. The chamber orchestra teased the first few bars of a waltz, and couples of all ages, young and old, assumed the proper stance.

“Dance with me, Dean,” Charlie leaned up and whispered in his ear. “Let us give them that much evidence of our joy for them, at least.” With a swallow that felt entirely inhibited by the lump in his throat, Dean nodded, and he and Charlotte took up a place near the fringes of the crowd.

With the start of the music, a stately piece that Dean was unfamiliar with, the couples all placed hands to waists and shoulders and began to twirl in three-time about the floor. Struggling to remove himself from the moment and pretend this was like any other dance he had shared with his wife over the years, Dean stared into Charlie’s eyes. She met his gaze firmly, and though he had the lead, it was her hand on his shoulder that steered them through the steps and around the floor, her slightly shifting gaze that told him where to step.

James’ clear gaze caught Dean’s eye for just a moment, Ms. Milligan and James sweeping by at a stately pace. This restrained, public waltz was a far cry from the jubilant, carefree movements of the country dance that Dean and James had shared a year before. Couples circled the floor in intricate, random patterns to the accompaniment of skilled musicians, the rustle of fabric, the scuff and tap of shoes upon the polished tile floor, the hush of conversation. James and Ms. Milligan passed by once more, and Dean noted wistfully that the expression on James’ face, the glitter in his eye, was just the same as Dean had observed when James had danced with a partner he had found only somewhat satisfactory. His eyes gleamed, his lips smiled, but there was no exuberance, no jollity. The glitter of eyes in the mask of a doll came back to Dean powerfully, and he missed a step and trod on Charlie’s foot, drawing a hiss from her.

“Sorry,” murmured Dean.

“My love,” she replied, “all will be well, and all will be well, and all manner of things will be well. Take heart.”

Around they swirled, the pace picking up, some couples dropping out and giving room to those who remained to engage in wider steps, covering more of the floor, those most skilled doing dips or spins.

Delighted grin brilliant on Ms. Milligan’s face, she met Dean’s eyes, then Charlie’s, and laughed with joy. Smiling more sedately, James’ gaze swept over their faces as well.

Blue eyes met green.

James’ face went white, his mouth fell open, his feet missed a step and he tumbled down and out of
sight amidst the dancing couples. Charlie laughed, of all things, and mortification and horror swept over Dean. Heart pounding, he dragged his wife to the edge of the room and put a hand to his chest, struggling to catch his breath.

“Well, that part’s done,” said Charlie with satisfaction.

“And you accused Mr. Novak of cruelty?” managed Dean.

“You refused to look at him,” Charlie shrugged. “I thought if we encountered them enough times on the floor, surely you’d have to see each other.”

“Excuse me,” Dean broke from her, feeling a surge of anger. “I need a few moments alone. Ms. Harvelle has been standing some time, surely assaulted by the biddies and the shrews, I’m sure she’d appreciate a rescue.” Without awaiting her reply, he stalked away, passing through the parlors and sitting rooms rapidly refilling with guests.

Seething, Dean’s eyes scanned each space before moving on to another. He wasn’t sure what he sought, only that he would know it when he found it. Rooms of indolent widows and pompous Lords held no interest, bored chaperones faded into the background like so much furniture, whispering couples hid in many a corner and stole covert touches and whispered lies of love eternal. Charlie knew how much Dean was struggling with regret and melancholy, how dare she expose him like that? And to do that to James! If he had recognized Dean this time – surely he must have, to react so! – what must he be feeling, what efforts he must be forced to in order to shield himself from Ms. Milligan’s well-meant concern.

Every room was too crowded, too noisy, too hot, too filled with people who stared at Dean as if he was an obscene objet d’art. Too many black, veiled eyes could hide the puppeteer attempting to maneuver him from amidst the anonymity of the crowd. His steps led him towards the back of the house. A manor such as this, even in the city, must have some sort of gardens. If there were any place he could find solitude, to bring his anger at Charlie under control, to escape observation, it would be amidst the green on a cold, wet night. It was wrong to lose his temper with her, he trusted implicitly that she was working in his best interest as she saw it. If her actions had not produced awkwardness and embarrassment for James, Dean didn’t think he’d have minded at all. Dark windows draped in stunning damask beckoned him on.

“Mr. Winchester,” Mr. Milligan’s voice arrested Dean mid-step. Stopping, he forced the hint of a polite smile onto his lips and straightened his dark jacket. Dean turned and met his host among a small group of men whom Dean recognized from the dinner party – Mr. Alder, Lord Walker, and Mr. Kubrick. There was also a woman with whom Dean was unfamiliar, though he saw in her features a resemblance to Mr. Milligan. Though her eyes were blue where his were green, her hair blonde where his was sandy streaked with gray, her face unusually round where his was long and thing, the similarities rested in an arrogant turn of thin lips, an upturn to the chin as if everyone were beneath them, a cold aloofness to the eyes.

“Mr. Milligan,” Dean replied, nodding. “Lord Walker. Mr. Kubrick.” Only Kubrick did Dean the dubious honor of acknowledgement. The others stared at him, and Dean felt the all too familiar clutching at his throat.

“My sister, Mrs. Lilith Novak,” Mr. Milligan introduced the blonde woman. A quirked eyebrow and a slight shift of expression was all she gave by way of recognition, and Dean gritted his teeth and bowed politely.

“Thank you for the condescension of your invitation,” the words came out clipped, a result of the effort it took Dean not to sound impolite. “Your home is—”
“What were you saying, Mr. Milligan?” Lord Walker interrupted.

“Yes, yes,” echoed Kubrick sycophantically. “I was finding your conversation most edifying.”

Lips curling into the semblance of a smile – not a smile in truth, though, for that would have required pleasure or warmth or humanity, Milligan pinned Dean with the stare that seemed reserved just for him and said, “The place of woman is, of course, at her husbands’ side.” The others nodded. “She is an extension of his will, subject to obey, and not to act beyond his control. The same can be said for other female members of the family – sisters,” Mr. Milligan directed a hint of wryness towards his sister, who returned and identical cold smile. Definitely of the same mold, Dean thought with a repressed shudder. “Daughters, cousins, nieces, you understand. It is the essence of impropriety and wrongness when women step outside of the spheres that were intended for them.”


“As you say, dear brother,” Mrs. Novak smiled. “Though I would add that the distinctions of rank and privilege must needs still be respected. If a woman marries a gentleman who is far below herself, she does not shed the rights to which she was born.”

“It depends on the lady,” said Mr. Milligan, giving her a look of respect that suggested much and explained nothing about their relationship, and Mrs. Novak’s relationship with Mr. Novak. “Take one such as Mrs. Winchester – she was a Bradbury, you know.”

“In truth?” said Lord Walker. The look he gave Dean matched disgust to the hint of incredulity in his voice.

“Yes,” Mr. Milligan nodded, eyes locked on Dean’s. “And see how she has maintained the dignity of her birth, despite the compromises that she has been forced by necessity to make.”

“I had not thought of it in that light,” conceded Lord Walker. “But I see now how very correct you are.”

“Is his conversation not edifying?” Dean wondered if Kubrick had any other words in his vocabulary.

“Most definitely so,” Walker’s showed teeth as his lips spread. “I must say, Mr. Milligan, you are a connoisseur of the finer things.” The world exploded in noise and darkness, obliterating what further words might have passed through Lord Walker’s mouth, and a voice whispered from the past, clear as the tolling of a bell—

*Only babes in arms believe in monsters, Mr. Winchester. I am a connoisseur.*

Horrified, Dean met the level gaze that Mr. Milligan had locked on him, and in that instant, he knew . Michael. Adam Milligan was Michael. The build was right, the arrogance was evident in every movement, in every sound, and the way he stared entrapped Dean just the same, possessive and domineering.

“Well, Mr. Winchester?” Mrs. Novak easily towered over him for all that he was much taller than she. Under Mr. Milligan’s gaze – under Michael’s piercing eyes – Dean felt inches high and scoured bare, exposed, raked over a bed of coals.

“Yes,” he said abruptly, aware that he had to force some sort of word from his lips. From the corner of his eye, he spotted Mr. Novak. “Excuse me, I see an acquaintance I must speak with.” Crossing well past the bounds of good manners, Dean pushed past Lord Walker, flinched from contact with
Mr. Milligan, and strode away. He could feel eyes boring into his back, tearing him apart, ripping at his heart, nipping at his heels, spurring him on. Mr. Novak met Dean’s eyes and opened his mouth to speak, but Dean continued past him without a moment’s pause, not caring if the group of damned monsters saw the lie his actions gave to his words. He had to get away before he shamed himself completely. The hand was locked around his throat, his breathing was coming in increasingly urgent gasps, and all that he could think of was escape.

Doors fronted in glass, giving a view of dark oblivion outside as contrasted with the rich, dim light within, drew Dean, and unthinkingly he laid hand to the knob. He jerked the door open and stepped out onto a stone patio and was engulfed in the dankness of a London night. The air was so thick it was like having a damp cloth pressed to his face, and droplets coalesced to coated his skin. Even so, it was easier to breathe than it had been in the suffocating atmosphere within. With a clatter, the door shut behind him and Dean jumped, turned and saw faces glancing at him with curiosity, disdain, aloof smugness. Shuddering, he stepped out of the light that fell in diffuse squares from within the house and retreated into the deeper darkness of a small, walled garden. Occasional sprays of rain beaded in his hair or pattered on evergreen leaves.

Safely out of sight, Dean paced along a dense hedge and sought to grab a hold of his scattered thought. Mr. Milligan was Michael. Adam Milligan with his talk of propriety and rank had cornered Dean and threatened him with assault – with rape! It was simultaneously inconceivable and so obvious that Dean couldn’t believe he hadn’t seen it before. He should have guessed, he should have known, he should have understood all and prevented all. A more sensible part of him tried to argue that self-recrimination was a meaningless distraction at a time when concentration was essential, but he could not stop the cascade of doubts any more than he could stop the racing of his heart or control the way that the rain and panic blurred his vision.

James is going to becoming Mr. Milligan’s son-in-law. James is going to be Michael’s son in low. The most precious man imaginable, with the soul and looks of an angel, was going to be under the sway of a monster.

“Hello, Dean,” the voice fit in so perfectly with the wash of horror that Dean’s thoughts brought that for a hysterical moment he thought he’d imagined it. He wheeled around and saw Milligan, eyes black in the night, and Dean froze. “I told you we’d see each other when we were in town.”

“Leave me alone,” mumbled Dean. Anger was essential, to fight, to rage, to protect himself, to protect James. He sought protection in any emotion other than remembered fear and panic, but every other thought skittered away. Black night, black gaze, the shadow invaded his thoughts and subsumed them.

A hand locked around his throat, he couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t get any air at all, he was going to die, he was going to...

“Shh,” said Milligan gently. Dean was on his knees, wetness soaking through and staining his breeks. Milligan stood over him, far too close. A hand reached down to cup Dean’s chin, raise his face until their gazes met. Determinedly, Dean tried to avoid being captured in those dark depths. If he could only not look, he wouldn’t be trapped. Squatting, Milligan placed his face within inches of Dean’s, and there was no escape. Their eyes locked together.

“I hope you have studied well the strain that even the hint of scandal can put on a respectable family,” continued Milligan implacably. “You have been a fortunate man thus far. Many have stood by your side. Think how much more they will resent the discovery of the truth, that you are a hardened libertine, incapable of feeling, willing to reduce yourself to the level of a beast in pursuit of pleasure. Abandoned by friends, family, wife and children, society – neither man nor woman will
feel safe in your presence, when they knew what I can tell of you.”

“I will never say yes,” though the words were defiant, Dean’s voice was pleading. He wasn’t even able to convince himself, and Milligan’s lips curled into the precise cruel smile that Dean had imagined so vividly when Michael had trapped him at Ms. Naomi’s.

Fingers dug in to Dean’s cheeks, Milligan’s other hand latched on to his throat and compressed his windpipe. I'm not recovering from illness and injury this time. I am healthy and hale and whole. I can fight him. I must fight him. His lungs screamed for air though the need was not truly dire yet, fear and the memory of fear spurred Dean’s body to react prematurely. He grabbed at the hands crushing his neck, straining at the fingers. Milligan’s grip left Dean’s face, reached to intercept Dean, but Dean knocked it aside. Grappling, they struggled against each other, and Dean could feel himself losing, feel those eyes dominating him, feel the world growing black.

An uppercut fist struck Dean in the stomach and he gagged, and Milligan threw him aside. Falling heavily, Dean retched on the ground, choking on bile, sight of the dark grass streaking as his body shook from reaction and cold and damp and fear. A second kick struck him in the chest, and Dean rolled over onto his back. All he saw was the black of a night sky, rain forcing him to blink constantly, so quickly that his couldn’t get his bearings. His heart pounded frantically, and his hands trembled.

Dean had to act. He had to rise. He got his hands under him, looked up, and his eyes met Milligan’s and his heart quailed. Don’t let him choke me again, can’t let him choke me again, please, anything but that. In that moment’s hesitation, Milligan was atop him, straddling him. Knees intercepted Dean’s hands and pressed them into the ground before he push away. The hand was back at Dean’s throat, pinning him. With his free hand, Michael began to casually feel along Dean’s body, kneading his flesh, breath heavy with desire, pants bulging. Metal scraped against metal as the locket and watch in Dean’s pocket were ground together, and as Michael’s hand passed over Dean’s other pocket, there was the distinctive crinkle of paper, the letter that Dean had brought to place in James’ hands, if only he could contrive to speak with the angel one on one. The image of James shattered as the grip around Dean’s neck bore down, Milligan straining so that the tendons on his hand and wrist bulged.

Can’t breath – he’s going to kill me – black eyes – somebody help me – have to get him off me – can’t say yes, mustn’t say yes – Charlotte! Sam! Castiel!

“What…is this?” the voice of an angel answered Dean’s prayers. The hand constricting his throat released as if Dean’s flesh had become painful to touch. “Mr. Milligan? …Mr. Winchester?”

“Novak,” Milligan’s voice was slightly breathless, and his gaze turned from Dean, freeing him. “This is a private meeting.”

“My uncle told me that Mr. Winchester sought audience with me in the garden…?” James looked uncertainly at each man, flushing at their compromising position. “I didn’t mean to intrude. I’m sorry, I should…that is to say…please excuse me, and rely on my discretion.” Anxious puffs of breath from James’ lips made misty trails through the cold night air, his expression growing increasingly panicked as his eyes shimmered, ever a mirror to his thoughts. After an instant’s hesitation, James shifted on a heel, about to turn and return to the house.

“Wait,” gasped Dean. Milligan’s head whipped around, gaze pinning Dean to the ground.

Words died in Dean’s throat, his mind overwhelmed by the thought of a hand strangling the life from him. What if Milligan tried to do that to James?
“Well, Mr. Winchester, do you have anything to say to Mr. Novak?” cold words set Dean’s chilled, soaked body to shivering, teeth chattering.

Help me, dear God please, angel, help me! “Castiel,” Dean croaked, voice wrecked by Milligan’s powerful hands and his own frenzied efforts to draw air.

Milligan bent down and kissed Dean, dry skin passing over Dean’s mouth like the touch of a viper’s skin. Disgust twisted Dean’s stomach, imagined fingers squeezed and tore at him. The contact broke in an instant, but the damage was done.

With a horrified gasp, James’ eyes went wide, and his head shaking frantically in denial. “I should not be here, I…I have to go. I should not have come. Forgive me, Mr. Milligan…Mr…I’m sorry!” And with that, James fled. He started at a walk that rapidly quickened until he was sprinting. James’ boots clattered on the stone patio, hands scrambling at the door knob as he threw the door open.

Dean watched him go like watching the sight of salvation fading as the gates of Heaven closed before him.

The sounds of laughter leaked from the house, shadow and light playing against the glass as people engaged in the dance of social interaction. With a click, the door shut again, and quiet filled the garden save for the faint rustling brush of raindrops on leaves.

Frantic, Dean twisted and tried to throw Milligan off, but a casual backhand struck Dean’s cheek, setting his ears to ringing, and then the hand was back at his throat and all Dean’s resistance died. With the back of his free hand, Milligan stroked Dean’s cheek soothingly. Rich, callous laughter bubbled from boyish lips. “You…and James Novak? Not merely a dalliance for the halls of Ms. Naomi’s, but actually sharing affection?” He laughed harder, body shaking, thighs clenching around Dean’s hips painfully. “You truly thought he would help you, even after what I told you last time? That boy is a worm, desperate for the hook to save him from the fish! He knows nothing of the world. Not like you and I.”

The hand on Dean’s neck squeezed to emphasize the point, and then relaxed. With what defiance he could muster, Dean closed his eyes and tuned out the sound of Milligan’s voice. He had to concentrate, he had to think clearly long enough to figure out a plan of attack. Instantly, he was choking again. “Open your eyes, Dean,” hissed Milligan, and there was no choice at all. Dean responded to the command, and the pressure eased. Weakly, he kicked at Milligan, thrashing, trying to free his arms, and immediately the pressure returned. Pain and a single frantic word repeated endlessly, air, air, air, swept all in its wake. Blackness like the embrace of a lover, comforting and freeing, stole over Dean, and he lost seconds, or minutes, or hours.

When he opened his eyes again, Milligan was still atop him, and as fear crashed in on Dean’s mind, he quickly catalogued – they were both still clothed, Dean was still alive, Milligan still looked smugly superior, whatever may have happened, he hadn’t violated Dean further. The hand was gone from Dean’s throat, but every breath hurt.

“How do you feel?” False sympathy made Milligan’s voice cloying, and his hand brushed through Dean’s sweat and tears and rain stained face, mussed his dripping, dirty hair. “I thought our time apart would have taught you respect and obedience. I’m disappointed that I was wrong.” Dean’s heart raced frightfully as Milligan’s inflection, the sound of the word disappointed emerging those thin lips in that rasping boyish tenor. “And piqued. I must return to my guests, but later, we will continue your lessons.”

“No.” There was a swish of leaves and a spattering of water falling in the shrubbery behind Milligan. For the first time, Dean willingly locked his eyes on Milligan’s, trying to keep the other man’s
attention focused on him.

You’re insane. What could possibly have happened in the past day – the past year – to make you think anyone would help you?

“I see I must clarify the current stakes,” Milligan said with a sigh. “I still have everything I need to ruin you, but you seem to have overlooked that I also have James Novak. Every time you say no, I will take a pound of that boy’s flesh. He’ll be my son in law. He’ll be in my household. Any time I want him, I can reach out my hand and take what is mine. And have no doubt: I will take until I am sated. I will take his innocence, his beauty, his love, until he’s a husk just like the rest of us,” Milligan vowed. “When I’m done, I’ll tell him why it all happened to him, and send him back to you, so he can see how little he was worth to you all along.”

Red fury washed away fear, washed away pain, washed away everything. “I won’t let you hurt him,” snarled Dean, struggling mightily against Michael’s hold on him. “You don’t want him. You want me.”

“That’s right,” Milligan said, voice like a caress, undeterred by Dean’s attempts to win his freedom. “I want you, Dean, and I’ll be thinking of you every time I touch him. You alone can prevent all. All you have to do is say ‘yes.’”

“Never,” Dean growled, and he twisted as hard as he could. Milligan’s smug countenance slipped as his balance was finally overthrown, and he fell sideways into the shrubbery to the accompaniment of snapping twigs. Dean rolled away and turned back to see Milligan righting himself, rising, expression contorted into a rictus of fury, eyes glittering maliciously.

“As usual, you over estimate your clout, country boy,” jeered Milligan, advancing on him slowly. Dean scrambled to get control of his body as trembling threatened to incapacitate him. “This is not a negotiation, Dean. You will say…” A shovel took Milligan in the side of the head with a dull echoing thud of reverberating metal, and he tumbled sideways and slumped to the ground.

“You okay there, boy?”

“Bobby?” exclaimed Dean. He managed a deep breath and nearly choked on it, gasping it out in stuttering, uneven releases. The groundskeeper knelt beside Dean and wrapped a powerful arm around Dean’s shoulders, pulling him upright. “Damn if you’re not the finest sight I’ve ever seen.”

“He didn’t do anything perverted to you, did he?” snapped Singer, hauling Dean to his feet.

“No,” Dean tottered and tried to stand under his own power. Each time he blinked, it seemed the world had to reform itself from nothing. His lungs seemed to creak with each breath. Gripping Singer tight, he shifted his balance and gave Milligan a kick just as the other man began to stir. Relief surged through his mind. Milligan wasn’t a monster, he was just a man, a ruthless, callous, heartless man. Dean pulled back and kicked him again. “If you hurt James I will kill you, understand?” The anger that had been repressed by that the bastard’s gaze melted the fear left in the wake of that ruthless grip to Dean’s throat, and Dean growled in fury. There was no specter here, there was no phantom of black eyes, only a man lying on the ground, grunting in pain as Dean prepared for another strike.

“What are you doing?” Ms. Harvelle’s voice cut shrilly through Dean’s rage and he spun to see her tripping lightly over the wet grass, hem of her skirts rapidly darkening with absorbed dew. “I don’t care what he did to you, Winchester, you can’t beat our host!”

“Yes, I can,” retorted Dean with a scowl. His voice was practically unrecognizable from the abuse to his throat, dry and crude and rendered stony and emotionless by reaction to the attack and his finally
finding the spirit to fight back. “Seems to be exactly what I’m doing.”

“She’s right,” Singer interrupted. “Boy, believe me, I want to kill him, but this is his home, and if we do there’ll be consequences, sure as rain is wet. Let’s get you home, and leave him to deal with how he’ll explain what’s happened to him out here.”

“Probably blame me,” grunted Dean. “Say he came out to check on me – I attacked him – ruin my reputation a bit more – son of a bitch.” He managed another glancing kick, smearing mud over the cream of Milligan’s pants. The effort spun him around and nearly planted him on his face. Ms. Harvelle swooped and caught his other side to keep him falling. Her face locked in anger, brow taut, eyes lowered, she looked even more like a warrioress than earlier.


“I’ve got the carriage out front, and that Novak is gathering up Mrs. Winchester,” Singer and Ms. Harvelle determinedly hauled Dean across the lawn, away from his fallen attacked. “There’ll be hell to pay for this in the morning.”

“There always is, Bobby,” Dean shook his head, trembling from the rush of different emotions. “There always is.”

Dean allowed himself one glance back, and saw exactly what he’d known he would – eyes dark in the night, staring after him, narrowed murderously. He shuddered and got his feet under him, and as a trio they hurried across the lawn.

They burst through the doors into the house to amid a burst of shocked gasps from the assembled gentlefolk. Dean could only begin to guess his appearance, soaking wet, muddied, bruised, eyes unfocused with alarm and anger and consternation, unable to walk without the assistance of a brusque servant and a lady. People scattered in all direction. They crested the room in a wave of silence as people saw them, quieted aghast, and flowed aside, only to close in behind them and burst into a shocked hubbub. Once again, Dean earned the dubious honor of being the talk of the Ton. At least this time, he knew exactly what people would suppose. Milligan would spur them on to the belief that the country booby squire had assaulted him in the garden for who-knew-what reason, “why do men such as that do anything? Surely drunk on spirits and indifferent to propriety!” Dean and Charlie would find themselves summarily disinvited from every reputable house in the city, friends would confront him wondering what on earth he was thinking and he’d be unable to answer them honestly, and everyone they encountered on the street would stare and shy away. At least in the aftermath, they’d be spared being forced to pretend polite company with Milligan for the foreseeable future.

It wasn’t until Dean was slumped into the back of Mr. Novak’s barouche, heart beat echoing dully in his head, the sounds of Charlie’s confusion and concern washing over him, that he thought to check his pockets, and realized the magnitude of the disaster that had befallen him that night.

The letter to James, the letter that named Castiel and Asmodeus and James and was signed D. Winchester, was gone.
Masks

“What the hell happened last night?” Dean rounded on Charlie and Mr. Gabriel Novak, snarling in fury. “What the hell kind of plan was that?” Charlie flinched, head lowered, shoulders raised, unable to bring herself to meet his eyes. Mr. Novak stared at him with distaste, which only spurred Dean’s anger. The temper that eluded him for so long, drowned by fear and the memory of strangulation and black eyes, was finally alive. It felt good to feel something other than downtrodden and miserable and lonely, and Dean let it course through him.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” said Charlie. “We didn’t think that Michael would move so aggressively, so openly, so soon. Last night was supposed to be about initiating our opposition, a campaign of counter-rumors and gossip. We didn’t even know that Michael was Milligan, only that based on what you said, it seemed likely that Michael moved in that kind of circle and would likely be in attendance at the ball. I supposed that if we started people talking, we might be able to upset his equilibrium enough that he’d be forced to reveal himself.”

They were arrayed around Mr. Novak’s sitting room, tastefully decorated in shades of blue and white. Dutch tiles made a rustic appearance around the fireplace and contrasted to furniture upholstered in an intricate jacquard weave. A wool carpet was accented with pink. The walls were spotless with blue satin insets, the thick curtains the color of the sky and held back by navy ropes. The cool tones should have been calming, but Dean was too overwrought for it to have any impact. Charlotte sat tensely upon the sofa, fingers gripped over her knees, and Novak stood by the quietly crackling fireplace, expression disdainful and exasperated.

“Well, that worked out real well,” Dean retorted. “Fantastic. Perfect. He showed himself. While you were busy playing footsy with Harvelle during a game of whist and Novak was tricking the people he was speaking with into making idiots of themselves for his own amusement, I was being pinned down and strangled in the garden of one of the finest private homes in London. Now everyone believes that I’m an ass who attacks his host, and that Milligan is my victim. So how exactly does that help the plan, Charlie? Novak? We got a new approach now that’s going to fix everything? Thanks for nothing!” God, he felt like he couldn’t breathe. He tugged fretfully at the cravat bound about his neck, tied high and layered thickly to hide the dark bruises that had brought tears to Charlie’s eyes when she beheld them. Even the starched cloth could do nothing to hide the pink imprint of a hand upon his cheek, or the harshness of every uneven inhalation and exhalation dragged over the strained and injured flesh inside. Talking hurt, breathing hurt, swallowing hurt, turning his head hurt.

“I said I’m sorry, Dean,” anger flared in Charlie’s voice. “Don’t you dare suggest I’ve not done my best to fix this debacle ever since I learnt of it. If you’d told me all sooner, maybe Milligan wouldn’t have had eight months to agitate against you. As it is, he’s established a narrative that predisposes others to believe that you are a cad, and it will only grow easier the more “evidence” he can provide. So don’t get on a high horse that this is my fault. You’re the one who decided to handle this by engaging in some kind of bizarre manly seclusion, because God forbid you let us see that someone got the better of you. And Milligan is the one who actually hurt you, so if you’re to be angry at any, save your shouting for him.”

“You’re mighty quiet, Novak,” Dean had no counter to her points. She was right, of course, if he’d disclosed all sooner, they might have named Milligan originator of villainy months ago, might have averted the meeting last night, might have set down the rumors before ever arriving in London. He’d be damned if he’d admit it, though. Just because she was right didn’t mean that was he was wrong to be upset about the previous evening. “Is that what you thought? That Milligan wouldn’t show
himself?” Novak turned away from Dean, and made no reply. “You honestly expect me to believe that you didn’t know what kind of man he is? After all the time you’ve spent together? You knew. You knew he would act, if only to show that even in the midst of a crowd he could do whatever he wanted to me, and no one would stop him. You knew he’d resume his efforts to induce me to consent to his advances. You were depending on it, weren’t you!” The words tumbled from Dean so quickly and fiercely that he couldn’t stop them. When the first had left his lips, he’d been goading Novak, desperate to get some kind of reaction from the damnable man, but the longer he spoke without Novak interrupting, the more the chill settled into Dean’s bones, the cold contrast to the anger burning his blood, telling him that he was on to something.

“You knew that Milligan was Michael was all along, didn’t you?” Dean shouted, yet still Novak did nothing. “Didn’t you!” Dean roared, putting a hand Novak’s shoulder and forcing him to turn around again.

“Hands off, Winchester,” said Mr. Novak calmly, rolling his eyes. “Of course I knew. How could I not? He’s my brother-in-law, you yahoo – and my wife is Ms. Naomi.” He brushed off the shoulder that Dean had grabbed as if the touch had sullied his jacket, and Dean ground his teeth in frustration.

“…Of course she is,” Dean threw his hands in the air. “Of course. The Novaks and Milligans, one sick, arrogant, heartless, happy family. So, what, this is your idea of protecting me? Of protecting James? Letting him become the son-in-law of that…that…monster?”

“I’m a connoisseur.

“You have no right to judge the sacrifices I make to protect my family!” Novak hissed, finally raising to the bait. So, he did have sore spots after all. The discovery served to calm Dean’s temper slightly. If mentioning James got a rise out of Mr. Novak, that implied that Novak did actually care about the angel, and maybe the things Novak told them hadn’t all been lies. “None. It was a calculated risk. There was information you needed, that I knew, that I couldn’t tell you. I knew you were dense – you’d met Milligan before and he spent the entire damn night staring at you, yet you didn’t think once that maybe he was your attacker? – but I thought even you couldn’t stand in a room with him without recognizing him for who he was. So, you were invited to the party and dangled before Milligan like waving a red cloak before a bull to see if he’ll charge. And he did. So now you know who you’re dealing with. Who do you think sent Singer? I saved you, fool! You should be thanking me for pulling you from the fire. What the hell were you thinking? You discover the man who imprisoned and assaulted you and you promptly go somewhere isolated and alone while you’re in his house? You’re damn lucky our plan for James came to fruition when it did, and that he went outside trying to find you, or else I wouldn’t have even known you were in danger!”

Novak was right, damn him, why had Dean decided to go out to the garden? Air whooshed from his lungs and he deflated like a hot air balloon. It had made sense at the time, he’d needed to get away from all those strangers, all those eyes on him, but in retrospect it had been a dreadful decision. Dean could hardly have made a worse. Embarrassment only served to fray at him, but he had no retort, and he stomped the length of the room in what he knew was a juvenile show of defiance and irritation. On the mantle, a stately clock decorated with painted porcelain panels in an Oriental style chimed the morning hour.

“Novak, why couldn’t you tell us that Mr. Milligan was Michael?” Charlie asked, restraint tightening her voice.
Her words gave Dean a new focus for his ire. “Because of Balthazar, right? The debonair Mr. Freeley and your sad, lonely sister,” snapped Dean, and Novak actually flinched. “You didn’t think I’d recognize him? Don’t try to pull the wool over our eyes, Novak. Ultimately, this wasn’t about protecting me, or Charlie, or my family, or even James. Freeley stood outside the damn room while Michael attacked me at the soiree—”

“He did?” gasped Charlie.

“—and you said flat out you didn’t care what Michael did until it threatened James’ happiness,” Dean continued as if she hadn’t interjected. “This – all of this – was about protecting yourself and your lover. If that requires that the rest of us sink – as long as Milligan goes down with that ship, too, you really don’t care, do you? How many times have you and Balthazar stood aside and allowed Milligan and his sister to blackmail unsuspecting gentleman whose only crime was affection for other men?”

Anger flared in Novak’s eyes, gold burnishing amidst the green in the morning light streaming into the sitting room. His chest huffed out, and he let out a harsh breath, forcibly, visibly exercising self-control. “Mr. Winchester,” Novak’s tone was as tightly controlled as his mien, low and ominously threatening. “I said I would help find Michael, and I did. I said I’d work with you to break the engagement between Ms. Milligan and James amicably, and I’ve done my part. I said I’d contribute to reuniting you and James, and if you hadn’t allowed yourself to be pinned to the ground and straddled in public, I would have succeeded.”

“Listen here, you son of a bitch...” Dean snarled.

“Dean!” Charlie interrupted sharply. “I appreciate that you’re upset, but this childishness is not helping. Be quiet and cool your head, and let me deal with Mr. Novak.”

“Thank you!” said Novak, eyes lighting up at the prospect. “I appreciate you calling off your obdurate attack dog, Mrs. Winchester. Now, you and I can discuss this like reasonable human beings. Last night did not go precisely as planned, but I think we can still...” He trailed off as he took in Charlie’s expression and licked his lips. Her lovely face was taut with anger, eyes narrowed, body trembling with suppressed energy.

“Milligan is blackmailing you, too, isn’t he?” Charlie fixed Novak with a sharply pointed finger. “What’s he made you do? Help your wife discover victims? Make you cover the expense? Force you to conceal the evidence for Milligan’s crimes? And what – if you don’t help their scheme, Milligan will ruin the marriage you hate so much? Out you to the town? Expose Mr. Freeley?”

Suddenly looking tremendously tired, Novak walked to a chair facing Charlie and sat down in it heavily. “Freeley didn’t lock you in the parlor at the soiree,” said Novak, dodging Charlie’s stern questions momentarily. “Zachariah—”

“Mr. Alder?” cut in Dean, just to prove he wasn’t so oblivious as he’d been accused of being.

“—Mr. Alder serves as Milligan’s aide, and in exchange, Milligan makes sure that society tolerates Alder despite all he’s done,” Novak continued. “There’s little that Milligan could take from me that I wouldn’t willingly part with, but Mr. Freeley is not so lucky. You see, his father has had the most unfortunate turn of good health. The man is approaching 90, and not only does he refuse to die, he hasn’t even had the grace to decline into decrepitude and senility. If the older Freeley learns of the younger’s behavior, he’ll be disinherited. Not to mention that Freeley’s exposure will shame my sister, reveal my own indiscretions and give Mrs. Novak the lever she needs to pry my fortune from my hand, and thus by extension ruin the entire Novak family, for myself and Freeley represent all the prospects for the clan at the moment. If it were only myself, I wouldn’t care – I’d part with far more
to be free of that banshee – but I will not see us all ruined, I will not see Freeley ruined, to rectify my own mistakes. So, I do as Milligan requires of me, and am kept safe and sound. I’ll admit I’ve had few regrets. What is it to me if men and women behave foolishly and earn their comeuppance? If they did not stray, they would not find themselves in trouble. And it keeps my wife happy. She does delight in getting her own way and manipulating others.” He smiled wryly. “Allowing James and Ms. Milligan to marry is Milligan’s way of saying thank you for what a good lap dog I’ve been. Good God, the man makes me physically ill. I can’t wait until he gets what’s coming to him. If we could defenestrate my wife while we’re at it, that would be fantastic.”

“Freeley is the second person you love?” Charlie asked. Novak nodded. “It would have saved a great deal of bother if you’d told us how much you stand to lose.”

“How so?” Novak said. “It changes nothing. Milligan holds our cards, and we still must find a way to turn the tables. After last night, it will be harder than it was before.”

“Much harder,” with calmer heads prevailing, Dean finally threw himself into a chair. They both turned to stare at him, and he swallowed uncomfortably. “Milligan took something from me – a letter I had written James.”

“Let me guess,” Novak heaved a sigh as he spoke in a voice thick with sarcastic irony. “You addressed it ‘to the right honorable James Novak of 7 ----- Boulevard,’ and signed off, ‘Dean Winchester of Lawrence Hall’ and filled the whole with mentions of scandalous trysts?”

“I was afraid I would balk to speak my mind if I confronted Mr. Novak in conversation,” Dean explained, hating to admit how much he’d erred but forcing the words out anyway. “Having resolved to explain myself to him and place a letter in his hand, I addressed it James, and signed off D. Winchester. There are too many men named James among the gentlemen of London for him to be much singled out and exposed no matter what Milligan knows or says – his name may be brought up in the gossip, but so may many others – but it is easily enough to bring my ruin.”

“What were you thinking, Dean?” groaned Charlie. “Didn’t I say ‘leave it to me?’ ”

“I will leave all to you as regards Milligan, but it is not for you to mend what I have broken with James Novak,” Dean replied. “I wished to do so myself, and I’ll not apologize for that sentiment.”

“And what would you say to me in a letter, Mr. Winchester, that you do not think you can say in my presence?” James’ low voice cut through the dialog and all heads turned to the door to see the young man standing there, eying each of them in turn.

“Ah, James,” said Novak with a broad smile that did nothing for the tension in his eyes and brow. “Welcome home.” He rose and began to cross the room, but hesitated at the discouraging look on James’ face.

“I’m surprised to find myself the topic of conversation,” said James coldly. “Especially amidst a group such as this. To what do I owe the honor?”

“I think that is for Mr. Winchester to speak of,” Charlie rose abruptly and straightened her skirts. “Mr. Novak and I have much to discuss. If you’ll excuse us?”

“Nay, do not leave the room on my account,” James turned away. “Mr. Winchester and I have nothing to say to each other.” Pierced through, Dean slumped into his chair and looked away. Not only had James abandoned him the night before, but now he’d not even speak with Dean. James must hate him for what had passed between them the previous year. It was no less than Dean had feared, no less than he deserved, but it hurt afresh nonetheless. At least it made the stakes of the
apology low. Dean could say what he felt he must, with the knowledge that the forgiveness that he had never expected was not to be offered. He could speak with the clear conscience of one who offers something sincerely while truly anticipating receiving nothing in return.

“Stay and hear him,” the elder Novak ordered him. “He’s surprised me a time or two – if not always for the better. Perhaps he’ll surprise you as well.” On that dubious note of support, Mr. Novak and Charlotte hastened from the room, leaving Dean and James alone.

Unable to bring himself to watch James’ behavior, Dean sat and organized his disordered thoughts, ears catching every faint sound that James made as if it carried vast import. There was a huff, a long period of silence, a sigh. Boots crossed the floor, the fabric of pants scuffed at every step, the legs of the chair that Mr. Novak had recently vacated scraped against the floor. Dean glanced that way as James took his seat elegantly several feet away, watching Dean all the while. Their eyes met with a frisson, and Dean looked away, the forced indifference in that gaze too much to bear.

“My uncle says I should hear you,” said James, voice bitter. “So I will, and then I’m gone. I can think of nothing you could possibly to say to me that would justify the things you’ve done, the things you’ve said.”

“I’ll not try to justify anything,” muttered Dean. The letter was gone, and Dean was more the fool for writing it, but the contents must be shared. Though he could never match in the spoken word the turn of phrase that he could communicate with a quill, he would have to do his best.

“What?” James leaned in closer to catch Dean’s soft voice. The familiar scent of him wafted through the air, musk and honey, tantalizing as teased Dean’s senses.

“There’s something I must say,” Dean said, mustering confidence. “I’m sure it must be difficult for you to converse with me, and I appreciate you giving me the opportunity. I’ll be brief, and then you may be on your way.” He took a deep breath, pain in his throat interrupting and causing a hitch. “I’m sorry. Such a simple phrase is wholly inadequate, but if you believe nothing else I’ve said to you, please believe me when I tell you that my love for you has never wavered, and my regrets defy expression. I am unspeakably sorry. I spoke in anger and haste when we parted last year. I thought you had...it matters not. I offer no justifications because there can be none for my actions. I’ve no defense. I misjudged you, I wronged you, I betrayed the precious trust you had placed in me, and I am profoundly ashamed of myself. I know forgiveness for what I did is impossible. I can never forgive myself for how I hurt you.” Dean dared to look towards James, steeled himself to watch the angel rise and depart the room without a word, without a glance. Instead, he found James watching him impassively through narrowed eyes, hands squeezed into pale fists, head quirked to the side.

“You love me?” James’ eyes met Dean’s, and Dean could read nothing in them, nor in the flat affect of James’ voice.

“Always,” confessed Dean. “From the day we met until this very moment, and never an instant in between when you did not own my heart entirely.”

“You love me and you’re sorry,” James echoed slowly, consideringly.

“Yes,” Dean whispered. He could sense the moment when James would leave never to return coming closer with every tick of the mantle clock.

The moment didn’t come. James leaned forward and reached out, set a hand on the pocket containing Dean’s watch. As James withdrew the timepiece and the attached locket, Dean’s breath caught. Emotion lit on James’ face at last, perturbation, uncertainty. His gorgeous eyes met Dean’s, and for an instant in their depths Dean saw a glimmer of what was stirring in his own breast – hope –
but he knew it must not be so, he must be projecting his own fondest wishes onto the angel. With fingers shaking visibly, James pressed the catch on the locket and it popped open with a ping of metal. James blinked as if surprised to find his own likeness within, but then he dropped the locket, rose to his feet, and took jittery, nervous, aimless steps about the room. Perplexed, Dean merely followed with his eyes, carefully closing the locket and replacing it in the safety of his jacket. No matter the outcome of this conversation, Dean would carry it on his person for the rest of his days.

“Damn it all,” snapped James of a sudden, curse words incongruous in his low, well-bred voice. “What did you think I had done that could possibly have explained your behavior? Why did you not even attempt to clarify, or give me the chance to defend myself from whatever you thought to condemn me for?”

“You did nothing,” Dean stated the truth simply. “What I believed you guilty of is irrelevant. I know now you did nothing. You are the only person in all of this who is absolutely blameless.”

James stopped his pacing and gaped at Dean. “What on earth happened that night?” Tight-lipped, Dean looked away. It was bad enough that James thought him hateful, but to add to that unfaithful, craven, timid, was too much. He could accept James leaving his life, expected it, but to add to that the possibility that James should think so ill of him was too much. “What did I intrude upon at Mr. Milligan’s last night? Have you been with him all this time? Please, tell me the truth! If you love me, why would you be with him?”

Shocked, Dean turned back to see James, his expression open and hurt. It struck him in an instant, James was so guileless that he’d not the least idea what he’d interrupted in Milligan’s garden. No wonder he had left without helping. How must it have appeared to an outside observer? Dean tried to picture the scene from the point of view of an outside observer, one already inclined to think ill of Dean. The last time they’d spoken, Dean had rebuked James, told him he never wished to see him more. In the year between, what conclusions might James have drawn about Dean? Then to recognize him on the ballroom floor, to have Mr. Novak suggest they speak, for James to search the house for Dean only to find him secluded in the garden with Milligan…James must have supposed Milligan and Dean to be engaged in some kind of consensual play, thought that Dean would never suffer himself be kissed except by choice.

Mr. Milligan straddling Dean’s hips, Mr. Milligan’s hand on his face, their mouths meeting, Dean not even attempting to struggle or fight back. Lips brushed his, eyes penetrated him, hands grasped him...

“Castiel,” he groaned. James’ face went pale and his eyes fluttered, flooding with tears. “Beautiful angel…” He should tell all, share all. If he was to be condemned, let it be for the truth at least! Dean opened his mouth, but words wouldn’t come. A hand went to his throat, aching and bruised. “I can’t…” His voice came out broken, and he could find no strength in him to force out more.

Strides suddenly purposeful, James crossed the room and settled on his knees before Dean’s chair, close enough that Dean could feel the warmth of his toned, lean body. “Why not?” demanded James, but though the words were harsh, his expression was bewildered, and there was the beginning of concern in his eyes.

...hands compressing Dean’s throat, black before Dean’s eyes...

Tentatively, James lifted an arm and extended it to Dean, but Dean could not bear the thought of that touch on his worn skin, on the cheek where Milligan had slapped him the night before. He shrunk back into his chair, shaking his head, barely keeping his eyes open to see James’ increasingly worried frown. The hand hovered shy of touching him, the ghost of soft fingers seemed to brush Dean’s cheek tenderly, and he repressed a titter of longing.
“Asmodeus, did he hurt you?”

Dean’s breathing grew ragged, even the pleasure of hearing that beloved voice speak his name subsumed. Milligan’s voice ground out horrors in his head, *James will be my son in law. He’ll be in my household. Any time I want him, I can reach out my hand and take what is mine. I want you, Dean. All you have to do is say ‘yes.’*

“There are bruises on your neck,” muttered James distractedly. He ran a hand through his dark hair, hopelessly tangling it. “Milligan...this is what he was doing to you? He attacked you? He...he strangled you? I don’t understand. Why would he...?”

*...pressure on his throbbing pulse, no blood to his brain, no air to his lungs, he needed to breathe but he couldn’t, he couldn’t, he was going to die, he was going to...*

“Castiel,” Dean croaked, the echo of his plea from the night before, and got out the words he’d not been able to force out in the dismay of the moment, “help me!”

“Oh God,” groaned James, horrified. “Last night, I left you to...in May...is this what befell you in May? The things I’ve said of you, the things I’ve thought...”

“Castiel...”

*...the black of Milligan’s eyes, the black of suffocating, the black of oblivion...*

Blue flooded Dean’s vision. “Look at me, Asmodeus,” James commanded with authority. Their eyes met, and Dean flinched away. Gathering up every bit of willpower, he tried again, he truly did, but he couldn’t – even for this glorious angel, Dean couldn’t. A hand pressed on to Dean’s cheek, and he started and shuddered. With instinctive defensiveness, he grabbed James’ wrist, but stopped short of rebuffing the touch. “It’s alright. You’re safe. I’ll never hurt you, never...” James’ other hand rose to cup the other side of Dean’s face, smooth skin comforting him, a touch not felt in so long that Dean had nearly forgotten how nice it was, so familiar that it began to restore his tenuous control. James’ shifted closer to him, drew their faces close. “Let me see your beautiful eyes.”

With more difficulty than Dean would ever have imagined, he raised his gaze to meet James’. The bottomless blue of the ocean swallowed him, wide and endless, extending to the edges of the world in every direction. Distress was writ large in that gaze, alarm and apprehension, but also comfort and safety and acceptance. *Love.* The terror clawing at Dean’s chest and throat began to dissipate, the panic to subside. James wasn’t angry at him, wasn’t thinking worse of him for being afraid. Uncertainty and the lingering dread insisted that this was all a dream, all a trick, all a figment of his mind – that James would yet reject him, that he’d yet wake to find himself in a darkened garden with Milligan’s hands tight around his neck. Trembling, Dean reached out and traced the line of James’ jaw and chin.

Tears flooded James’ eyes, and he swallowed, tightening his delicate hold on Dean’s face, fingers shifting to caress and sooth gently. “It makes me ill to see such fear on your countenance when you look upon me! Oh, Asmodeus, I’m so sorry. Perhaps you speak truth when you say you have wronged me, but surely, *surely,* I wronged you when I abandoned you last night, when I forsook you prior, when I didn’t trust you, when I gave the gift I cherished so to another because I could bear to look upon it longer. Though it broke my heart to believe it, I thought you inconstant, I thought your love for me a lie. For so long I struggled within myself – why would tell me you loved me, why tell me you wished to give me the stars in the sky? Why would you write me letters, bring me Byron, bestow upon me that necklace beautiful beyond worth? And then to quit me so completely, so cruelly, so suddenly and unexpectedly? I could make no sense of it!
“I came to think it mattered not, for why ever you were gone, you were, and I had no way to find you again,” continued James, words coming quickly as he desperately tried to explain himself. Dean latched on to the sound of his voice, James’ contrition and distress, and clung to them. “I forbade myself to look upon your likeness, but it was ever your voice I heard in the quiet of my mind. From the depths of a peaceful slumber, it was ever the memory of your perfect body that faded from my arms as I awoke. Even as I proposed to Ms. Milligan a dread built in me, that there would come a time I would have to possess her, that then as at so many other moments it would be your green eyes I would see when I met hers, your name that would emerge from my lips like deliverance. For my heart has not wavered, though I know looking upon my actions must make that difficult to credit. Dare I ask – after how I abandoned you, after how I left you to a cruel fate last night – can you forgive your angel for such crimes?”

With quivering fingers, Dean brushed strands of hair from James’ forehead. “Are you my angel, Castiel?” whispered Dean. This is a dream. This must be a dream.

“Heart and soul,” murmured James, an echo of words so well remembered, so dearly treasured. “I am yours forever, my beloved demon. Only my head to doubt, to be pragmatic and insist I must move on, to say you loved me not, to remind me of duty and obligation and family and the requirement that no matter how it hurts I must wed.”

There was the pain, the proof that this was, in truth, a fantasy. For no matter what sweet words James spoke, he was yet engaged to Anna Milligan, had looked at her with affection, had given her the star sapphire. “Do you love her?” Dean asked.

The words hit James like he’d be struck, he pulled back like the injury was physical. “After a fashion, I suppose,” he said, voice thick with bitterness. “She is very sweet, and she cares for me deeply. The idea of hurting her is repugnant. As I once wrote you long ago – she is not you – but if a man must wed, as I must, I could do far worse. When you spumed me, there was left a hole in me, and I could not function without filling it with something, anything – the pain was too great to leave the wound agape. My options were limited, so I filled it with Ms. Milligan. It was a cruel thing to do, to pick her because she reminded me of you, to woo her while I thought of your face, to bestow on her the necklace you gave me because you could not put your heart on a string for me to wear. There had been days once when I’d allowed myself to think that somehow, you and I might forge a future together. When I read of your family, things I’d thought impossible began to seem in reach. Those happy thoughts died that night in May. I did as I thought I must, expecting to never see you more.”

In full possession of himself, though of aching heart, Dean lay a hand on James’ cheek and brought their eyes together. “I am sorry. I arrived at the soiree and you were not there. I feared harm had come to you, but could find no sign of anything. In distress, I waited, and in the intensity of my conviction that you were in danger, it never once crossed my mind that I was the one under peril. Michael – Mr. Milligan – he...” Panic rose once more, but Dean focused on blue eyes, vulnerable, trusting, affectionate, and the fear subsided. “He wanted to make love to me, and though I said no, he was insistent.” For an instant eye contact broke as James’ gaze flicked to the bruises about Dean’s neck, and he mouthed the word insistent incredulously. “By the time he relinquished his aims and left me, I was distraught, frightened, hurt. He knew my name, my real name, though I’d told no one. When I considered how he could have learned it, I believe only you could have reconstructed my identity, only you could have told him. My trust in you should have overcome every objection – it tried to, struggled valiantly – but there was such a preponderance of evidence that I could not but think continued trust delusion. It broke my heart to suspect you, sundered my soul, destroyed reason – and for all that, for being nigh certain that you had betrayed me to violation and black mail, I yet loved you! I knew not what to do. I rebuked you, fled the city, returned home, faced malicious rumors spread as Milligan continued to seek to coerce the permission that I would give to none save you willingly, and sought to reconcile myself to the prospect of a solitary future. Only in December
did I realize the truth of who had betrayed me – Ms. Naomi, who today I learn from Mr. Novak is none other than your aunt Mrs. Lilith Novak.”

“Truly?” James said in amazement. He shook his head. “If any but you spoke the words, I’d not believe it – but I’ve learned my lesson for doubting you, and will not do so more. For my part...that night was terrible. I’d been denied entrance, my invitation summarily revoked – I’ve not received another since – and they’d not even tell me if you were in attendance. As the hours ticked by, I tried to convince myself that you sat anxiously within, precisely as I sat without. My worst fears named you dead, taken by the illness of the prior month. Only then to see you emerge unharmed, it was elation – but your words! I don’t even recall how I got home that night, don’t recall any of the endless days that followed. I thought you must have chosen another, as absurd as it seemed in light of all the declarations you had made. When I recognized you last night – when I saw you with Mr. Milligan – it seemed clear, horribly clear, though I knew him not to be Michael, that you had chosen another, that perhaps you’d even been in his arms at every soiree since we parted! Hence my anger today, so unjust!” James shook his head. “Forgive me, love, and you are forgiven.”

“There is nothing to forgive, I yet hold you blameless...” Dean trailed off at the look on James’ face, stern, an eyebrow quirk.

“Unless I’ve misunderstood, last night Mr. Milligan attempted the grossest violation of your person imaginable,” James paused for confirmation. Dean flushed and lowered his gaze, all he could manage by way of acknowledgement. “I walked in, interrupted, could have prevented further harm coming to you, and instead – even knowing you to be Asmodeus – even remembering all of the vows you spoke to me of being mine, only mine – I thought you happy for the attentions you were receiving. Do not insist on my innocence, the evidence is against me. Allow me the ownership of how much I am to blame, how wanting in constancy and trust I have been.”

“I think you far too severe upon yourself,” Dean said. Gentle fingers trailed over Dean’s exposed bruises, the imprint on his face, and he winced. James gave him a wry look. “My love, once my temper ran its course, I forgave you when I thought you guilty of betraying me into black mail. Of course I forgive you for not acting last night. You were confused and scared and had every reason to think ill of me.”

James made no answer. Drawing back from Dean slightly, he settled a hand on Dean’s face, tracing the line of Dean’s brow, his cheeks, ran a thumb along Dean’s nose. Warmth spread at every touch, and Dean allowed his eyes to slip shut so he could revel in it. Though concerns and fears pressed in from every side, the simple reality of James’ affection washed all away. A finger brushed over Dean’s lips, and he parted them, mouthing gentle at the nail, the sensitive tip. James gave a faint, vocal gasp, but he didn’t draw away. Opening his eyes, their gazes met, and Dean had the gratification of watching the shift in James’ expression as Dean licked the tip of his thumb, drew his lips over it, coaxed it into his mouth, sucked on it gentle. Pupils grew wide, blue brightened, cheeks pinked. Withdrawing his finger with a faint pop, James smiled shyly. They stared at each other, lost. A temporary uncertainty clutched at Dean’s chest. Misunderstandings resolved, perhaps this was the moment when they should walk away from each other, accept the realities of the world, that they were to be ever divided, and remain as friends. There was danger to Dean, danger to James. There was James’ engagement to consider, and the horrible threats of Mr. Milligan, with which James was not even aware.

“I thought I had lost you,” whispered James. “I thought myself bereft, cursed to never feel your calloused hands on my skin, to never hear your gorgeous voice cry out my name, to never lose myself in your perfect eyes.” James squeezed his eyes shut on tears, opened them again, blue unspeakably, beautifully clear. Staring in to James’ gaze, Dean saw not the least glimmer of doubt, and it quieted his fears.
Moving as one, they leaned forward. Eyes slipped shut and lips met.

Tender and chaste, soft with a faint hint of moisture, Dean breathed in as James breathed out and his mouth filled with the taste of honey, pepper, and that favorite flavor he had nearly forgotten yet had craved nonetheless. Where pain had clutched at his neck, pleasure took its place, warmth soothed away the hurt. Tendrils of contentment found their way to every extremity, pooled in his gut, his heart, his head, his loins. It was over in moments and they parted. Dean’s eyes opened again to look open the face of an angel.

James matched his gaze with bright, joyful eyes, lips slightly parted to facilitate the increased rapidity of his breathes. Though they had shared each other’s bed, though the very first time they met Dean had spread his legs and allowed the other man to fill him – the thought sent a far less innocent stab of longing and fire through him – that had been expected, anonymous, safe. This, for them, was true intimacy. There were no masks, no protection, no secrets, only two men alone in one of the most fashionable parlors in London, staring into each other’s eyes and completely consumed by love.

“Castiel...James...” Dean breathed the name that had filled his thoughts since he’d learned it. A moan escaped James’ lips, expression going slack. “James, my beloved angel.”

A second kiss, as chaste as the first, but of longer duration as Dean could not bring himself to draw away. Breathing steadily through his nose, lengthening the kiss, deepening the pressure of his lips upon James’, Dean slid from his chair to kneel flush with the other man. Dean wrapped an arm around James’ back, hand curled over his shoulder, cradling his neck, thumb rubbing the base of his skull. As if compelled, James moaned again and opened his lips to Dean’s exploring tongue. Fingers curled into Dean’s scalp and held them together, his other grasping Dean’s waist, encircling it, trembling. Slowly, so slowly, Dean traced his tongue along James’ lips, licked his teeth, stole within the heat of his delicious mouth and tasted every inch of it. His member hardened at the deliberate eroticism of each careful sample he took of James’ delicious flavor, and through their breeks he could feel James growing hard as well. Mental images, faint memories of being pressed into, pounded, stroked, forced a groan from his mouth and he finally broke their mouths apart, leaning back at the waist so that each could catch their panting breath. Their hips were yet flush, though, and it was an act of willpower not to rub into the contact, not to rut and thrust until they both exploded with the pleasure without bare skin ever touching.

The same struggled was mirrored in the set of James’ jaw, the unfocused blue of his eyes, the liquid depths of his pupils, the way he bit his lip as he watched Dean, chest rapidly rising and falling.

God, he looks like he wants to devour me.

God...I would let him.

As if James could read his mind, there were hands on Dean’s collar, forcing their mouths together, and James’ tongue invaded his mouth. Gone was restraint, all was panting and touching and James smearing his saliva in every corner of Dean’s mouth as he explored, sucked on Dean’s tongue, nipped at his lips, and Dean moaned and didn’t even try to keep his hips still. Shamelessly, he rolled into James again and again, brushing their erections each time, and the other man broke off the kiss, clamping his mouth shut against a cry of pleasure. Arms encircled each other frantically, rubbing, desperate for every point of contact, frantic for fingers to spread fire with the least touch. Dean leaned forward and snagged James’ cravat, tugging it down with his teeth to expose pale neck, sucking down on the sensitive skin.

“Asmodeus, God, I’ve missed you,” James breathed. “We shouldn’t...here...this is...”

“I’ll stop,” it felt like wrenching his arm off, but Dean pulled back, forced his hips to still.
A hand crushed against his buttocks, another latched onto his hips, and James thrust into him so hard Dean fell back against the chair, knocking it backwards, tumbling Dean to the carpet. James was atop him, between his legs, hips thrusting hard into Dean’s as their lips met again.

“I love you,” James said aggressively, pressing his body against Dean, pressing Dean’s back into the floor, arms on either side of Dean’s head, holding him as he deepened their kiss. Dean embraced him in return, curled a leg around his ankle, lost a hand amid long black strands. “I love you, demon...Dean...” Dean arched into James’ body with a moan to hear his names on those lips, his name in that sultry, rasped out, desperate voice. “I know your name, I look upon your face – you’re really mine.”

“Take me,” the words escape Dean as a gasp even knowing how impossible it was. To slake their lust fully clothed on the floor of Mr. Novak’s parlor was already so far beyond the pale, there was no way to go further, but the need for it consumed Dean, the emptiness within him growing with every brush of their cocks through thick fabric. “James, I need you to take me...complete me...I need you so much.” He wrapped a leg around James’ hips and hitched up, so that each brush of James’ hardness placed pressure on his entrance, the soft cleft of skin behind his member, and his sensitive sacks.

“I will, Dean,” James vowed, and Dean moaned again. “Not now – you know we can’t now.” James kissed him again, nipped and tongued a line along his chin, sucked at the delicate skin behind his ear.

“I know,” Dean whispered, scarcely vocalizing as he mouthed against James’ cheek. “I know...”

“But I swear I will...” groaned James, surging against Dean, panting with the need for more, so much more. “God...over and over again...somehow...I will take you just like this...I’ve never wanted anything more.”

“Yes,” Dean barely held the word back from being an embarrassing cry that would surely have pierced through every wall of the house. Pleasure crested through him and he chased his climax, rutting against James’ body even as James began to lose his steady pace. The angel’s beautiful eyes slipped rapturously shut, and Dean’s followed a moment later. Heat and light licked through Dean’s thoughts, took him to the very edge, his aching lungs and throat leaking pain that twined with the heat in his gut and pushed him even higher, and then it all crashed down, and he moaned, “Castiel, Castiel, oh my angel, James...” Every name he had for his beloved passing through his lips even as release spewed from his body into his small clothes.

“Asmodeus,” James grated out, entire body going rigid as he jerked into Dean frantically, and then collapsed atop him.

“You’re really here,” whispered Dean, enfolding James in his arms, holding him close, part of him irrationally convinced that if he didn’t hold on with all his might, James would disappear like so many of the figments that had haunted Dean over the past year. His lips sought James’ and they shared a tender kiss. Release softened all the tension from James’ face, left him with a lazy smile and gentle, affectionate eyes.

“You’re still the only person I’ve ever kissed, Dean...” murmured James, nuzzling against his face. “You will be the only person I ever kiss. That, of all of me, I reserve for you.” Dean stole another possessive brush against the lips that were his alone, wishing that he could live his whole life to the sweet sound of that gruff voice moaning his name in ecstasy.

They lay together on the floor a time, until the uncomfortable aspects of the position became unbearable, until the fear that Mr. Novak and Charlie would surely return eventually outweighed even the pleasure of being entangled in a warm embrace. Rising, Dean retrieved his kerchief and
surreptitiously turned away to clean the damp mess from his breeks. As James did the same, Dean took up a seat on one end of the couch, and James joined him a moment later, sitting a reasonable distance away at the other end of the couch, far too distant.

“You have hinted at much,” James said at length, “and told me little. I would help you. I would shield you from my future father-in-law if I possibly can. Please, tell me all.”

Taking a deep breath, Dean did so, starting from the very beginning, omitting only those details too irrelevant and shaming to be revealed, and keeping those secrets that were not his. As he spoke, his hand crept into the vacant seat on the sofa between them, and James’ did the same, until their fingers were entwined, massaging and caressing idly.

Dean had reached the part where he told his family of Michael’s actions when the door opened and Charlie and Mr. Novak stepped into the room. Flushing, James attempted to withdraw his hand, but Dean held him firm, interrupting his own narrative to say, “My love, if there were ever two people in the world who would overlook this innocuous show of affection, it is my wife and your uncle.”

“He’s right,” said Charlie with a bright smile.

“After the noises we heard coming from this room,” added Mr. Novak with a bawdy wink.

“You never did!” exclaimed James. “We were very quiet.”

“Oh ho!” Novak whooped. Charlie blushed bright red. “So you did misbehave, then? I take it that means you’ve reconciled?”

“Yes,” said Dean. His voice was low and scratchy, the nights abuse compounded by their fit of lust and the relation of his extended narrative. “We may yet be divided forever by society, by Mr. Milligan ruining me, by Novak’s marriage to Ms. Milligan, by ill luck, by illness, by chance...really by practically anything...but at this moment, we have achieved the beginnings of an understanding.”

“Do not speak so!” James scolded. Dean gave him a wry smile.

“Excellent!” Charlie picked up the chair that Dean and James had forgotten to right, set it on its legs and sat upon it. Mr. Novak took up the other chair. “That’s one of our three problems solved. That leaves Milligan and the engagement on our ‘to accomplish’ list. Mr. Novak,” she turned her attention to James, “has my husband acquainted you with all of the sundry, sordid details of this affair?”

“He was in the process of doing so, Mrs. Winchester,” answered James in a small voice. With the return of others, all of James’ diffidence of company seemed to return powerfully. With a pleased smile that lit Dean’s entire countenance, he thought how adorable it was to see the man who was so assertive with him while they were intimate behave so shyly. Charlie must have sensed something similar, for she snorted on a laugh.

“Come, Mr. Novak,” she declared. “None of that coy timidity. If I have my way, we’ll all end up family.”

“Mr. Winchester did tell me that you were acquainted with his inclinations, and made no objection to his efforts to satisfy them...” James trailed off, lowering his eyes to his lap and giving Dean’s hand a nervous squeeze.

“That’s all he told you?” she rolled her eyes. “Really, Winchester?”

“I couldn’t exactly give him every detail of my life,” grunted Dean. “We were supposed to keep our identities secret.”
“Bang up job on that, Winchester,” cut in Novak. Dean scowled at his grin.

Rising, Charlie approached the couch and knelt before James, peering up into his downcast gaze. “Mr. Novak,” she said gently. “Allow me to be perfectly blunt about this. My husband doesn’t like women. Oh, he thinks they’re pleasant enough creatures, don’t you?”

“I do.”

“But as objects of affection, not a bit of it. For my part, I think that is the most ridiculous, foolish thing I’ve ever heard,” she continued. James’ eyes widened, his expression flustered by confusion. “I don’t...” stammered the young man.

“Mr. Novak, I think women are fabulous,” said Charlie with a wide grin. “Can’t get enough of them, truly.”

“Oh...” said James faintly. Comprehension dawned on his face. “Oh! You...and Ms. Harvelle!” Charlie laughed and nodded. “So, you truly wouldn’t mind if your...your husband and I, if we were...if we are...”

Rising to her feet and brushing imaginary lint from her skirts, Charlie glanced at Dean. “He makes you happy?” she asked with a vague gesture at James.

“You know he does, Charlotte,” said Dean.

“And you—” she fixed James with a steely eye. “Do you care for Mr. Winchester?”

“I love him,” confessed James. Dean started to hear James say it so openly, glanced at him sidelong and colored at the warm look he received in return.

“Then what’s the problem?” Charlie shrugged. “I don’t see a problem. Do you, Mr. Novak?”

The older Mr. Novak shook his head. “James knows I couldn’t care less, he knows what – and who – I was attending the soirees for.”

“Excellent,” she settled back into her chair, daintily adjusting her skirts in a flattering position. “I’m glad we’ve gotten that sorted out. Oh, and Novak, darling? Find a way to get that necklace back from your fiancée, or I’ll make you rue the day you ever thought to don angel wings.”

“I will, I—”

“Right, where were we?” with business-like efficiency, Charlie turned to Mr. Novak. “Please, do tell them the plan.”

“The inestimable Charlotte Winchester will be patrolling the social circuit, putting out fires and seeking which rumor mongers are mostly responsible for causing trouble. I will be informing all that I was witness to the events at the Milligan household, and though obviously there is much cause to suspect a mere Squire so-and-so as compared to the noble Adam Milligan, the truth of the matter was that you were set upon. After all, any who have been in a room with the two of you have seen the lengths to which Milligan will go to set you down – clearly, he bears some animus against you.”

“And us?”

“You, for the love of God, will do as you should have done last time – nothing,” snapped Charlie. “The same for you, James Novak. The two of you – lay low and try not to cause any more scandal.
There’s nothing untoward in two male friends spending some time together – do that. No – not a word of it, Dean. I know you want to help, and I also know you lock up the moment Milligan looks at you.”

Face falling, Dean bit his lip and looked away. “What if I introduce James to my friends at the Intercontinental League?” he managed, the idea of sitting still while others acted on his behalf grown increasingly unpleasant as the magnitude of the danger grew, and especially in light of Milligan’s threats against James. “He won’t qualify for admission, but it would be a way to make sure my friends are set straight, at least.”

Charlotte and Novak exchanged a look. “Yes, that should be fine.”

There was a long pause.

“Are you sure?” Dean pressed on. “Milligan has the letter I wrote. It’s one thing for it to name James and myself, if we are not much seen together, but quite another if we begin to be seen frequently in company...”

Charlie shrugged and refused to look at him. Novak smirked and nodded his head slightly.

“Have you two told me any of your actual plans?” Dean asked quietly.

There was an even longer pause, then Mr. Novak shrugged. “No.”

“Fine. Good,” Dean said. He sublimated his frustration by reminding himself that – given his record – he was not the one to be told any confidences, nor could he trust himself not to be taken by fright if Milligan so much as looked at him. He shook his head in self-disgust, finding little reassurance in James’ finger rubbing soothing circles into the palm of his hand. “Just – please tell me if there’s anything of value I can do. And for goodness sake, be careful. I don’t put anything past Milligan, nothing. He’ll do whatever he must to get what he wants, and if he hurts any of three of you, or any of the rest of the family, or even that daughter and son of his and Ms. Masters, I’ll never forgive myself.”

“What did I tell you at the dance last night, love?” Charlie asked gently.

“All will be well, and all manner of things will be well.” He said, rolling his eyes. It was one of her favorite sayings, and he’d always thought it so much meaningless, circular reasoning.

“And so it shall,” she smiled. “Worst to worst, we’ll flee to the States. Just think, it’ll be so provincial!”

Dean chuckled quietly, feeling distressed, until James caught his eye. In that look, Dean saw all the reassurance and love he could hope for, and a silent promise that whatever it took, they would not be parted again. He wondered what Ms. Milligan would think of that prospect.
As far as the Ton knew, the young Milligans were intimate to the Winchesters, and the Milligan family and Novak family were practically one and the same, but the Novaks and the Winchesters were only recently acquainted. Tongues would flap if Dean and Charlotte were seen to call on the other family with too much frequency. Thus, though Dean longed for James like he longed for air, he restrained himself from charging to the house at 7 ----- Boulevard on Saturday morning and throwing himself on his knees before his glorious angel. Instead, he left a card indicating his intention to call on Wednesday.

The fallout from the Milligan ball began as whispers that rapidly sparked into wildfire, the most exciting thing to happen since the Season had started, the most remarkably scandalous in several years. That two gentlemen would resolve a conflict through violence was gossip worthy if unremarkable; slights between foolish young men were still often resolved by duels, and some if the affair of honor involved sportsmen they might choose to box or fence. However, Dean’s appearance on re-entering the party, and Milligan’s as well, suggested that a common brawl had taken place. That was unthinkable to the gentry of the city.

Everyone knew Milligan to be respected, cultured, aristocratic, even, and Milligan had an extremely wide circle of acquaintances. Where Dean was known, he was thought well of, but he had few personal friends. What was commonly known of him did nothing to combat people’s natural inclination to heap condemnation on his shoulders: that he was from far to the north and that he’d been raised aboard a ship. To that, many added a passing acquaintance with the incidents of Samuel’s youth, his association with Ruby Cassidy and her set. Then, there were the rumors of Dean’s behavior as regards Amelia Richardson, and the by-blow Claire that the Winchesters had taken in. With such a foundation, few questioned which, between Dean and Milligan, was responsible for initiating an encounter so brazen, so garish, so common as fisticuffs during an elegant ball. If a man be raised among ruffians and the dregs of society, and relegated to a backwater, who can be surprised if he acts as his upbringing accustomed him to? The only wonder of the situation was that he had won invitation to the event at all. He owed that to his wife, surely, the superior Bradbury breeding leading her to intimacy with Ms. Anna Milligan and Ms. Margaret Masters. Poor woman, to be stuck in marriage with such a brute! Or perhaps their invitation was thanks to Inias Milligan, poor, deluded soul to be taken in by the likes of Samuel and Dean Winchester. Such a dangerous liaison should be curtailed before the Milligan boy went the way of his elder brother, Raphael, well on the way to being disinherited.

The slights that followed Dean about town tempered the pleasure he felt at the happy reunion hadn’t not dared hope for. Whispers of panic haunted him, and only the thought of trusting blue eyes kept them at bay. Invitations were withdrawn, their introduction not sought, as they called on friends, attended fetes, and did their best to continue the usual social niceties. Everywhere Dean went, he heard his name spoken in whispers, and despite himself, he listened to hear what the Ton said about him. The surprise was learning that approbation of the Milligans was part and parcel of the discussion of the fight. The events of the ball itself were thoroughly canvassed with the usual amounts of “and Mrs. Dowager herself says that…” and “Ms. Muslin swears to…” and “the estimable Mr. So-and-So overheard…” However, when that seemingly inexhaustible font of gossip was spent, talk turned to the mischief of Inias Milligan and the reputed crimes of Raphael Milligan. Few seemed insensate to the fact that Milligan himself was haughty, overbearing, and arrogant. The consensus seemed to be that Dean’s failing had been temper – that faced with a man who was
known to be proud to the point of narcissism, Dean had been goaded into behaving ungentlemanly. That was a sad deficiency – clearly Dean could not be trusted in polite company, and the way he was ostracized everywhere he went bore that out – but he also heard subtle hints that perhaps, though the behavior credited to his was beyond the pale, he had been goaded beyond what ill-bred manners could bear by Milligan’s imperious treatment.

Charlie and Mr. Novak’s influence was clear to see.

Through it all, Dean’s friends kept him in check, kept him calm, kept him distracted. Lafitte or Henriksen would track him down in crowded parlors or sit beside him at dinners and they’d speak of the Intercontinental League, and Henriksen’s intentions of taking ship to New York City so that he would qualify for membership in the club he was helping form. They’d talk about men who had expressed interest in joining. They’d consider whether to open enrollment to any who met the minimum qualifications, or if the bar should be set higher – a requirement that they impress at an interview, or make a donation, or provide letters of recommendation. They realized with concern that, as they were going, they could well end up with a company composed almost entirely of naval men instead of gentlemen with extensive holdings and a fondness for seeing the world. The resulting debates were largely inane, but they passed the evenings. Dean sought sanctuary in the safety of the planning. When a gentleman or lady of his acquaintance brought up the Milligan Ball, he shrugged their comments aside and instead asked if they’d heard about the new League. It made the perfect segue, and facilitated Dean’s efforts to keep himself from doing anything that further exposed himself.

Nonetheless, the ominous dread was building in his gut again. Milligan had the letter. Nothing that Dean had heard suggested that its contents had been made public, which meant that Milligan was holding it in reserve. The possibilities of why that might be dizzied him to consider. However, his fears were easier to keep at bay than they had been. No longer was Michael a faceless cipher, a Zeus mask that could hide any face beneath. While the monster’s identity had been a mystery, Dean had walked among a crowd and thought any might be responsible for terrorizing him, that he might be set upon at any time. Now, he knew that if he did not see Milligan, he was safe. The whispers were merely words, in light of that realization, and even the tedious hours that passed in the company of those inclined to think the worst of him were nothing worse than unpleasant, a frustration to be borne, one more barrier that he must press through before he would have the opportunity to see James again.

When Dean’s thoughts grew darkest, when he stood alone amid a group and watched eyes meet his momentarily only to skitter away, he thought of James. He heard that deep voice proclaim that Dean was loved. He thought of those strong hands running along his body. Warmth pooled within him, calming him, arousing him enough to bring him ease and not so much as to mortify him in public, and he felt up to any challenge.

Wednesday morning finally arrived, and Dean, Charlotte and Ms. Harvelle arrived at the Novak household and were shown into a sitting room where sat James and Gabriel Novak. The ladies made hasty apology, for they had assumed that Mrs. Novak would be present – she rarely was, Mr. Gabriel Novak explained, she played hostess at either the Milligan house or in Ms. Naomi’s spectacular parlor most days. As the entire visit had primarily been a fiction to allow James and Dean time together, Mrs. Novak’s absence facilitated that end. Mr. Novak resolved to accompany the ladies for a shopping expedition about town, and the lovers were left to their own devices.

James and Dean were left alone for the first time since they’d resolved their misunderstandings the week before. They were alone for the first time since passion had stolen reason and left them entwined on the floor, rubbing against each other with such longing that they hadn’t needed to feel the touch of hands on sensitive flesh to satisfy each other. The thought forced Dean to bite back a
moan of longing, remembering all the things they’d done, all the things they’d not and that he craved. They sat staring at each other across the distance separating the chairs of Mr. Novak’s blue and white parlor and a long, awkward silence stretched out.

“How has your health been?” James broached.

“Generally? Of late? Or more long term?” asked Dean uncertainly.

“I don’t know – which would you prefer to answer?” With a quirk of his lips, James shook his shoulders out as if to free himself of tension.

“I’ve been well, I suppose,” Dean loathed small talk. “I had the one illness last year, as you know.”

“Yes!” There was a flare of passion in James’ voice that brightened his eyes. “What happened? Do tell me! I was petrified for you, the suspense was dreadful! Not that intend to compare it to your suffering, but…I’d like to hear what befell you after we parted.”

Flushing, Dean wondered what it was about James’ shy behavior that brought out Dean’s own aggressive side, whereas when James acted with fervor, Dean felt more shy. “Well,” he paused, unsure where to begin. “We’re from the north – in ----shire, do you know it?” James shook his head. “It’s…very north. Several hundreds of miles. It was a four day trip for me to come on horseback, and I traveled only with Mr. Singer.”

“The gentleman who answered the door at your home?” There was a twinkle in James’ eye. “I’ve never seen a poorer butler.”

“That’s because he’s not a butler – he’s our groundskeeper,” Dean scrubbed a hand through his hair. Where to even begin? There was so much to tell!

“Is…is this okay?” James retreated back into himself in an instant. “We can speak of something else, anything else, if it will make you more comfortable…”

“Is it okay?” echoed Dean, muttering. James quailed. “Oh, James – of course it’s okay! Simply, every question spawns an answer that requires an explanation that spins out more questions. It is my life – and I wish to know as much of yours – and it is not easily canvassed in quick descriptions. Or rather,” he stopped, rubbing his temples again. “I do not wish it to be, with you. I suppose I could tell you simply – I grew ill on the ride down, and grew worse on the journey back, but I ultimately recovered – but how pale and incomplete a story that is!”

Leaning forward, James took his hands and met his eyes, his own glowing with intensity. “Never answer my queries with such an insipid, tell-nothing reply again. I want to know everything!”

“And I of you!” smiled Dean. “I have a proposal…” There was a beat of awkward silence, and Dean pressed on before his word choice could mortify him worse. “…do you ride?”

“A little, and very ill,” confessed James. “I do not have a mount in the city – to tell truth, I do not own a mount at all, nor saddle, reins, or anything like. We had use of a pony when I was a boy, the property of my grandfather Novak before he died and my uncle inherited. The poor beast did triple duty, as plow horse, carriage hauler and children’s plaything, and when it passed my brother and sisters and I were so distraught we insisted that it be buried.”

Dean laughed. “Whoever was responsible for digging a hole so large must have cursed you all to blazes!”

“He did,” said James, chuckling at the memory. “Loudly, and for all to hear! My father read him a
sermon on it afterwards – ‘forsooth whosoever shall take the Lord’s name in vain… the wages of sin… the perils of loose tongues…’ and so it went!”

“Well, I’ve the very steed for you,” Dean rose with purpose and headed towards the door. “It’s a beautiful day, for all that it is winter, and I suggest we repair to the Winchester house and mount ourselves for a trip outside the city.” James opened his mouth, but Dean continued to speak, and James closed it again with a paint smack of lips. “I got the sense, from things you’ve said me and in your letters, that city life does not suit your taste, and thought a chance to see some of the countryside might appeal…?”

“Winchester…”

“I’d offer you a ride in a carriage or my gig, but neither is in London at the moment – the carriage returned with my brother and sister-in-law last week, and my gig has never made the trip. I cannot afford equipage in the city and…”

Leaping from his chair, James closed with him and set lips to his, a far more effective interruption than mere words had proved. The kiss started as a mere light pressure, but with a happy sigh, Dean refused to permit James to draw away, and it lengthened, tender and sweet and affectionate.

“You need not be so nervous of me,” James said softly, his face lit by a happy smile. “I am not so fragile, nor so easily frightened off, that the prospect of mounting a horse will drive me from your side.”

“You say that now,” said Dean, “but I recall a young man in a doll’s mask once telling me that our interests were opposite and opposed because I liked to be outdoors and he preferred the quiet pastimes of a sitting room.”

“And more fool he!”

Delighted laughter bubbled from Dean’s lips, and he caught James in another kiss, hand curled over the side of his face. The smile on James’ lips brightened every feature, his eyes shone with wonderful blue. Warmth filled Dean pleasantly, leaving him with the light headed feeling that usually only came after imbibing drink. “I love you,” Dean breathed when their lips parted. “God, how I love you, James!”

“Forsooth!” declaimed James with a wicked grin. He stepped through the door and intercepted a passing servant with the request to fetch their coats and hats. “Whosoever shall take the Lord’s name in vain…”

It was a short walk to the Winchester’s rented home, and Dean was glad the distance was scant and that they began in a merry spirit, for it was difficult to remain so when the eyes of the public fell upon them. While it was easy, while alone, to shrug off the suppositions of the world with, “la, but they do not know that we are anything but friends!” while under scrutiny it was surprisingly difficult not to see every sidelong glance and wonder what they knew, what they suspected. Paranoia brought fear to every word, tempered every expression, restrained every gesture. Perhaps, had James remained uninhibited, Dean might not have felt the tension so thickly. However, the instant they stepped out of the safety of privacy, James closed in on himself, grew polite and proper, eyes wide and tight and clearly terrified at the prospect of betraying unseemly intimacy. Dean’s thoughts wandered to Charlie and Ms. Harvelle, and how they comported themselves in public. Did they entertain such fears, did they worry so? He was ashamed to realize he’d never given it a moment’s thought, so comfortable with them both that it hadn’t occurred to him the self-restraint they must exercise at all times. All couples must behave decorously, of course, but the burden was so much greater when the engagement – oh, what a word! – must be kept secret.
Flushing at the terminology his thoughts sought to attach to his arrangement with James, Dean sought a topic of conversation – anything – with which to divert and distract them. “I wish I could show you how my brother and Inias Milligan are together,” Dean said as they walked. “You would not be so concerned. I mean, see there.”

“Where?”

“I’ll not point,” chided Dean, “‘tis rude. Those two young gentleman to our left, the one with the satin waistcoat and the other with his hair so foppishly styled he dare not place a hat on it?” James nodded as he spotted the two, down the street on a corner. As they watched, the pair pointed at Dean and laughed uproariously, giving each other congratulatory pats on the shoulder for whatever witticism had brought such paroxysms, managing to occupy an entire sidewalk in their effusive, intentionally public display. “There is no reason we cannot behave as familiarly.”

“There is,” James’ voice was low and angry. “Neither of us is a great coxcomb. They should not scorn you so. I will…”

“Leave be,” Dean said soothingly. “Such at my expense was become commonplace even before the incident last Thursday, and now it is completely unexceptional.” The two had noticed that Dean and James were watching and were pantomiming a brawl with a child’s idea of what a fight looked like, balled fists raised stiffly, elbows bent, jabbing forward and skipping back. “They wish to provoke me into a public display of temper, and thus gather further fuel with which to fire the talk against me. Is it frustrating? Yes. Am I on the verge of charging down the street and putting a stop to it?” He snorted. “Never would I dream of giving them the satisfaction.” They turned a corner and lost sight of the youths. “My point, besides, was not to point out their immaturity, but rather to say – there is no need of this stiff formality between male friends.”

The brownstone fronted house that Dean had let for their time in London was tucked along a cobbled street lined with ones that looked just the same. They passed through the stately, finely worked front doors, down the white-washed hall towards the back of the house. As they approached the back door, Singer came up, huffing breathlessly, liveried jacket unbuttoned. “Wasn’t expecting you,” he said informally. James started, clearly surprised to see such familiarity from a servant.

“Singer, this is Mr. James Novak,” Dean introduced them quickly. “Novak, this is Robert Singer, whom I mentioned to you earlier.”

Singer thrust his hand out to shake, and James was startled, but a hint of a smile played on his lips as well. After a moment’s hesitation, James took it and shook. “Are you the idjit he nearly killed himself for last year?” asked Singer. James expression slipped into pure amazement.

“Yes…” he said faintly. “Yes, I suppose I am.”

“Don’t let it happen again,” Singer said with gruff sternness.

Glancing at Dean in absolute bewilderment, James managed, “I won’t…sir…?”

“Next thing to a father to me,” Dean said with a happy smile that he hoped would put James’ concerns to rest. “Knew about me before I knew about me, if you catch my meaning. When I told him, do you know what he called me?”

“Let me guess…”

“Idjit,” rumbled Singer. “How could I have missed a thing like that? Sunny day like this, you young louts going for a ride?”
“Yes,” Dean confirmed. “I know you’re doing double duty, but would you mind saddling Impala and Chevelle?”

“I’ll do better,” said Singer. “I’ll saddle Charger as well, and we’ll all go.”

“Singer…”

“Did I say something confusing, boy?” Singer cut him off with a sarcastic tone that couldn’t mask his jaunty grin. Rolling his eyes, Dean shook his head, and Singer headed out to the stables.

“Is he always like that?” James stared after the servant, agog.

“Sometimes he’s worse,” grinned Dean. “That was just him testing you, and making it clear what the pecking order is in the Winchester household.”

“What is the pecking order in the Winchester household?” James was looking at Dean like he’d never seen him before.

Frowning, Dean thought about it. “Ellen is definitely on top – she’s Ms. Harvelle’s mother, and is currently responsible for our children – I’ve never met anyone who can stop her doing exactly as she pleases. Ms. Moseley perhaps hasn’t as much clout, but all she needs to do is lift her hand in wiggle her fingers together like so and I remember every time she dragged me around belowships by the ears, and I feel like I’m a naughty child about to be spanked. Charlotte after that, I suppose, she orders the household. Ms. Harvelle, of course, and below her is probably Jessica, my sister-in-law – I wish Samuel would write and tell me how they do, we’ve not had word since they returned home. Well, no, come to think, Singer is above Jess, and maybe even above Ms. Moseley…” He trailed off, realizing he was rendering his explanation completely unintelligible in his rambling. “Right. I think Ellen, then Charlotte, then Singer, then Ms. Moseley. Below that it’s a bit of a muddle, then there’s Sam and I down near the bottom. I’d say Claire is below us, and the children, of course – unless Diana is screaming, then she is the single most important thing in the world, because she is the single most important thing to Ellen, and since Ellen is in charge…”

“Winchester…you know, when my uncle told me you had a remarkable family, I hadn’t the least idea what he was talking about,” James shook his head in wonder. “Surely…this is sarcasm? Are you not Squire? Do you not own the estate?”

“Oh, well, if you ask me who manages things, that’s a completely different question,” said Dean. “I have the ownership and management of Lawrence Hall, Samuel serves as my solicitor, executor, and man of business. However, if the question is, whose word goes – that’s what I was describing. Shall we?”

The walk past the kitchen gave them a whiff of delicious aromas – roasting duck, some sort of fruit baking, butter, a spiced stew – and a glimpse of Ms. Moseley, who saw them and waved.

“Get in here,” she snapped. James just shook his head, like he still couldn’t believe how casually Dean’s family behaved. Shrugging, Dean followed the order, and James trailed behind. “So, this is your angel?”

“All of them know,” muttered James in shock, trailing a hand through his hair as he turned away and walked a few bemused steps back out the door. “All of them know!”

“Yes, Ms. Moseley,” Dean shrugged.

“You hurt him again, I’m going to whack you about the head with this rolling pin, do you hear me?” she said firmly, slamming the kitchen instrument into her hands with a poof of flour.
“I won’t,” vowed James with heartfelt sincerity.

“She meant me, James,” Dean said in an undertone.

“I meant him!” Ms. Moseley waved the rolling pin at Dean. “Now, get out of here, supper won’t make itself.”

Dean had to grab James’ arm to get him moving again.

“How...how is this your family?” stammered James. “Are these even servants? How...? I’ve never seen anything...”

“We’re unconventional,” Dean shrugged as they walked out to the stable. Good to his word, Singer had quickly gotten the three horses ready to go.

“Which one is Chevelle?” James glanced from Chevelle, small and gray, to Charger, a little bigger and dark, to Impala, 16 hands at the shoulder and jet black, and swallowed nervously.

“The smallest. Come on, let’s get you up,” Dean offered James hands to mount from, and awkwardly, the young man did so, stepping a boot in Dean’s interlaced fingers and swinging a leg stiffly over Chevelle’s back. Singer and Dean each took one side of the saddle and hastily adjusted stirrups and reins to the necessary lengths, and Dean adjusted how James was sitting and how his legs were positioned, sparing a few unnecessary touches for the tender flesh of his inner legs and thighs. It wasn’t Dean’s fault the man’s legs were irresistible clad in tan breeks and straddling the horse’s back. Firm muscles stood out clearly against the well-fitted cloth, and James’ jacket was particularly flattering while he sat up so very straight, not the slightest hint of thickness at his waist or shoulders. When he looked up to see if James was comfortable, Dean colored the flush on James’ cheeks and the hunger in his eyes. A tingle coursed through his body, and only immense self-control kept him from having to worry about arousal as he easily set boot to stirrup and swung himself onto Impala’s back. Another glance at James showed that hunger had only intensified, and Dean realized James must have stared at him as he’d mounted.

Heeling the mounts lightly, Dean led the way down the streets, keeping close to James in case he needed any help. Singer kept a respectable distance behind them. “I wasn’t ‘to the manor born,’ you understand,” Dean explained hastily. “My father was a second son, a lieutenant in the navy. Our mother died when we were young – Sam merely an infant – and so we went to sea. We grew up around men of all stripes. There’s nothing like being on a floating tub with 200 other men for months uninterrupted to make it clear how little rank tells you of the worth of a person. Don’t get me wrong – the authority of the officers was absolute – but that didn’t mean that the coxswain didn’t know more about steering than the midshipman, and we’d all have drowned if not for the boatswain. When we were asea, Ms. Moseley had our care. When we were on land, Ellen and Singer did. My uncle, the old Squire Winchester, had no interest in us, and our father rarely had time for us. We built our family where we could. Becoming squire didn’t change that, for which I am eternally grateful. Singer, Ellen and Ms. Moseley aren’t servants, they are family as surely as Ms. Harvelle and Charlotte and Samuel are.”

“The picture you paint is so contrary – so opposite – to every manner in which I was brought up,” said James, voice thick with wonder. “No matter how little money we might have, we were never to forget that we were Novaks: high society, entitled to the best, used to the best. It didn’t matter what the truth was, the appearance of every conceivable propriety and respectability was to be maintained no matter the cost in money and personal sacrifice. My eldest brother, Lucas, drives a phaeton with as fine a matched set of steppers as can be – or so I’m told – and every penny of it was funded from my sister’s dowries. There was never economy or thought for the future, and the result is my current disaster. Lucas is already wed, and a poorer match could not have been managed. I am the only other
“Doesn’t Mr. Novak help you?” asked Dean. The streets of the city were growing densely packed with people, the houses lower and closer together and more squalid, the smell more rank. Dean always enjoyed the transition from the gentrified neighborhoods to the more casual, and now he found the difference more pronounced and welcome than ever. However much people stared at him here, he knew that it was only because he was a gentleman and out of place, and had nothing to do with Milligan. For all their self-importance, the words of such men had little meaning here, beyond the impact that their votes in the House of Lords had on the administration of city and country.

“As he can,” said James. Dean navigated Impala through the thronging people, sparing glances for his love as often as possible. For his part, James’ eyes were fixed straight ahead, only varying in whether they were pinned to the back of Chevelle’s head or to the view of the street between her ears. “My father holds a living that my uncle granted him, and it would have been an adequate one had a more sensible family the management of it. However, my father was accustomed to all the best growing up, my uncle is not a modest or a temperate man, and Mrs. Novak, once a Milligan after all, is used to the very best. It was quite a step down for her, to come from a family where she was accustomed to an income of £15,000 a year to one of merely £8,000 or £10,000.” Choking, Dean’s throat clenched painfully and he coughed. “Are you well?”

“Eight thousand pound?” he hacked out. “I can’t even imagine…”

“Why not, what is your income?” There was a pause. “Oh, I’m sorry, that is a most forward question.”

“Nay, I don’t mind,” Dean said. “There is no affair of mine that is off limits. If you wish to know, merely ask, and if somehow you alight on a topic which I am uncomfortable disclosing, I will say so – though I’ll own I cannot conceive of what such a topic may be. Lawrence Hall is worth £2,000, or as much as £2,500 if the year is particularly flush.”

“See, that is precisely what I mean!” James said with passion. “In my family, such a sum would be considered appalling! Too little to keep a gentleman in clothes, much less to support a manor and a lifestyle and some time in London. Yet here you stand before me, perfectly content, raising all with some to spare!” A thought seemed to strike James, and he went quiet. They broke out of the tightly cramped streets into stretches of road fronted by scattered buildings, and then all at once they were amidst fields, gray and brown with only hints of evergreen scattered among.

“What troubles you?” Dean asked quietly, riding closer to James now that the obstacles facing them were fewer.

“It never dawned on me your income was so little, nor the demands on your purse so great,” said James, ashamed. “I pushed you to come to London last year because I simply assumed you a gentleman of great means. My upbringing has spoilt me, for all we had little, to think all like my family. I forget what privilege we were born to. The necklace—”

“Please do not think of it!” Dean looked away to hide his pained expression. He didn’t want James to worry, but it did trouble him. He’d had to sell several personal affects to make up the price of the jewel, and then for James to give it away as if it were nothing but a bauble hurt. The more he learned of James’ family, though, the more sense it made.

“Nay, don’t say that,” protested James. “I should think of it. I feel the guilt acutely, that I gave it away after you declared that you’d purchased it for me because it was mine – because it belonged
with me. And now to realize that it must have been a tremendous expense for you! When I gave it to Ms. Milligan, I told myself it was a trinket to a man such as yourself, and to her, whereas to me it was everything. I sought to devalue it, in the hopes that in so doing I would feel less pain in seeing it, that my heart would ache less at the memory of the importance I had allowed myself to attach to it. But I’m wrong, aren’t I – the cost must have been a burden to you. I was correct in thinking it as meaningful to you as to me.”

“In comparison to your value to me, it was a pittance.”

“Sweet words to hide a hard truth!” James sighed. “I’m sorry, and despite your wife’s admonition to me, in a week I’ve thought of no means of retrieving it from her short of ending our engagement.”

“It was and is yours to do with as you please,” Dean said with as much sincerity as he could muster.

“Do not lie to me, Asmodeus – please, never lie to me,” chancing a look away from the barren field over which they crossed, James met his eyes and gave Dean a sad smile. “Though I understood it not when I observed your behavior at the time, I saw the distress when Ms. Milligan displayed her prize to your family.” Dean shrugged and met the smile with one equally forlorn. “I will make this right. I will.”

“I’ve wondered,” grasping at a straw, Dean sought to segue them to a different topic. “How did you not recognize me that day? Your uncle Novak tells me he knew my face instantly from drawings you did a year ago, yet you sat in my presence and saw nothing.”

“You shrank into your chair so, I thought you shy,” confessed James. “You would not look upon me. Having felt similarly myself many times when presented with a stranger, I didn’t wish to discomfit you, so I gave you what privacy could be had among a crowd and averted my gaze. Further, I already felt the impropriety of visiting you at home when we’d had no prior introduction. Had I looked upon your features, I can’t imagine I’d have failed to identify you. I’ve sought your stunning eyes in every face I’ve beheld for a year. They are the vision of perfection in green. In retrospect, I cannot say if I wish I’d known you then, or if it were better that I didn’t recognize you until the dance.” Speaking the words, James caught those eyes now, held Dean’s gaze so close that he colored and felt stirrings of desire, and did not break that enfolding look until Chevelle missed a step. The horse bobbled, James gasped in overwrought distress, and Dean chuckled and grabbed the reins until both horse and rider calmed. Behind them, Singer rolled his eyes and waited until they resumed.

They crested a low hill which commanded a modest view of the environs. “What do you think?” Dean asked, pulling rein on Impala.

Behind them and stretching along the horizon was the city many in England thought the most wondrous in the world – London. For his part, Dean would as soon put money on Istanbul or Venice, though Hong Kong stood out as the most exotic he’d seen. Before them, hedges and fences divided farmland, mounted by stone fences, deep-riven waterways and woven with roads leading to the metropolis. Afar to their left could be seen a line of trees, and Dean was not the least surprised when James pointed them in that direction and nervously spurred Chevelle to a trot. Not above showing off, Dean urged Impala faster, posting circles around Chevelle. He adored the way James watched his athletic performance, the ease with which Dean stood in the stirrups with each upward beat of hooves, the strength in his legs and the familiarity with which he sat a saddle. A small part of him rebelled at the absurdity of such strutting, but such protests were overwhelmed by the greater part of him, which delighted simply to be together and to feel the heat of James’ appreciation of his body. Watching James’ face, that feeling swelled and grew, suffused him, hardened him and made riding increasingly challenging.
They spoke of all manner of nothing as they crossed the fields. Singer continued to trail in their wake, far enough back not to intrude on their conversation, close enough to be with them in an instant if needed. They saw not another soul. Dean’s problem amplified, the liveliness of James’ expression, the excited freedom in his speech now that they were alone once more, the brilliance of his eyes in the sunlight, all combined to make Dean increasingly uncomfortable. He switched to a canter, holding himself taut to protect sensitive flesh from the harsh roll of the leather saddle against his crotch, but his arousal did not abate. The trees resolved themselves into a good-size copse rearing from a ravine carved by a stream, dry for the season, dense enough to rightly be named a thicket. At James’ suggestion, they dismounted to stretch out fatigued legs – James’ only, Dean could happily ride all day – and meandered through the woods as Singer waited with the mounts.

Pushing through a mask of shrubs and vines, Dean invaded the quiet undergrowth, branches snapping, leaves rustling. Behind him, James called uncertainly, “Winchester, where are you going?”

A pheasant burst free of the bramble, a squirrel looked up, saw humanity, and fled up a tree. Dean paused, looking in all directions, but the location would not do. He could still see the outline of the horses, make out Singer’s feet as he – surely – inaudibly mumbled under his breath. There was a tangle of dead branches in front of Dean, an animal run making a low path beneath it. Dropping down, Dean scrambled through the narrow passage way, emerging into an opening beneath low scrub, clearly the domicile of some animal – a deer, Dean thought – but clean for that. It smelled of myrtle and thyme and decaying leaves, and was invisible from the outside. Rising onto his knees, a tingle in his crotch reminded him of the urgency of finding seclusion, the need to have James.

In a crackle of sticks and dried detritus, the faint pucker and tear of branches snagging on cloth, James shimmied through the animal run, top of his head leading his way into the enclosed haven concealed by the impenetrable thicket. In dappled sunlight, Dean drank in the sight of the most beautiful man he’d ever known.

Black hair topped his head, speckled now with bits of gray and brown where twigs and bark and leaves had tangled in it. He looked up at Dean with confusion, fair skin pinked with the exertion and exposure of the morning, lips relaxed in a faint smile, blue eyes brighter than the sky and shining like the sun. Black jacket and blue vest and tan breeks completed the image, all fit to his lean body so perfectly that Dean could picture every naked line, every hidden muscle, though he’d seen none in near a year. Dean’s breath caught, and the semi-arousal that had plagued him all morning grew painfully urgent. James paused and glanced all around, unsure how to proceed, picking bits of detritus from his clothing, breeks smudged with dirt, patina of his boots scuffed off.

“We mustn’t, not here...” said James without making the least attempt to stop. His arms tightened their embrace, rubbing up and down the length of Dean’s back, nestling in the curl just before his buttocks, an errant finger teasing beneath his breeks to rub at the top of his crack.

“We have to touch you.” Dean emphasized the words by clutching at James’ chin, tilting his head so Dean could kiss him more deeply, separating pursed lips with his tongue.
“Someone will see...” The sentence died in a mewl of longing as Dean shifted his weight forward and his hardness pressed into James’ abdomen.

“No one will see,” said Dean. Hungry to taste James’ flesh, he tilted James’ head further back, kissing and sucking at the tender skin beneath his chin, licking a line along the top of his cravat, nipped and mouthed at his ear lobe.

A low moan burst from James, and he bucked his hips into the contact. “Someone will hear...”

“Then we’d best be quiet!”

Suiting action to word, conversation ceased. Heavy breathing was the only accompaniment to increasingly urgent movement, arms rubbing over clothed bodies, legs shifting and moving to bring them ever closer together, Dean’s hand on the back of James’ head to draw him further into each kiss, James’ arm seizing Dean’s hips, holding him still as James’ rutted against him. A moan breathed from Dean’s mouth and into James’ parted lips. Through thick cloth, their members brushed, each glancing touch of hard upon hard bursting pleasure like a light behind Dean’s eyes.

“Ah...yes, I do see the merit of your suggestion, Asmodeus,” James’ eyes were alight with mischief. “You’ve convinced me thoroughly of the necessity of proceeding.”

“I knew you’d come around to my point of view, Castiel,” Dean chuckled, burying his tongue in the recesses of James’ mouth before more words could be spoken.

The thought of doing nothing but rutting again was inconceivable. Though it had been effective and had felt good, it was not enough, not nearly enough. While Dean yet entertained the possibility that they would be spending more time together, he had no idea when that would be, when they might hope for a bed and oil to smooth the way and all the comforts that had facilitated their priorlovemaking. In the absence of such, in the face of such urgent need, and confronted with the unlikely but not nonexistent possibility of discovery, if only by Singer, he settled on the next best thing.

Breaking away from James’ tender kisses was a wrench, but Dean did so anyway, leaning back to settle on his haunches. James got his elbows under him and leaned up, bemused and flushed with pleasure, head quirked to the side as he watched Dean, chest fluttering as he panted. Dean’s fingers found the buttons on James’ breeks and hastily undid the flap.

“What are you...!” A massive groan destroyed the words. Dean’s had his hand around James’ member, and James threw his head back, entire gorgeous, sleek, clothed chest arching towards Dean and glorious contact between skin and flesh.

“Quiet,” remonstrated Dean with hushed reverence. The cock in his hand was soft yet hard, firm and smooth and perfect, throbbing and twitching into his every slight movement, and he wanted it in every way he could think of. There was only one that was an option at the moment, however.

James was lost to any action but gasping and straining towards Dean’s touch. “Dean, I...” Taking advantage of the other man’s aroused immobility, Dean slid down his body and wrapped his lips around the hot, flushed head, letting his eyes flutter shut as pleasure flooded him. The distinctive taste, the knowledge that he brought James carnal joy, the feel of that weight in his mouth, the tang of early release on his tongue, all of it brought Dean such satisfaction that he moaned with his mouth enveloping half of James’ length. “Dean.” James stretched the word into a drawn out groan. Collapsing to the ground, his hands frantically scrambled at Dean’s face, his head, tangled in his hair, pulled hard enough to hurt. Dean lifted himself free, gasping for air, and kissed the luscious head again and again, grasping James’ cock with a hand to hold it steady, pumping the base, using saliva to smooth his grip. “No, stop...I...I have to touch you, please...”
With a shake of his head, Dean pursed his lips against James’ leaking tip and sucked hard, desperate for the reward of another drawn out moan in the man’s low, guttural voice. Desire so strong it nearly choked him pulsed through Dean’s body, matching the tempo he set as he began to bob his head around James’ cock. Opening his eyes, he looked up the length of James’ body to see James staring down at him, mouth open around desperate, rapid breaths, pupils dilated as he watched Dean administering to his pleasure. Chuckling around the bulk resting on his tongue, his cheeks puckered as he swallowed hard.

Fingers latched into his hair, and James lifted him free by brute strength and dragged him up. It hurt, his hair tugged, his body straining, and at the same time it felt fantastic. He trusted James, knew that every bit of pain he suffered would be rewarded, knew the other man wanted nothing so much as both of them to be engulfed in bliss. James forced their mouths together and ravished Dean’s tongue with his own, licked at the taste of himself. Even as they kissed, James shifted his weight and rolled them over so that Dean was against the leafy ground, his legs spread around James’.

A playful nip to Dean’s lip left him desperate as James pulled away, and though Dean strained and arched to follow those talented lips, James escaped him and sat back. Now it was James’ hands scrabbling so quickly over buttons that he broke one in his haste to open Dean’s pants, his fingers that slipped in and his strong hand that wrapped around Dean’s aching need and caused pleasure to explode through every fiber of his being.

“Castiel,” he moaned. A thumb nail flicked at his open slit, fingers teased at the hard ridge beneath, and Dean writhed into the contact, desperate for more. James slid his body slightly forward, the silky, sensitive skin of their members brushed, and both men bit back groans. “Do that...do that again...” Hitching his hips, James brought them closer, the head of his cock nuzzling against the base of Deans. “That...”

James thrust his hips gently, and their lengths slotted together. Bending low, James stifled a moan against Dean’s lips. “That,” he murmured. “Yes, that, definitely that...” Long fingers shifted, circled both of them, and began to stroke.

It took slow moments to get the rhythm. James’ hand enfolded both their cocks, their sensitive flesh rubbed slickly thanks to the generous quantity of Dean’s saliva along James’ length, their bodies rocked together, their lips never parted for more than a moment, Dean’s hands on James’ back and bottom, urging him on. As awkward as it was, it still felt fantastic, and then it all clicked and Dean let his eyes close. He wanted no outside stimulation getting in the way of how perfectly they slotted together. James’ voice, blown rough by passion, rasped between kisses and licks and nips, “so good, it feels so good to be with you again, my Asmodeus, my demon, my Dean.” Dean had no words. Speckled, broken sunlight made patterns against his eyelids. Every grinding pass of James’ hand over them, every twitch and throb of cock against cock, pushed him closer to the edge. James had control of both of them, and it was everything that Dean wanted, and he was close, so close, he was going to spill himself over James’ hand and onto the cloth of their breeks and vests and he didn’t even care because it was going to be the most amazing feeling he’d experienced since...

“Open your eyes, Dean. I want...”

Open your eyes, Dean! hissed a malevolent voice. Open your damn eyes.

“NO!”

Unthinkingly, Dean got his hands between them and pushed the other man away as hard as he could, mind filled with black eyes and Zeus mask and a pink embroidered farce of French Rococo fashion. Beyond his control, his body simultaneously was rocked by his release, so close that even the violence of his fear could not deny it, but the experience was robbed of all pleasure. Terrified, eyes
seeing only black, he rolled weakly away moaning, crying.

A hand landed on his back.

“Get away from me!” he gasped, pushing himself away from the contact. Lashing out with an arm, he struck something solid. He had to open his eyes, he couldn’t fight back if he couldn’t see, but the terror of what awaited him made it hard, and the crashing fatigue of spending himself only made it more challenging. Trembling, he curled in on himself and wept.

Brightness fell on his face, and his brain began to process that something wasn’t as it should be. There was light in the world. There was sound, birds and a chittering of rodents fighting. He could breathe, and cool, clean air filled his lungs. His heartbeat began to slow, his fear to subside. His fingers clutched at the ground, crumpling leaves with a dry rustling sound. This wasn’t right. Nothing about this made sense. Would he open his eyes and find himself in the garden? But it wasn’t night. There was no hand around his throat. Michael – Adam Milligan, he reminded himself forcefully – wouldn’t have stopped because he said to, wouldn’t have backed down until he compelled Dean to say yes.

The truth came to him in a rush, surging guilt and shame through his system. Forcing his eyes open, he looked upon a frightened James in the process of reaching for him again, semen making a sticky mass dirtied by soil and fragments of leaves where he’d wiped his hand on his pants.

“James…I…I’m sorry, I didn’t mean…” Dean blinked back further tears and flushed in embarrassment at his behavior.

The other man reached for him, enfolded him protectively, swaddled Dean’s body with his own. Arms wrapped around his shoulders, legs encircled his, a gentle hand brought Dean’s head to James’ shoulder. “Don’t be,” he said gently. “Please don’t be. I should have realized, I should have thought…”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” huffed Dean with more spirit than he felt. “How could you possibly have known? I hadn’t told you, I was too ashamed. He was – he is…” Dean forced down bile and tried again. “He says that to me. When he stares at me, I can’t – it’s like I can’t even resist him. His eyes…” Salty tracks streaked his cheeks, and anger – at himself, at Milligan – seethed quietly in his gut.

“It’s alright.”

“It’s not alright!” Dean snapped, finding some strength, sitting up. He met James’ startled expression. “There’s nothing about it that’s alright! He doesn’t get to have me. He doesn’t get to make me feel like this. I want you – I only want you – I want to be able to take pleasure from the things we do together, the things you say to me, and I never want to think of him again. He has no right to take these pleasures away from me.”

“How about this, then – it will be alright,” fingers trailed through Dean’s hair and along the back of his neck, and Dean relaxed. “We will overcome this.” James’ words soothed Dean’s anger, but he didn’t allow it to dissipate. Instead, he nurtured the feeling, tended it like a prized rose bush, invested in it against the moment when he next saw Milligan. He needed a reserve of anger to face the man, a source of strength and power ready to flare to life at the first sign of need. He’d not let Milligan have any further hold over him, not let him deprive him of the joy he’d longed for his entire life, the joy he’d finally found in James’ arms. “And in the meantime,” added James dryly. “I will never say that to you again.”

Dean laughed and pressed harder into the comfort and support that James offered him, entwining the
other man in his arms. “Did I hurt you?”

“Not at all,” James reassured him. “Think nothing of it. And do not alarm yourself over the possibility of a reprise – if this happens again, it will still be of no moment to me beyond the concern it brings me for your well-being. Understood?” Dean nodded.

They lay thus for some time, until both had cooled from passion, anger, fear, a swirl of emotions that Dean hoped never to experience simultaneously again. When they felt calm, they cleaned themselves off as best they could and crawled from their haven, emerging into the surprisingly cool light of early afternoon. A chill breeze clattered through the copse, promising colder weather to come, and they received nothing but an eye roll from Singer at their disheveled appearance as they returned to the mounts, climbed into their saddles, and returned to the city.

Introspection cloaked their return trip in quiet. Dean struggled with lingering trepidation and couldn’t miss the worried looks that James gave him, but for that it was still a pleasant, companionable silence, the sort shared by two people comfortable enough with each other that words were not necessary. They navigated the London streets, returned the stable, scrounged the kitchen for lunch, adjourned to the privacy of Dean’s rooms to don clothing that was not stained by mud, covered in leaf fragments, and spattered with dried release. Though the moment could have been intimate, neither made it so. The irony of it was lost on neither, and they returned to the parlor of Dean’s home exchanging wry glances.

“Well, then,” James said. “Do we have further plans? Would you care to part for the day?”

“No!” The exclamation drew a warm glow from James’ cheeks, the skin made rosy by their time in the sun. “Perhaps you have heard, my friends and I are in the process of forming a club – the Intercontinental League? We have a meeting this afternoon, and I’d hoped to introduce you to them.”

“Is this more of your family?” asked James hesitantly. “Should I expect them to be shockingly crass, entirely too familiar, and intimately acquainted with your preferences?”

“Unfortunately not,” Dean shook his head. “Only my immediate family and household are privy to those secrets. However, they are my boon companions, and they are good men. I cannot say if you will like them, or if they will like you, but I like them, and I like you, and it would bring me happiness of all could unite.”

“I would be delighted to make the acquaintance of your friends, Dean,” said James, nodding faintly, lips pursed seriously to match his intense words. The overall effect was precious, and Dean resisted the urge to announce his love yet again, if only because the distraction doing so would likely result in their being late.

They walked over to Mr. Lafitte’s home in high spirits. Though Dean could sense that James was still restraining himself, nervous about being exposed on the street or yet worried about Dean’s embarrassing lapse during their ride, he could also tell how much effort James was putting into behaving like they were any two male friends sharing a walk. Happy to meet him in the effort, Dean also went through the motions, and in no time at all what started as forced play acting became natural, and they laughed and joked freely, if not so flirtatiously as when they were alone.

Mr. and Mrs. Lafitte owned a townhome on a street of middling fashion not far from -----. Dean and James arrived as darkness began to unfurl on the far horizon, spreading gray over the city streets. The robust sound of laughter and talk greeted them as soon as they walked into the foyer, and as they passed a servant their outerwear, Lafitte himself stepped in to the entryway, grinning broadly.

“Winchester! I wondered if you’d make it,” he boomed, drawl incongruous at such volume. “Have
“Not a recruit yet, I fear,” Dean said. “But a friend, I hope.” At James’ curious head tilt, Dean explained quickly, “you have not yet been to three continents, so you do not qualify for membership in the Intercontinental League.”

“Sadly not,” James shook his head. “Far from it, I’ve yet to leave England’s shores. I hope to travel, however, if I can find the time and funds.”

“Mr. Benjamin Lafitte,” introduced Dean hastily, “Mr. James Novak.”

“Well, we’re mostly drinking and playing at cards anyway, so the more the merrier,” though Lafitte’s words were carefree, there was a tightness about his eyes that had not been there moments before. A troubled chill passed through Dean’s spine. If Milligan had leaked the letter, then James’ name would be tied to Dean’s, and their being seen in public together would be inescapably scandalous. Charlie and Mr. Novak had told Dean not to worry about it, though. He shook his head as they followed Lafitte, and was inexpressibly reassured when James found excuse to trail a hand over his arm and offer him a friendly smile.

Introductions were passed all around save where they were unnecessary. Henriksen, Ashley, Freeley, Zeddmore, Gallagher, a dozen others were in attendance, and it was as Lafitte had said – the main occupations appeared to be tumblers of dark liquid and tricks at whist. With the new arrivals, tables were hastily rearranged, and Dean and James found themselves sharing a table with Lafitte and Henriksen. As the two were his closest friends, he nursed the suspicion that this was by design, not coincidence.

“So, this latest trouble of yours,” Henriksen mentioned after they’d played a hand. Whist was one of Dean’s favorite games thanks to the strategy involved and the need to interact with and trust a partner and understand their style of play. He was partnered with James, and was pleased to find him an adept player. They did not do so well as Henriksen and Lafitte only because they were not yet familiar with each other’s strategies, whereas the two friends had been playing partners at whist for years, but Dean didn’t doubt that given time, he and James would become a force to be reckoned with at the table. How he hoped they’d have that time!

“Bad business, that,” said Lafitte as if following a script. Dean scowled slightly and gave them a raised eyebrow. Had they truly rehearsed how to speak with him about the incident at Milligans? “Can’t go assaulting members of the peerage, Winchester.”

“He’s not in the peerage,” said James. “He’s a Mister, like the rest of us.”

“Popular and well liked, though,” Henriksen observed.

“Feared and disliked, I believe,” Dean said. “Tolerated because of his standing and clout.”

“Man doesn’t have clout if no one likes him,” said Lafitte wisely, tapping a pipe against his chin as if he were thinking deeply about what card to play next.

“It won’t happen again, will it?” added Henriksen.

“And if it does?” Dean lowered his cards to the table, no longer willing to pretend that he had any interest in the cards.

“It’s our trick,” James interjected, taking the cards, appearing to be deep in thought over his hand as if the subtext completely eluded him.
“Well, we’d appreciate some warning, is all,” Lafitte drawled, placing a card down.

“Next time Adam Milligan has designs to attack me in his garden, I’ll make sure you’re the first time you know,” said Dean with bitterness and anger.

“Now, don’t grow cross with us,” said Henriksen.

“Your play,” said James, glancing up at Dean with an unreadable expression.

“We know you, Winchester,” Lafitte said. Dean’s eyes narrowed as he picked a card virtually at random and tossed it to the table.

“We know what kind of man you are,” Henriksen nodded his agreement. “But most others do not, nor would they understand and believe even if they did.”

“Further, we know exactly what kind of man Adam Milligan is,” said Lafitte. “Our trick, I believe.” Henriksen nodded agreement and gathered up the four cards. “It turns out a surprising number of men know what kind of man Adam Milligan is.” Lafitte lowered his cards, clamped his teeth around his pipe stem, and met Dean’s gaze, lips curling into a smile.

“Do they?” Dean berated himself for doubting his friends. “That’s fascinating - and informative.”

“Ain’t it ever?” Lafitte chuckled, and returned to studying his cards.

“You could have known too, if you ever pulled your head out of the sand,” Henriksen took up the thread, and gave James a pointed look, who returned it with a clueless smile. James placed a card, and caught Dean’s eyes, and the shrewdness there told him that he was following every word just as closely. “More than a few people of my acquaintance have suggested that while your altercation with Milligan was unusually public, it was not the first such incident that they had heard of. A few interesting names reached my ears.”

“Mr. Demian, for one,” Lafitte took his pipe and gestured at a man that Dean was slightly acquainted with, short and a bit wide about the waist. “Mr. Barnes, for another.”

“That’s very interesting,” said James. “But I thought we were playing whist?” Dean raised an eyebrow at him, and got a slight shake of James’ head in return.

“Indeed, indeed,” Henriksen selected a card. “As far as we’ve been able to find out, Milligan is not a man to be trifled with, and that has made him exceptionally fond of trifling with others.”

“As we see it, it’s about time someone stepped up to put a stop to that,” said Lafitte.

“The elder Mr. Novak – your father?” Henriksen glanced at James.

“Uncle,” supplied the young man.

“Your uncle Novak, as I hear it, witnessed all in the garden and swears that Winchester was set upon,” continued Henriksen. “But he’s not made himself too popular over the years.”

“Too fond of the sound of his own voice,” muttered Lafitte, scowling.

“But if a few more voices start to sing the same tune, well, then the audience will get a much clearer idea of the melody,” Henriksen said.

“A choral comparison?” Lafitte shook his head, amused disgust in his voice. “Really, Henriksen?”
"It seemed apt," shrugged the dark-skinned man.

“Thank you,” Dean said, embarrassed and grateful, his thoughts already sprinting forward on whether he should talk to the men himself or pass the names on to Charlotte. “You’re true friends.”

“Just look out for yourself,” Henriksen said gruffly, giving him a cocked smile that Dean knew hid real affection. Despite his profound love for James, Dean’s heart did the small somersault that had once been boundless and unavoidable at the least affirmation of Henriksen’s friendship for him. Once upon time, he had been extremely, unrequitedly infatuated with the man.

“Damnit, Winchester, are you ever going to play a card?” Lafitte snapped.

James laughed, a bright, infectious sound that broke the serious mood, and they played out the rest of the game to jests and jibes and bantering small talk.

Chapter End Notes

Uh...sorry the smut this chapter got awkward. As I'd originally envisioned it, that all was going to happen, but the chapter was going to end with a whole lot of way more satisfying smut. However, it got super long, so I made the hard choice the change things around.

No promises for next chapter, but...
The Eve of the Storm

Chapter Notes

Minor retcon: while I was doing character research, I realized I'd mixed up which characters was Barnes and which was Demian. (They're the two dudes who cosplay as Sam and Dean in "The Real Ghostbusters," in case you were wondering...). So, I've switched that 'round in the previous chapter, and the change is reflected in this one!

Sorry bout that!

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

The unusually loud clatter of hooves on the street outside of 13 ---- Place drew Ms. Harvelle to the window to peer outside curiously. In the time it took her to cross the room, their visitor was upon them as Samuel burst into the room. His cheeks were aglow with excitement and the exertion of his ride, his eyes shadowed with fatigue, and his clothes thoroughly rumpled.

“It’s a boy!” He announced delightedly.

“Oh, Samuel, that’s wonderful!” exclaimed Charlotte, leaping to her feet to catch Sam in an enthusiastic embrace. “And Jessica is well?” Ms. Harvelle traipsed across the room to join in the hug.

“All that is perfect and wondrous, as always,” said Sam happily. “Ellen said it was the easiest delivery she’s ever assisted in.”

Dean rose more slowly, and waited until the women had moved aside to catch his brother in a rough, manly hug. “Welcome to fatherhood,” he said with a grin. “So, what are you doing here? The ladies chase you out?”

“I always meant to come back afterwards,” Samuel shrugged. Removing his overcoat, he threw it negligently over a chair and slumped into it, sighing gratefully to have soft cushions supporting him instead of hard leather. “Perhaps not so soon...” The joy on his face faded and he gave Dean a serious glower. “Charlotte wrote me about what happened at the ball.”

“Of course she did,” Dean sighed and resumed his own seat. That simple statement hid so much more, and made Dean anxiously restless. It was only 7 days since the ball at Milligans. For a letter to have arrived so quickly, Charlie must have sent it express, and Sam must have departed nearly on the instant of receiving it. Surely the situation was not so urgent as that? Dean wasn’t sure what to make of the possibility that it was.

“I have a plan,” continued Sam. He leaned forward intently, settling his elbows on his knees and meeting each gaze in turn as Charlie and Ms. Harvelle resumed their seats and took up the sewing that had kept them barely entertained through a Thursday morning without any visitors come to call. “I challenge Milligan to a duel.”

Charlie snorted incredulously. “Really, Sam Winchester?” Ms. Harvelle rolled her eyes. “Letting Milligan shoot you will accomplish...what exactly?”

“No, hear me out,” Sam said earnestly. “I’m a good shot – aren’t I?” He turned to Dean for support,
who nodded. “I’ve already won...oh, five or six duels, I’d say.”

“Seven,” Dean supplied, having been in his brother’s second in every one, as distasteful as he’d found it. There had been a point in Sam’s life where the exchange of slights had almost inevitably lead to someone naming a time and place. More to be thankful for, that Sam had never been seriously hurt, that none of the young fools involved had died.

“If Milligan even accepts the duel, I’ve already won,” said Sam. “There’d be no call for him to answer my request for satisfaction unless he’d wronged Dean.”

“Which is why he’d never accept,” said Charlie. “I appreciate that you have tried to think of a solution, Samuel, but do not, under any circumstances, attempt to implement this course of action. As I keep reminding Dean, the situation is under control. All we need is time.”

“So, there’s really a plan?” said Sam in measured tones.

“There is, truly, a thorough plan I am certain will succeed,” agreed Charlotte. “Given enough time.” Dean bit back an irritated snort. Charlie wrote to Sam express, Sam arrived in days despite Jessica’s recent delivery, and they had time? It didn’t make sense.

“Tell me.”

“No.”

“I’ve a right to know,” began Sam, huffing angrily.

“Indeed you do,” Charlotte nodded with a pleasant smile that broke into a faint scowl as her thread snapped. “And I’ll happily acquaint you with the details, and welcome your aid, but not while Dean is present.”

“That’s how things are?” Sam eyed the husband and wife in turn.

“That’s how things are,” Dean sighed and rose to pace the room in irritation. “Though I wish you would permit me to speak with Mr. Barnes and Mr. Damian.”

“What would you say to them, if you had the opportunity?” said Charlotte, putting aside her embroidery in disgust. Ms. Harvelle picked it up instantly and went about repairing the damage she’d done.

“That I know what kind of man Milligan is,” Dean shrugged. “That while I do not know what was said and done to them, I can speak to what was done to me and would not see it done to others. That if they wish to help, they should speak to you, and I will make the introductions. I am already acquainted with Mr. Demian, and Mr. Barnes is a close friend of his. It would be easily accomplished to call on Mr. Demian, and I see only good in discovering more men who can speak to the truth of the accusations we can level.”

“You presume that we will be leveling accusations, instead of finding a way to resolve this that does not require exposing you,” Charlotte said, tone half statement, half questioning.

“At this point, I feel my exposure to be inevitable, and regard the rest as mere efforts to save face. So far as I am concerned, if I’m to be ruined, we can at least destroy Milligan as well,” said Dean, rounding on a heel and marching back to the window. “However, I fear we must leave the conclusion of this discussion to another time, for the Milligans are outside.”

A knock on the door a moment later confirmed the truth of Dean’s observations, and they were
invaded by the lot. Ms. Masters came first this time, but her entrance was completely overshadowed
by Mr. Inias Milligan, who took in the room in a heartbeat and exclaimed with a delighted shout
“Winchester!” upon espying Samuel. Sam was on his feet in an instant and the two shook hands,
grinning. “Did you hear about the upset at Newmarket?”

“No, I...”

Samuel trailed off as Ms. Milligan came in, arm resting demurely on James Novak’s arm. Ms.
Milligan’s pretty face looked troubled, and James’ was tight about the eyes in a way that made Dean
extremely nervous. The Elephant’s Eye yet nestled on the pale flesh above her bosom. Dean, Charlie
and Ms. Harvelle rose to meet their visitors, and there was a pause of awkward silence. They had not
seen the Milligans since the ball a week before.

“Mr. Winchester, it is a pleasure to see you again,” Ms. Milligan broke the tension, tone restrained
but tinged with pleasure. “Is Mrs. Winchester well? Are congratulations in order?”

“They are,” Sam said. “She bore us a son Friday last, and both are healthy and hearty. We’ve named
him Henry, after my uncle and grandfather.”

“That is excellent news,” said James, a smile easing the tension that had the skin of his face taut.

“Thank you...?”

“Ah, sorry,” Dean stepped in. “Mr. James Novak, my brother, Mr. Samuel Winchester.” The two
shook hands, and Dean saw a familiar, assessing look in Samuel’s eyes as he looked at first James,
then Dean, in turn.

“A pleasure to make your acquaintance,” said Samuel. “Ms. Milligan has spoken of you a great deal.
Congratulations on your engagement!”

“You’ve not seen what he gave me,” gushed Ms. Milligan, presenting the star sapphire for Sam’s
inspection. “Is it not lovely?”

“It is,” Sam stammered, clearly surprised to see the usually modest young woman so forward. “Very
like one that I saw last year at Mr. Whittaker’s. Do you recall it, Dean? You were quite taken with it,
as I remember.”

“I thought it attractive,” Dean shrugged with his best imitation of polite indifference. To cover any
lapses, he hastily returned to his seat as everyone around the room sought places to sit save Sam and
Mr. Milligan. “However, it was too rich for my blood.”

“Oh! Was it terribly expensive, Mr. Novak?” concerned, Ms. Milligan turned to James. More eyes
were on Dean’s now: Charlie caught his eyes and looked heavenward by way of the vocal scold
he’d likely receive later for opening his mouth on the topic at all; Sam’s were growing progressively
narrower as he looked from Dean, to James, to Ms. Milligan, and back, and Dean scanned his
thoughts in an effort to recall precisely what he’d said to his brother about Castiel; and Ms. Masters’
had grown pensive and weighing.

“I know not,” James colored and hastily covered it with a shy lowering of his eyes. “It was gifted
me, I’ll confess.”

“You gave me the gift of another?” Ms. Milligan looked at him with surprise. “I had assumed it a
family memento.”

“So it is, now,” Dean cut in, determined to shield James. “Bestowing it upon you has ensured that,
Ms. Milligan.” James’ eyes widened, and he colored more deeply. A movement to Dean’s side drew Dean’s eyes to his brother, who nodded once decisively. A topic change was definitely, most certainly, absolutely in order. “Ms. Milligan, if I may – I wished to apologize to you, to express my sincerest regrets, that my actions resulted in disruption at the ball. I’d not have done anything to cast a shadow on a night to celebrate your happiness, not for all the world.”

Flushing, Ms. Milligan refused to look at him, casting a worried sidelong glance at James, who appeared at a complete loss for how to reply. Dean’s heart ached to see the conflict that James was subjected to, and wondered at his angel’s decision to accompany the Milligan party at all. Forced to play attendance to Ms. Milligan, when the entire Winchester family was aware of the truth of his inclinations, while Ms. Milligan, Mr. Milligan and Ms. Masters were entirely in the dark.

“And yet, you did,” said Ms. Masters bluntly. Startled, he looked at her. The look of assessment in her eyes was gone, and in its place, a languid expression hid anger. “Or was it Mr. Milligan who did?” Dean expected the later to resemble and accusation, and was surprised to find no hint of such.

“Meg, please,” Ms. Milligan soothed, catching Ms. Masters’ eyes and, remarkably, forcing the other woman to look away. “I’d thought not to discuss the matter,” she continued at a more regular volume. “I am well enough acquainted with you, Mr. Winchester, to know that you do not go about willy-nilly. All I’ve been able to determine is that there must be some vast misunderstanding – my father will not speak of it to me, you understand? Third parties have surely had a hand in poisoning the ear of each against the other. My aunt Mrs. Novak imputes all manner of ill-will on your part, but she knows you not, nor for all her condemnation can she say why you behaved as you did.”

“That is the mystery of it, is it not?” drawled Ms. Masters, leaning back in her chair. “For both of you to act so far out of character is remarkable. Ms. Milligan supposes third parties intervened, but I do wonder if not grave provocation was involved.” She gave Dean a steely-eyed look, and all attention came to Dean, even that of Mr. Milligan and Sam. Dean swallowed, at a complete loss of what to say.

“This is a fine way to treat a host,” James interjected quietly. The eyes that had been on Dean swept to James in an instant, and the young man flinched at the intensity of being the sole focus of the room. Dean veered between the urgent need to spare him exposure, and immense gratitude at the support. “We come into Mr. Winchester’s home and interrogate him? I thought we had resolved we’d not come at all if we though his sins so great as Mrs. Novak believes them to be.”

“That is true,” Ms. Milligan rose, startling Ms. Masters and James, and crossed to Charlie, managing a lady-like squat before her. “I am sorry, Mrs. Winchester. It is difficult – he is my father – but I came only with the intention of saying that, knowing not the truth of the case, I do not blame Mr. Winchester any more than I could ever lay guilt at my father’s feet. I value your friendship far too much to allow such to come between us!”

“Let the men tussle,” Ms. Masters was smiling now. What was she at, Dean wondered with exasperation, unable to keep track of her lightning-fast mood changes. “We women can manage our own way.”

“Are we being chased from the room?” demanded Mr. Milligan, affronted. Samuel laughed.

“If such is the case, perhaps you will accompany me?” Sam immediately segued. “I’d like to hear about Newmarket, and I must to The Temple of Muses to pick up an order. Would you accompany me?”

“The bookstore?” grumbled Mr. Milligan. “Well, if we must.”
“You’re to Lackington’s?” James’ expression brightened. “May I go with you? Are you coming as well, Mr. Winchester?”

“I’m afraid not,” Dean begged off, stung as some of the gleam in James’ eyes fell away. Had it truly only been a day since they’d seen each other? It felt like far longer. “I’ve an acquaintance to call upon.”

“That reminds me,” James said. “My uncle is to host a dinner next week, Tuesday, for the Milligans and for several other friends, and has asked me to pass on invitation to the Winchesters as well. I know it will be awkward – but he suggests that it worth the difficulty to restore amity between the families and to quiet the scandal that is damaging all in its spread.”

“What a noble man your uncle is,” said Ms. Milligan, giving James an adoring smile that closed over Dean’s heart like a vise as surely as did the possibility of attending a dinner with Adam Milligan. With difficulty, he forced himself to focus on the continuing conversation around him.

“Charity and forgiveness are not virtues I’ve ascribed to Mr. Milligan,” Ms. Masters observed.

“Do you not think so?” said Ms. Milligan sadly. “I’d like to think that upon better acquaintance...”

“I’m sure that Mr. Gabriel Novak will do all he can to fix matters,” said Charlie in a firm tone that cut off further conversation. “Mr. Novak, pray tell your uncle that he can expect to see all of the Winchesters in attendance.”

“Thanks, ma’am, I will.”

Dean’s breathing grew more stuttered, the mostly-healed bruises around his throat aching as if they’d just been made. Retreating to the relative seclusion of the hallway, he stepped away as Mr. Milligan, Sam and James made their preparations to depart. The spoke, but he was unable to attend them, and only the sound of the door opening and closing gave him the privacy to gather his thoughts.

A hand settled on his shoulder, and he jumped, spinning around. James stood behind him, brow knit with concern. “I must go,” he said softly. “But I had to see you tranquilized, and tell you that, at my uncles, with your family in attendance, none will allow harm to come to you.”

“I’m well, James,” Dean mustered a reassuring smile, and got one in return. “You should...”

“Novak,” the door cracked open once more and Mr. Milligan called in loudly. “Are you coming, man?”

“Yes, Milligan,” James called back over his shoulder. “I’ve found my hat, out in a moment.” Their eyes met, and instantly calmed Dean’s fears. A hand quickly reached out and glanced over his cheek, and then his angel hurried out the door to the sound of a scolding from Inias Milligan for the delay, scant as it was.

Donning overcoat and hat, Dean walked through a brisk afternoon to call on Mr. Demian, wondering how he would broach the difficult topics that he had to bring up without mortifying or frightening the other man. A light, frigid rain fell in occasional spurts and kept people off the streets, and a sharp wind persistently blew Dean’s coat about, try as he might to keep a hand on it.

Considering how grim the weather was, Dean felt surprisingly good. The anger he’d nurtured inside himself glowed a dull warmth, even at the prospect of seeing Milligan again, and Charlie’s confidence that what she was doing would work was infectious. It was fantastic to have Sam back, and to know that Jessica and the baby were both healthy. Best of all, he was finally able to act, to have something useful he could to do to further his own cause.
In all likelihood, Demian had already been or was still being subjected to blackmail by Mr. Adam Milligan, and Dean had no wish to add to that burden by giving the man the least reason to think that Dean would abuse him similarly. On the other hand, Dean only barely knew Demian, and knew not what sort of man he was. The entire situation was fraught and thorny, and Dean’s patience for was threadbare. Not for the first time, he considered the merits of washing hands of all and retiring to the country. To escape from the suspicions and whispers of the city, to return to a place where he was comfortable and known, would be extremely pleasant. However, leaving now would necessitate separating from James. He’d no wish to accelerate that inevitable division, had not yet even found the nerve to discuss with the other man how they intended to proceed in the future. It was a sobering thought, tempering Dean’s improved mood as he reached Mr. Demian’s door and used the brass knocker mounted on the door of the modest, gentlemanly home.

A servant answered, took Dean’s damp coat and showed him into a study, where a surprised Mr. Demian rose politely.

“Mr. Winchester,” he said with the ghost of a smile, offering a hand. “To what do I owe the pleasure?” Mr. Demian was a short man, rotund and bulky without appearing obese. His face was round and fleshy, his hair brown with a curl over his forehead, and he wore a beard to hid that he had no chin. A vision struck Dean powerfully – a heavy set man in green satin, yellow breeks and a Guy Fawkes mask, dancing with a tall man dressed as an eagle, dancing at the first soiree that Dean attended. That any too man so short yet so square could be a part of the same small social scene seemed suddenly too great a coincidence to believe, and if Dean recalled the times that Mr. Barnes had been pointed out to him, the man was tall and so thin he was nearly gaunt.

“Mr. Demian,” Dean said, with a bob of his head and a handshake. They stood in silence, and Dean realized that he truly hadn’t the least idea how to broach the topic.

“Perhaps we could repair to the sitting room? I’ll have tea brought in,” suggested Mr. Demian, with a gesture towards the door. Dean nodded. Moments later saw them installed in a pleasant parlor decorated in dark colors, deeply stained wood and burgundy. They made small talk about travel and the Intercontinental League, and a tea tray was brought in. The rituals attendant on serving the tea and biscuits afforded several additional minute’s distraction. Tempering the heated brew with milk, Dean debated fiercely whether to be evasive or tell all.

“Word of the incident at the ball last week has quite taken the city by storm,” said Mr. Demian tentatively. Demian lifted his teacup to his lips, sampled it, and set it aside upon finding it too hot.

“It has that,” replied Dean, glad for the opening. “We are recently met, Mr. Demian, but I do not, contrary to reputation, make a habit of engaging in brawls with my hosts. Please have no concerns on that score.”

“That’s why you’ve come?”

Nodding, Dean considered all the things he could say next, and realized with a visible start that he was utterly fed up with double talk. “I fought with Mr. Milligan over a personal matter that he is quite determined to see not be personal. My friends have led me to think that you have experienced similar, and that you presumably alluded to such while discussing the matter with them. I hoped you might be candid with me, and I with you, and perhaps we could work together to prevent further indignities being visited on ourselves or others in the future.”

Mr. Demian blinked at him, then broke in to the first genuine smile that Dean had seen on his face.
“May I say, I was extremely gratified at the report of the injuries that Mr. Milligan sustained?” The smile subsided, and a scowl took its place. “Would that I’d had the nerve to do the same when he came to me. As it was, it seemed a small matter to give him what he wanted rather than face the consequences, and so I told him all he wished to know.”

“And then...?”

“And then nothing, there were no further consequences, nor have additional demands made of me,” Demian shrugged, but there was a smoldering anger in his eyes. “He wished names, and I gave them him, and he hasn’t troubled me again. It is not the crimes against myself that make me loathe and despise the man. I wish him to the devil, if you’ll forgive my language.”

With a quake of nerves, Dean raised a hand to his throat. The man had been at the soirees, and clearly knew about Milligan. The genuine rage masked beneath his features as he tried to continue his narrative convinced Dean more than any declaration of trustworthiness ever could have that Demian was a man who would work with him to see Milligan brought low. Curious, Demian watched him as Dean deliberately undid the tie on his cravat and unwound the length of linen to reveal the fading yellowed bruises about his neck. Demian’s breath hissed through his teeth, and he grimaced sympathetically. Dean’s lungs protested for imagined lack of oxygen, and he took measured breaths, counting to four on each one as he forced himself to calmness.

“Yes, just the same,” Demian said, voice thick with indignation and ire. “Just the very same. So was done to Mr. Barnes, and for that I’ll say whatever you need of me to bring Michael to his knees.”

“Mr. Barnes is a tall man, is he not? Nose like an eagles?” The pair had looked so happy together, dancing at the soiree. Dean wondered if Mr. Barnes had said yes to Milligan. It was none of his business.

“Indeed, and he will help as well,” said Mr. Demian. “I’ve already spoken with him on the matter. As long as he believed it was merely himself who had been so assaulted, he understandably did what he must to protect his family and reputation. It may surprise you, Mr. Winchester, but society’s determination to condemn you for your actions has had benefits. It has ensured that word of your hurt as spread, and those of us who hear of it and who know what Milligan is can easily surmise the truth and imagine what you were subjected to. Neither of us is prepared to stand aside and allow you to face the consequences alone, knowing how innocent you are of any wrongdoing. Tell us the plan, and we will be there.”

“Thank you,” said Dean, voice rough. He could hear the sincerity in Mr. Demian’s voice, his hurt, his affection for Mr. Barnes. “I don’t know the plan.” Demian blinked at him. “What happened last week was not the first time that I and Milligan interacted, and I have not handled it well. When she learned the truth, my wife stepped in to...” He fished for the right word. Protect? Defend? Shield? All were rather mortifying to admit to, that a man such as he, nigh six feet, strong, broad, muscled, had to stand behind a woman nearly a foot shorter, so slim and apparently fragile. “...handle the matter, as I have not the social clout to combat Michael’s efforts to whittle down my reputation and render me vulnerable to his...direct persuasion. It is she who can tell you how best to help, not I. Would it be acceptable if she called on you tomorrow? Might Mr. Barnes be able to attend as well? I expect she’ll bring a gentleman with her as well, Mr. Gabriel Novak—”

“I know Novak,” said Demian with evident distaste.

“Do not hold it too much against him, whatever it is he has done to offend,” Dean suggested bluntly, wrapping his cravat anew. “Milligan may be his brother-in-law, but that has not spared him. He has been subjected to black mail as well.” Demian’s expression softened. “Thank you, for speaking to Lafitte, for meeting with me, and for being willing to help. We’ll never know how many Milligan
has harmed, but I do know that if more men had your bravery, yours and Mr. Barnes’, many would have been spared. By acting now, we can ensure that many more in the future will be.”

“Thank you, Mr. Winchester,” replied Demian, breaking into a grin. “It is a noble thing you are doing, risking your own future to expose a monster who has masqueraded as a gentleman for far too long. Now, forgive me, I am sure this is difficult for you to speak of but I must know – I’ve heard from Mr. Tran, who says he witnessed all – is it true that your manservant hit Mr. Milligan in the head with a shovel?”

“It is,” Dean broke into a broad smile. “The sound it made when the metal struck his skull? Indescribable.”

“Please – try,” Demian gave him a wicked wink, and Dean did his best to explain the small amount of physical comeuppance that had come to Milligan. The man deserved to be horsewhipped. Such was surely never to come, Charlie and Novak would focus their revenge on the social, but at least Milligan had endured some of the thrashing that he had coming to him ten times over, and Demian and Barnes deserved to know of it.

By the time Dean left the Demian house sometime later, he was fatigued and stretched thin. Though he clung to his lingering anger and the ever-supportive memories of James, speaking of what had happened left him feeling dirty. There was an inescapable feel of fingers pressed tauntingly into his skin, and no matter how he tried otherwise, his breath rasped through his throat. It was midday, the rain was mixing with snow to render the streets entirely inhospitable, and Dean faced the prospect of returning home to spend an afternoon and evening doing nothing. They’d originally had a dinner, but they’d been disinvited in the wake of the events of the ball. To fill the empty time, Charlotte and Ms. Harvelle had obtained theater tickets, but Dean had declined their suggestion that he attend as well. He could think of no compelling reason to expose himself to such a swath of the public merely to again watch the lovers of Twelfth Night find their inevitable way to the happiness that so eluded him. For some time, he walked aimlessly through the streets, past empty stores manned by forlorn shopkeepers, over bare, slippery sidewalks, to the accompaniment of a silence shocking in so large a city, broke only by the susurration of rain sluicing off buildings and the occasional rattling passage of a carriage with curtains drawn against the weather.

It was dangerous to call on James. He knew it to be, felt it keenly, yet he wanted nothing more. The house was so close, and after Inias Milligan, Sam and James finished their errand, James would presumably accompany the Milligans and Ms. Masters back to Mr. Adam Milligan’s home, then return to his own. With no knowledge of James’ plans for the evening, it was exceedingly presumptuous to show up at his home and presume him available. Further, if any should learn that they’d been together, it strengthened Milligan’s leverage against Dean, damaged their chances of establishing a relationship that could be maintained safely, and risked both their reputations.

Weighed against the possibility of seeing James, of speaking with him, of touching him, of being touched by him, all such objections seemed paltry.

Looking around, he realized his feet had already found their way to ----- Boulevard, with number 7 a few doors down, a fine, large house fronted in white stone with a columned portico. Whatever his head said, it was pretty obvious that his body and heart were in concurrence. Taking a deep breath, he approached and knocked.

“May I help you, sir?” asked the butler who answered the door, a stately gentleman in forest green livery and a strange, short hat.

“Is Mr. Gabriel Novak in?” he asked self-consciously. Even if James had returned, it was safer to ask after the elder man.
“Is that Winchester?” called Novak’s voice from somewhere within. “Bring him in, bring him in!”

The butler nodded and granted Dean entry to the dim hall, helping him remove his sodden coat. Enough rain had soaked him that even his jacket had grown damp, and the skin of his hands and face felt clammy. “This way, sir.”

Mr. Novak was installed in his study, a room heavy with wood paneling and leather-bound books. He looked up from surveying a ledger, set his quill aside, and waited until the door had shut behind his butler. “Are you really here to see me?” he asked dryly, without preamble.

“If Novak is in, I’d hoped for his company,” admitted Dean. “However...”

“However, you couldn’t exactly come to the door and ask for him?” Novak chuckled. “You’re in luck, after a fashion. James is not in, but I expect he’ll return soon. Mrs. Novak is out and will be until at least tomorrow, and I will be back so late as makes no difference.” There was a knowing gleam in Novak’s eye and a catch of laughter in his voice that completely escaped Dean’s understanding. When Novak realized that Dean was oblivious to the joke, he rolled his eyes. “What day of the week is it, Winchester?”

“Thursday...”

“What happens on the third Thursday of each month?”

“Tonight is Ms. Naomi’s soiree!” he realized, feeling the fool.

Tonight marks one year since I met Castiel – since I met James.

“The house is all yours,” said Novak with a saucy grin. “Try not to make too much work for the servants? They do talk, you know.”

“We’ll be discrete, I promise,” Dean said, coloring.

“Well, get out of here,” Novak said, making a dismissive gesture with his hand. “I’ve work to finish before I go. I expect James will be back soon. Try to wait until I’m out of house, will you?”

Coloring more deeply, Dean walked across the hall to the familiar blue and white sitting room. It felt very empty with not a soul in it, agonizingly quiet, and he paced back and forth before settling before the window, his back to the door. He told himself he was definitely not watching for James’ return, but it was a ridiculous conceit. He didn’t fool himself in the slightest. Figures passed by, mostly men, all huddled against the wind that drove flakes and droplets into faces, whipped at coats and capes, and threw hats to a sad fate beneath horse’s hooves and carriage wheels. The afternoon grew darker. A servant came in, stoked the fire and lit the candles, asking him politely if he’d like anything. He shook her off. His stomach was twisted in anticipation, and though he’d not eaten all day, the thought of food was nauseating. His clothing dried to his body, his skin gradually grew warm, people passed by, but there was no sign of James. Dusk fell, and the wintry mix gave way entirely to snow, slowly coating the streets. The gas lamps at intervals along the road struggled valiantly against the drifting flakes, but could manage only small yellow pools of light with darkness between.

Anticipation morphed into apprehension. If James had accompanied Ms. Milligan and Inias Milligan back to the Milligan house, he might have seen the patriarch of the family. What if something had befallen him? With increasing nerves that set Dean’s heart thrumming and his lungs laboring, he stared at each passing figure, attempting to discern the lean figure of an angel beneath the layers of overture, the shock of black hair covered by a hat, the shadow of blue eyes locked on the treacherous ground. A tap on the door drew Dean’s attention, and he turned to see Mr. Novak. He wore his entirely black suit, as Dean had seen him wear in the guise of Loki at the Soirees, with only the black
cloth mask missing.

“Did you tell him of you would be calling this evening?” asked Novak with curious exasperation.

“No,” confessed Dean. “I had no intention of calling, when we met earlier. I decided on the spur of the moment when I found myself in your neighborhood.”

“Has it occurred to you that there is a high likelihood that he is at your home, awaiting you as you await him?” Dean shook his head, surprised. It was possible, he supposed. He’d told no one he’d not be returning, they must be growing concerned even if James was not waiting as keenly as Dean was. Regardless, he should return home and inform them that he was well, and give up the folly of stealing precious hours with James. “I’ll do you a favor, Winchester – I’ll call at ---- Place on my way to Ms. Naomi’s, and let them know that Milligan has not killed you and dumped your body in the Thames. If James is there, I’ll send him over.”

“Thank you,” he said, guilty. He should have thought this through, should have gone home first, but he’d wanted to see James so very badly.

“Don’t thank me, I wouldn’t bother except the home that Mrs. Novak took for ‘Ms. Naomi’ for the year is only a short ways beyond yours,” Novak shrugged indifferently and departed.

In the quiet, empty house, the wait seemed interminable. The darkened streets showed Dean nothing but occasional dark figures slogging through gradually deepening snow. He paced, returned to stillness, asked the servant for a book, but found he could not concentrate on the words, and took up his lonely vigil at the window once more. As the fire warmed the room and the night outside grew more chill, mist fogged over the panes until Dean could see nothing, and yet he stared, at a loss for what else to do with himself.

The door opened. Dean’s eyes slipped shut and he turned from the rhimed window.

“Dean.”

Opening his eyes once more, he beheld his angel. Fragments of memory of their first meeting flashed through his mind. Blue eyes seen across a dance floor, curious and bright but unfamiliar, now looking upon Dean as if he were all that was radiant and good in the world. A draped white robe, nearly feminine in the silhouette it formed, now replaced by an entirely masculine accoutrement, fitted brown jacket, black vest, blue shirt, cream pants and black boots. Black wings caught the light and shimmered, absent now completely, not seen since that painful night in May. A painted porcelain mask hid all features save black hair and glorious eyes, now revealed into the true face of Dean’s angel, cheeks brushed with dark stubble after a day about town, expression elated, prominent brow, delicately curved chin ever so slightly cleft, perfectly shaped nose, full pink lips spread into a smile.

A surge of possessiveness swept through Dean, and he crossed the room and wrapped his arms around James, leaning his head down to catch those lips and feel that smile against his skin. James anticipated him, met Dean half way, ran an arm along Dean’s spine and the other down to lay a hand cupping his buttocks. Lips worked against lips, tongues danced together and flitted apart. Their eyes slipped shut, and there was nothing but darkness and sensation, small bursts of heat lacerating him as they kissed, hands rubbing against his body. Dean’s fingers following every hard plane of James’ back until he found a soft depression, massaging, easing away every tension. With a sigh, James leaned into his body, and Dean supported them both easily.

Breaking from the kiss, Dean shifted to James’ neck, worming his tongue beneath the cravat to lick at James’ flickering pulse. Their cheeks rubbed together roughly, stubble abrading against stubble. Relaxing into him further, James whispered into his ear, “Upstairs, Asmodeus.”
“Lead the way, Castiel,” Dean murmured back, trailing kisses along James’ ear as he did so.

They made it as far as the base of the staircase before stopping to kiss again – fortunately not a servant in sight. Dean got a foot on the first stair, and James shifted, climbed two up, and forced Dean against the banister, kissing him deeply, bending Dean’s back over it. The kiss broke off and James pulled away, taking in the view. “Oh, I like that idea. You, bent against the wood...” He pulled Dean up a half dozen steps, turning him to face outwards. Forced to lean out over the open space, Dean felt a wash of vertigo that made him pleasantly dizzy, amplified a hundredfold when James grabbed his hips and dragged Dean’s buttocks against his crotch. The feel of James’ stiff arousal forced a faint moan from Dean’s lips, and he instinctively grabbed the banister and pushed himself back against the contact, rubbing wantonly. James swallowed a groan. “You’d like that, my demon?”

“Yes,” the words was harsh and low with breathiness. ‘God, yes. But your uncle has asked us not to scandalize the household help...”

“Very well,” James pulled away, “Some other time.” Dean’s knees failed him, he slumped weakly down with a moan at the loss of contact. Shaking slightly, Dean got his legs beneath him and turned to see James looking at him expectantly, grinning, perfect gaze alight with expectation, dark with lust. He held out a hand to Dean, who took it. They skipped up the last few steps, and James dragged him into a bedroom, closing the door behind him.

Dean took in the room in an instant, indifferent to the details. Though there was only dim light from a sconce and a banked fire, the pale colors with which the room was decorated made it seem brighter. The curtains and blankets were in shades of cream, the furniture was pale wood simply worked, and a pristine carpet in pastels that appeared gray in the dimness covered the floor.

Taking a key from the mantle, James placed it in the door, then hesitated. “Dean, is it alright if I lock the door?”

A disused lock squeaking as, outside of the room, a key was turned...

Dean swallowed, forced the thought away, and nodded. “Yes. I’d rather the household not interrupt us. I’d rather nothing interrupt us, ever.” Nodding his agreement, James used the key, set it back on the mantle, turned, and waited, eyes lowered.

Aching with anticipation, desperately hard at the thought of what was to come – so long, it’s been so long, can it possibly be as good to be joined as I remember? – Dean stood and wondered what was holding James back.

“I’ve been thinking,” James said, licking his lips with obvious nerves. Shame twisted Dean’s mouth. This was about the previous day. James was going to say he was uncomfortable – suggest they wait – indicate he’d rather... “I want to make sure you’re alright, that at every possible point we have ensured that you are safe and comfortable. I told you, it makes me ill when you look at me and I see pain and fear upon your features. Though I know I am not the culprit, not the author of your distress, I am nonetheless the immediate cause, and it’s a wretched feeling – and surely a trifle beside how you feel. I’ve been considering how best to prevent a repeat, and I had an idea. I think it might even be fun. What if...” He met Dean’s eyes and blushed adorably. With effort, Dean softened his expression, let his own fear go. Dear, loving James, so determined not to cause Dean unhappiness that he’d spent time thinking about how best to make love to avoid Dean’s discomfort. Dear, loving James, spending extensive time over the previous day considering how best to make love to Dean. It was tremendously endearing and irresistibly enticing. A smile lit James’ face as Dean’s expression grew warm, and Dean gave him an encouraging nod. “You are going to tell me exactly what you want me to do. Precisely. And I will do what you say – nothing more, nothing less.”
“I want you to make love to me,” said Dean in a rush.

“No, not so general,” James shook his head, though he was smiling, his cheeks bright, his eyes lidded with want. “Is it alright if I demonstrate?” Dean nodded. “Dean, I want you to kiss me. And...while you do, remove my cravat.” There was command in James’ eyes, and a shiver of anticipation ran through Dean. As he closed the space between them, wrapped an arm around James’ waist and pressed their lips together, it crossed Dean’s mind that the orders themselves were pleasurable. Not having to think what to do next, simply being told, brought a casual freedom from worry. He didn’t need to guess what James wanted, for James would tell him.

With one hand, Dean massaged the small of James’ back, and with the other he slowly, carefully picked at the knot in the cravat, mouth working against James’ all the while. Small movements, a flick of his tongue against James’ lips, a tender nip at his lips, catching James’ full lower lip between both of his and drawing back, only to close in once more. Their bodies rubbed together lazily, in time to their kissing, and Dean unwrapped the length of linen encircling James’ neck, caressing the skin beneath as he did. The urge to trail his mouth along the exposed line of James’ neck was powerful, and he had to remind himself not to, remind himself that he was at James’ command and was not to do anything but what was told him.

James broke away from the kiss and breathed into Dean’s ear, “my neck – kiss my neck.” Dean smiled against his chin at their shared thought and followed the order, using his lips to massage in every dip, nipping and sucking along each tendon, until he reached the hollow at the base of James’ neck. There, he focused, licking, laving, sucking at it until James whimpered and then gently kissing the mild hurt away. “Do you think you can do that?” James finally. “Do you think you can tell me what you want?”

“I’d rather you keep telling me what you want,” admitted Dean, reluctantly removing his mouth from the flesh he’d teased to redness. He looked up and met James’ eyes. “It feels more natural to me.”

“I thought it might,” James gave him half a smile. “In truth, it does to me as well. But I don’t want to risk causing you panic again. It was fearful to see you so out of sorts. If we do it this way, I’ll be able to learn what is safe, I can hear from your own mouth what feels good to you, and what does not.”

“But we can do the other, another time?”

There was not a moment’s hesitation when James replied, “absolutely. I promise you.” For that certainty, for James’ absolute conviction that future opportunities awaited when they would pleasure each other, Dean adored him as he never had before.

“Alright.” Dean took a step back from James, surveying his appearance once more. Cravat gone, his jacket and vest were still buttoned up neatly over his shirt, and every line of his erection bulged clearly against his breeks. The look on his face was pure desire – that expression that promised that he was going to make every one of Dean’s secret wishes come true, and that he was going to love every minute of doing so. It was breathtaking. “You’re beautiful, James.”

“And you...you are the most handsome man I’ve ever laid eyes on,” breathed James. “I desire you so strongly I am sick with it. Tell me what you want. I’m yours to use as you will.”

Dean didn’t even know where to begin. Staring at the outline of James’ cock, all he could think was, _I want that inside of me, right now. Five minutes ago, if that’s possible_. However, as much as his thoughts screamed for haste, a growing part of him longed to take this slowly, to savor it. So much of their love making had been driven by frantic need, by the knowledge that they had limited time and might never have another chance to be together. _But we can do the other, another time_ , Dean’s thoughts echoed their conversation of a moment before, and he smiled.
“Take your clothing off,” Dean said, rough and harsh. James tensed with the slightest of shivers, and he nodded. “Is it okay if I touch you?” James was already dropping to the ground, reaching towards his boots.

“You don’t have to ask,” said James. “If you do something I do not like, trust me to speak my objection. Otherwise, as I said: do as you will, and I will do whatever you command.”

“When you’re done removing your boots, I want you to stand to take off the rest.”

The vision of what was to come was already forming more clearly in Dean’s thoughts. His member twitched with anticipation. James tugged a boot off hastily, removed the other, and rose gracefully to his feet. Every one of his movements was elegant, long legs comely in his breeks, arms strong and sure. Sure fingers undid the buttons of his jacket and vest. James stared hungrily at Dean as Dean devoured the sight of him. Had their positions been reversed, Dean thought he would have felt shy, but there was not a hint of modesty in James’ body language or on his face. Even in this, his look was a challenge. Even in this, there was no doubt which of them was truly in charge. Dean was the happier for it.

Stepping around James, Dean helped the other man remove his jacket, dropping it negligently to the floor, and leaned in behind him. He pressed his erection to the cleft of James’ bottom and brought his lips to the side of James’ neck he’d yet to kiss. Sucking hard at the flesh if James’ clavicle, low enough to be sure that any mark would be covered by a cravat, he forced a hiss from James’ lips. Over James’ shoulder, he watched as lithe, trembling fingers grasped the edges of the unbuttoned vest. James leaned in to him, letting his head drop back to rest on Dean’s shoulder as Dean continued his tender attentions.

The vest dropped to the floor.

“Your shirt next,” murmured Dean. “Do it as if I am doing it – pretend those are my hands touching your body.” To emphasize that Dean wouldn’t take part, he stepped away, breaking contact between them, and paced around James so he could watch.

“Will you?” James whimpered. “I want you to…please…” His head was still resting back, though no longer supported by Dean’s shoulder, his eyes shut, his checks flushed. Dean could see how every throaty breath caused his Adam’s apple to bob, his chest to quiver beneath the loose shirt.

“I will, I promise,” Dean couldn’t believe how husky his voice had gotten. James curled his fingers into the loose fabric of his shirt and drew it free of the waist of his pants, inch by inch. His other hand slipped beneath, and James moaned as he ran his own fingers along his smooth skin.

“I did this…all the time…” he whispered. He drew the shirt up, revealing pale skin faintly lined and grooved with muscle, revealing his other hand twisting and rubbing over his nipple. “I lay in my bed and pleasured myself, and convinced myself it was your hands I felt, your lips moving against my skin, your tightness wrapped around me…”

“Keep saying things like that,” instructed Dean. Just watching was becoming too much, listening was far too stimulating. He lay a hand on his crotch and rubbed himself through the fabric, his breathing growing heavier, vocal. Closing with James, he used his other hand to follow the path James had so recently traced over his own torso, kneading hard. James groaned, using both hands to throw his shirt over his head, tossing it to land with a flutter of fabric against plaster walls. Dean curled his fingers around James’ side, palming against the hard flesh of his upper chest and along his waist, and pressed his lips to James’ nipple. The groan lengthened and drew out. A hand reached for Dean and brushed him, only to stop, trembling. “You can touch me…unbutton my jacket…take of my shirt and vest…God, I need to feel your skin against mine.”
With no injunction to go slowly, James’ hands were on Dean in a heartbeat, tearing at the buttons. Even through the cloth, every touch spread through Dean like pinpricks of pure heat and pleasure. He sucked on James’ nipple, catching the other between his fingers and teasing at it gently, delighting in the way the flesh grew hard beneath his ministrations. James moaned shamelessly, body undulating against air as he strove for greater contact between them.

“Just like that,” James managed. He had the buttons of Dean’s jacket undone, and tugged insistently at the garment. Letting go his grip on James’ torso, he let the other man pull him free. “There’s no comparison between my pale imitation and the reality of your caress.” The vest went next, and James was tugging at Dean’s shirt, jerking it free of his pants. Unable to wait any longer, Dean enveloped the smaller man, powerful arms encompassing his body, pressing their lips together. The kiss broke apart, and James gasped, “my skin feels like it’s on fire, Asmodeus.” They kissed against frantically. “I need you to touch me everywhere. I need to feel you everywhere.” James hitched Dean’s shirt as high as he could and the bare skin of their chests brushed with an explosion of feeling that had them both gasping for breath.

“I thought I was giving the orders,” panted Dean.

“Yes – yes, you are,” James said, pulling himself away. “I’m sorry. I forgot myself.”

“You still have your pants on,” he observed. “And I still have my shirt on.” He dropped his arms from around his beautiful angel. Visibly gathering himself, James ran a hand through his hair and opened his eyes. They were liquid blue, wide and dark and bottomless in the poorly lit room. Trembling, James tackled his pants, squatting to pull them and his socks off, and then rose and began to move towards Dean. “Stop.” James froze. Dean’s breath caught. An angel stood before him, naked, fully naked, no mask, no draped fabric, no wings. “You’re glorious, James.” Cheeks unaffected by shyness up to now flushed bright red, a color matched by the tone of his blood-stiffened cock, nestled amid curly black hair, every inch as beautifully curved and arousing as Dean remembered. “I’m going to feel you inside me tonight,” Dean whispered, the thought drawing a groan from him, echoed in James’ gravelled voice. “God…I’ve waited so long.”

“May I take your shirt off?” James’ shyness faded, replaced by a predatory look that Dean vividly remembered from a year ago. It was an expression he had fantasized about many times as he’d imagined James mounting him and taking him. His cock throbbed and his knees trembled at the thought. Soon, angel, soon...

“Yes,” said Dean. “And touch me – touch my chest.”

Exploring hands slipped beneath the fabric, brushing along skin, leaving tingling heat behind in trails that spread and suffused his body, drawing the shirt up and over Dean’s head. Every touch hit him like wine, leaving Dean feeling drunkenly light headed and desperate for more.

“Your lips...”

“Where?” asked James roughly. James’ hands traced along the sides of his body, curled around to rub at his back. Unable to find words, Dean reached out and touched James’ lips, then touched his own nipple. The other man responded instantly, mouthing at the tender nub, sucking, scraping his teeth along it. With his hands, James repeatedly rubbed the curve of Dean’s spine as if compelling him to bend, to shove out his rear, to prepare himself for James. The rhythm was impossible to resist, and Dean thrust faintly at the air at the bottom of each stroke of James’ hands.

“On your knees...on my...my...your lips on my...”

James was obedient on the instant, pulling away from Dean’s nipple with a wet sound, hands coming
to rest at the top of Dean’s breeks as he dropped to his knees before him. Dean looked down to see James staring up at him, licking lips grown red from kisses and bites, his cock visible, bobbing in the space between them.

“On my cock,” Dean managed to get out the filthy words. “Please! Please...”

Lips closed over the fabric of Dean’s breeks and he moaned and rolled forward into even that meager contact. James’ mouth teased at him through cloth, taunting him with warmth and denied wetness. “Like this?” he whispered mockingly.

“For God’s sake, take my pants off!”

James threw his head back and laughed gloriously, unrestrainedly, a wonderful low sound that seemed to emanate from his soul. His fingers expertly undid the buttons of Dean’s breeks and pulled them down, taking small clothes with them. Dean’s cock sprang free, heavy and dripping, and James instantly encircled the tip and sucked hard. With a mighty groan, Dean pitched forward, and would have fallen had he not caught himself with hands locked firm around James’ shoulders. “Like that, Castiel, oh angel, just like that!” True to the command, James didn’t explore, didn’t take more of him. He circle his lips over the head and sucked and licked and ticked and teased and kissed and Dean lost himself in the heat and wetness, hips rolling over and over again to the contact, words lost to one long, continuous low moan. Every corner of him felt the pleasure of James’ attentions, it curled his toes in his boots, tensed his fingers hard into James’ shoulders. He didn’t even have strength enough to lift his head under the burst of bliss. James hummed with pleasure as Dean leaked onto his tongue, and the moan broke into a frantic whimper.

A pulse through his body showed him close, but there was need that was being unmet. He was empty, agonizingly empty. Heat trembled Dean from his finger tips to the end of his nose, but there was a void in his nether regions, and his every wish screamed for James to fill it.

“I need you – need you inside me – I can’t wait any longer...”

James made no answer, continuing his ministrations. Why wasn’t he listening? Why wasn’t he acting, throwing Dean down, opening him up?? Thoughts were hard to come by, hard to organize, he was close to the edge of his climax and he didn’t want to feel it like this, he wanted to come with James pounding in to him. Why didn’t James stop and fill him with that exquisite cock that Dean could yet see throbbing below?

Right. Orders. He was supposed to give orders.

“Stop!” he gasped. James obeyed instantly, drew away, breathing very hard. One of his hands had fallen from Dean’s hip at some point and hovered inches from his own erection, fingers stretched towards himself but not touching. “Don’t – don’t touch yourself.” James groaned but forced the hand aside. “Tell me you have the oil we need.”

“I have the oil we need,” affirmed James, and Dean groaned just to hear his, husky and practically growling out each syllable.

“Get on the bed – get your hand ready to, to prepare me – I’ll be there in a moment.”

James gave a single nod and rose with obvious difficulty, and despite the extremity of Dean’s arousal, he felt a pang of guilt. It hadn’t even occurred to him to tell James to see to his own pleasure. That had been cruel. Would you have let him if you had thought of it? Yes was his immediate thought as he dropped to the ground to tackle the monumental task of removing his boots, but then he thought of how desperately James would pound into his body, having been denied for so long,
and his vision nearly blanked with the arousal the thought brought. No, if he’d thought about it, he would have done the exact same things.

Removing his boots felt like it took a life time, but the task was done, and he tugged off his pants, and turned to the bed. Atop a finely stitched quilt, James sat, legs to one side, cock pressing against his belly, rubbing slickened, gleaming hands together. Dean wasn’t really sure how he made it from the floor to the bed, but somehow he did. James’ eyes never left him, pupils thick and black and surrounded by deep blue that caused Dean to simultaneously feel completely exposed and entirely safe. He felt wanted, and desired, and loved, simply by meeting that gaze. Suddenly made shy by the intensity of the moment, he lay on the bed on his back, legs splayed around James. That wonderful, supportive gaze never abandoned him.

“All right,” Dean breathed, clinging to eye contact like a lifeline. “Here’s what I want. Here’s what you’re going to do.” He took a deep breath which shook through his whole body. A wave of dizzy desire threatened to tug him under, threatened to steal his rationality and leave him with words for nothing but begging James to take him, right then, any way he wanted. “You’re going to use your fingers to slick me, inside. When you judge that I’m ready – no, when I tell you I’m ready – you’re going to push that...” he groaned, imagining what he described. “…that beautiful, unbelievable cock of yours into me. And if I give you other commands, you’re going to follow them, but otherwise, you are going to fill me, and fill me, until you...” He couldn’t even say it. He wanted it so much but he couldn’t make his mouth form the words. Helpless fingers tensed desperately against smooth fabric. James was staring at him, lips parted against gasps, entire body trembling with restraint.

“God, tell me, please,” moaned James. “I have to...I have to feel you, and I can’t until you tell me. Please, Dean. What am I to do?”

“...thrust into me until I lose my mind with bliss,” Dean gasped. “Release into me while you scream my name. Please, do that! That’s all I want, that’s all I ever want.”

James was on him in an instant, one arm wrapping around his leg to spread him and tip his hips back and up, the other pressing in, invading him intimately. Sobbing with relief, Dean couldn’t help the way his body clenched desperately against the intrusion, useless muscles straining to force James deeper, to keep that finger within him. Warmed oil coated him, quick thrusts caused friction against long-neglected flesh. James didn’t wait for him to relax, relying on the lubricant to ease the way, and he pulsed the finger rapidly within Dean’s body. Dean looked down his body, legs bent up, James watching Dean’s face. James’ lips curled into a smile.

“I wish you could see what I’m seeing,” James whispered. “Your eyes are so green...your skin is so flushed...I can’t wait to make you feel good...I can’t wait to give you what you want...” A second finger joined the first, and Dean groaned and writhed into the contact. Leaning forward, James pressed Dean’s legs further up and forward, hitching one over James’ shoulder as he began to position himself. The two fingers filled him, spread apart to stretch him open, Dean’s muscles finally accommodating and relaxing and releasing. James twisted his legs around, positioned them beneath himself, and shifted Dean’s hips, resting Dean’s buttocks on James’ bent knees. James’ flush cock, tipped in thick white, brushed against James’ arm with each thrust of James’ fingers into him. There was a pause, Dean mewled and bucked impatiently, and a third finger swelled his opening. James had his lip beneath his teeth and was biting hard enough that the skin puckered and strained, his eyes glazed with the effort of restraining himself. Sweat streaked his face, matted locks of black hair to his forehead. Yet still, he continued with his fingers, in and out, sliding easily thanks to the oil coating Dean. An occasional brush against that wonderful, most sensitive spot caused a tumbling sensation in Dean’s gut and a tingling in his mind, and James expression grew more and more taut, his teeth dug more and more into his lip, mews scattering brokenly into growls as James’ visibly trembled in restraint.
“Tell me,” whispered James, words ragged and virtually incoherent for his teeth nipping at his lip. “Please God, please Dean, tell me!”

What had Dean told him to do? Dammit, what were the orders?

“I’m ready,” Dean practically shrieked as the answer came to him.

The fingers were gone. The restrain was gone. James lifted Dean’s other leg to his shoulder and leaned forward, one hand resting on the mattress at Dean’s side, the other wrapped around his cock, lining himself up. The blunt head pressed against Dean’s entry, and Dean strained desperately, squirmed, pushing up even as James pushed down. The oil made it slick, and James couldn’t find purchase, the opening so tight compared to his girth, their urgency so great that they moved too quickly. Both panted frantically as James failed to penetrate Dean.

“Still,” muttered James. “You have to hold still.”

“Yes!” moaned Dean. James was pushing against him, and though the effort made him shake from head to toe, Dean kept from raising his hips towards what he so desperately craved. He could feel himself spreading, bit by glorious bit, and moan after moan ripped from him as he threw his head back and forth, hands reaching and latching onto James’ waist, urging him forward, urging him deeper, “God I need all of it, give me all of it, James, please, now!” With a cry, James complied, surging forward and filling him completely and Dean wailed as friction and heat and pressure and hardness stretched him open and crowded his narrow channel. Sweat and tears trailed across Dean’s face, and he looked up to see intense ecstasy easing every line of James’ face.

Adjusting himself, James leaned forward, pressing Dean’s thighs to his stomach, coming to rest with his hands on either of Dean’s sides, staring down at him. Determined to keep his eyes open, Dean looked back. Through pleasure-blanked eyes, he watched James gasping for breath, eyes grown wild.

“Tell me what you’re thinking,” Dean breathed.

“You feel good.” James drew back and thrust into him hard. Dean moaned and pressed his hips up into the contact. “You feel amazing.” James thrust again, and he seemed to be struggling to support his weight with his arms, they shook and his head slumped down. Dean’s vision of him wavered as James thrust again and the full strength of his hips forced James’ cock against Dean’s pleasure, and he teetered on the edge of release. “I remembered this…” He thrust again and groaned. “This was the best thing I’d ever felt in my life.” Shifting his weight further forward, pressing his hips against the back of Dean’s folded-over legs, James rolled his hips against Dean repeatedly, each causing a wave of pleasure to ripple outward and drawing broken half-moans from Dean’s lips. “And it’s better.” James’ arms nearly gave way, one slipping as the elbow bowed. Dean caught him, supporting his shoulder with an arm, holding James up. “With you, everything is better.” Large movements seemed beyond him, so lost was James in pleasure, he pressed in close and made small jerking movements, each amplified to feel enormous to Dean’s wracked body. “I’m sorry,” gasped James. “I can’t last. I can’t! Oh, Dean!”

With grasping, fumbling fingers Dean found his own erection, and he moaned as he wrapped fingers around himself and jerked hard. “What were your orders, James?” Dean gasped out.

James drew back and thrust hard. “To fill you,” he moaned, “and fill you,” he thrust again and Dean couldn’t even keep an even stroke on himself, he was so close, so close, his whole body was on the edge of a precipice, “until you lose yourself in bliss…” Another thrust, James face was contorted in the effort of holding himself off until Dean’s climax, sweat dripped from his forehead to land on Dean’s chest. With a groan, he drew back, lay hands on Dean’s thighs to spread his legs wider, and
lay atop Dean. With a hitch of his hips, James’ filled him more deeply than ever before. Euphoria stole through him. “To release…screaming your name…”

“Yes!” Dean cried out. “James, God, yes!” Ecstasy poured over him, released spurting free, his body clenched around James. With the last shred of self-control he had, he locked his eyes on James’ face. He wanted to see, he wanted to watch the joy overtake his beloved’s features. In James’ expression Dean saw mirrored all he felt, eyelids fluttering like he was on the verge of fainting, giving Dean glimpses of spectacular blue.

“Dean!” sobbed James. He thrust again, and Dean watched as the tension of James’ restraint went suddenly slack, his eyes went completely unfocused, and even as he managed another half-thrust, he collapsed onto Dean. “Dean,” James moaned into Dean’s chest, writhing to feel the stimulation of skin on skin. Dean wrapped arms around him protectively, trembling with pleasure, amazed at how the slightest touch brought renewed ripples of delight. Determined to make sure James felt as spectacular as he did, Dean clenched weakly around the cock still deep in him. “Dean, stop – stop, I can’t, it’s too much, it’s too much…”

“Sorry,” mumbled Dean. “That was…I only wish to be sure that you’ve gotten what you need.” He shifted so that he could lower his legs, wrapping one around James’ hips, laying the other on the bed.

“You truly do not need to worry about that,” James reassured him weakly. “You are what I need, all I need.” He shifted, drawing himself out of Dean, mingling their sweat as their bodies rubbed together. Dean brushed fingers over his back gentle, and James giggled and looked up at him, expression elated. “I feel marvelous.”

“You are marvelous.”

As the aftershocks slowly left them in better control of their bodies, Dean drew James up and held him close, burying his face in the sweaty shock of black hair. Shaking overcame Dean in waves. James burrowed against him, trying to get closer, trying to crawl into Dean’s skin. Neither spoke until their breathing had calmed, their heart rates slowed.

“You’re still shaking,” murmured James. Shifting, he got his arms planted on Dean’s chest and he pulled himself up so that they could see each other’s faces. “Are you well?”

Tears flooded Dean’s eyes. Leaning forward, he brushed his lips against James’ forehead, delighting in the way James’ eyes slipped rapturously shut at even that modest contact. “I’ve never been so well in my life,” he replied. “I never want to let you go.”

“You never have to,” said James matter-of-factly. Shocked, Dean stared at him. “I’m not losing you again. We’ll find a way.” Dean shook his head in denial. “Your wife and Ms. Harvelle are able to be together. I refuse to accept that we cannot contrive to do the same.”

“What about Ms. Milligan?”

“Well, there’s this small situation, you see, where her father is a cruel monster who violates, assaults, and blackmails others,” James explained with mock seriousness. There was a wariness about his eyes as he watched Dean, but Dean didn’t feel the least trace of panic. His entire body felt too good, his mind too awash in pleasure, his thoughts too occupied with James’ simple declaration that they need not part. It sounded a pipe dream, but at that moment, Dean had no wish to argue the point, he’d rather surrender to the temptation of believing it possible, if only for the night. “Unless I’ve vastly misunderstood Mrs. Winchester and my uncle, I’ve cause to think at least some of his crimes will shortly become public. At that time, I will be able break off the engagement without the least loss of face. And then, I can go north with you. If you wish it, that is.” He smiled shyly.
There were ways to break that simple chain of logic, weaknesses, and Dean deliberately ignored them. Let it be tomorrow’s problem. He wrapped his arms around James and brought their lips together gently before settling the other man on his chest. James wrapped an arm beneath Dean’s shoulders, used a hand to cradle the back of his head gently, fingers massaging Dean’s scalp. “I’d love it of all things,” Dean replied, speaking the plain truth. He traced delicate lines along James’ smooth skin, and felt the other man incrementally relax against him, body growing loose, breath evening out. Dean held him, ignoring the slight discomfort of drying semen and sweat to instead luxuriate in the warmth of James’ supple, beautiful body pressed against his.

“I love you,” he whispered when he thought James had fallen asleep.

“I adore you, Dean Winchester,” James exhaled against his throat. The whisper of breath and the impact of the words sent a shiver through Dean, and he tightened his grip on his angel.

“I should go soon...”

“Stay the night,” James said with sleepy insistence.

“No, the risks...”

“No one will know save your family and Gabriel, and they all know all already,” said James, waking up slightly. “Stay with me, Dean.”

A brief internal battle was waged in Dean’s mind, his thoughts conjuring up all the ways it could go horribly awry, but he categorically dismissed each. “Forever, my angel. Forever. Be easy, James.”

James squirmed and nestled closer to him. “Never until I wake in your arms, my dearest love.” How hopeless those words had sounded when Dean had first heard them the year before, and what a bright future they promised now! Dean allowed the fatigue and pleasure of the day to wash away all concerns, all regrets, all fears, all discomforts. They both wanted this, and they were both prepared to fight for it. It would have to be enough. At least, for one evening, they could pretend so. He buried his nose in James’ hair and breathed in the musky smell of his sweat deeply. James shifted, sighed, murmured something unintelligible, and relaxed back against him. No, there was no pretending. Dean couldn’t give this up, couldn’t give James up. It was utterly inconceivable. Somehow, they would find a way to stay together. They must.

Dean drifted off to sleep, content in the knowledge that, for the first time outside of his dreams, James would still be nestled close to him when he awoke.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was the smut that was supposed to be at the end of Chapter 11. Super glad I didn’t try to shoehorn it in to the previous chapter, the last thing I wanted was to rush it! :)

I hope you found it worth the wait!
Light hit Dean’s face, and he blinked and scrunched his face to deny how it drew him towards wakefulness. The air was chilly, and the only warmth on his skin was a dream, the fading aura of holding an angel in his arm. He didn’t want to wake up to face the crushing reality of loneliness, and he shook his head against his pillow to deny the truth of awareness, tensed his arms around the memory of a firm form pressed against his body, lost his fingers among imagined silken strands.

“You’re real,” Dean whispered. He loosened his grip enough for James to shift. They were lying on his bed, naked as the day they’d been born, the blanket they’d lain atop of tugged free from the far side of the bed to partially cover their bodies. They’d hardly moved in their sleep, James lay half across him, half on the bed, and the arm he had draped over Dean’s side tightened at the trepidation and happiness in Dean’s voice. Hitching himself up on an elbow, James gave him a sleepy smile, eyes appearing unusually pale in the morning light that filtered through the cream linen curtains, black hair in astonishing disarray. The hand on Dean’s side shifted, trailed up his side, found the curve of Dean’s chin and traced the lines of his face gently. The sadness and fright that had flooded Dean, the certainty that James was a figment, faded and his face broke with joy. Fingers tenderly brushed at Dean’s short brown hair, and though Dean saw none of his alarm on James’ features, the fingers trembled almost imperceptibly, and he knew he was not the only one lost in wonder at the novelty of this experience. The fatigue on James’ face disappeared in delight, expression growing warmer.

Rolling on to his side, Dean lined their bodies chest to chest, threaded a leg between James’, wrapped an arm around his shoulders and drew him into a slow, deep kiss. Sighing, James eased into his body, lay one hand on his chest and ran the other against Dean’s side. “I believe I could grow entirely accustomed to waking up like this every day,” James murmured, drawing Dean in for another kiss. James splayed his fingers, curling them around the muscled curve of Dean’s bottom, and lightly urged their hips closer together. Flaccid flesh brushed, blood hummed in Dean’s ears and he felt his arousal stir, felt James’ do the same. “How do you feel this morning?”

“Fantastic,” Dean mouthed into the kiss, catching James’ lips with his own at every opportunity. “You’re here.” As lethargy faded from his body, he took a quick inventory. His insides felt stretched and chafed. James slipped two fingers into his crack and traced along the pucker, and Dean winced. “Sore,” he admitted. The fingers were moved instantly, James returning to kneading the muscles of his rear, thighs and lower back.

To the accompaniment of continuous, gentle kisses, Dean conducted a slow investigation of James’ back. Starting at the top of his spine, he traced each fine muscle, scraped his nails faintly over hot flesh, paying careful attention to James’ reactions. Every twitch and sigh took on deeper meaning, every flinch and soothing release of tension, every broken kiss and swallowed grunt told a story, and Dean catalogued every spot. James pressed them closer together, until their breathing came in quick pants of necessity, their chests were so close together. The hand that had rested on Dean’s chest fell away, trapped between their bodies, and James’ other hand held their hips together as he began to rut them slowly together. Dean lifted a thigh, settled it in the cleft of James’ legs, so with each back and
forth motion, James’ pressed sensitive skin against the hard muscles.

Fully hardened cocks brushed, and James finally broke off their fervent kisses to groan softly against Dean’s stubble. James’ cheeks were flushed red, breath hot enough and air in the room cold enough in the early morning that each exhalation made a small, misty puff. Dean had found a spot on James’ lower back that, each time he flattened his thumb against it, a quiver ran through James’ body. He rubbed hard against the spot over and over again, and James squeezed his arm around Dean’s back as if holding on for dear life and made increasingly urgent thrusts against Dean’s body.

“Just like that,” Dean murmured encouragingly. It was his thanks, for James being so kind to him the previous night; his apology, for the shared unspoken acknowledgement that Dean could not accommodate James within him again so soon no matter how much they might each wish it; and an expression of his joy that they had been able to spend one blessed night together on the anniversary of their first meeting. Sleep had not fully restored Dean, as it clearly had James. Well, there was much to be said for youth, and Dean suspected he had close to a decade on James. Not that he wasn’t aroused – he definitely was – but it was a lazy sort of warmth, pleased to curl itself around James and see to him, and if Dean found his pleasure too, that was fine, but not required.

Fingers forged a trail, with difficulty, between their bodies, and found Dean’s erection. The pleasure he thought sated moments before exploded into need, to feel James’ fingers move on him, to match thrust for thrust the movements of James’ body, sinuous as he clamped around Dean’s leg. James repeatedly nudged his member into Dean’s body, his hand stroke Dean, and Dean tensed with a moan. James chuckled in his ear. “That’s more like what I’ve come to expect from my lustful demon,” he teased.

The grip around Dean’s back eased, and a little space opened between them. With that opening, James took a firmer grip on Dean’s member, and Dean glanced down and saw the path for his own pinned arm to take a hold of James. Each wrapped firm around the other, they rested their foreheads together and began to stroke. Matched groans heated the air between their faces. James found the depression just below Dean’s rib cage that invariably made him twitch and squirm when pressure was applied to it, and Dean slipped his hand between James’ back cheeks to thumb and tease at his opening, drawing faint murmurs, “yes, yes, that’s fine, that’s good.” Assuming that James set the pace on Dean’s body that he himself longed for, Dean followed his lead, speeding his strokes when James sped up, slowing when trailed off, soaring higher and higher on the feeling of that hand on him and the increasingly low, needy sounds leaking from between James’ lips.

Dean pressed a finger into the tight pucker of James’ bottom, and James arched away from him, strained against Dean’s grip, squeezed Dean’s cock almost painfully hard and burst out, “Dean!”

“Is that okay, James?” he asked, pushed into bemused worry by the power of James’ reaction.

“Yes,” gasped James. He pushed back against the finger, grinding soft skin and sensitive sacks against Dean’s hard thigh. “Please don’t stop!” Honoring the request, Dean continued to play about the lip of James’ entryway, carefully, gently, respecting the fact that they’d used no oil to smooth the way. The rhythm of James’ hand on Dean smoothed again, and swirling pleasure ebbed and flowed, coming in gradually like the tide, surging each time James expressed with gasps or groans or desperate lunges of his body how gratifying he was finding Dean’s efforts.

"Would you like me to be inside you?"

“Yes,” said James again. Dean began to move away, wondering where the oil was, when James’ arm locked around him. “Not now! So help me, if you stop, Asmodeus…” He moaned, cutting off as Dean teased a second finger at his entrance. Laughing, Dean met James’ lips in his own, gathering
up every delicious sound that came from his angel’s mouth as the gorgeous man tensed. Muscles bore down on Dean’s fingers, the grip tightened around Dean’s cock, James’ movements grew ragged. A desperate inhalation drew the air from Dean’s lungs directly into James’, Dean flicked a finger through the white liquid beaded over James’ slit, and James came apart in his arms. Moans spasmed through his body, release collected hot over Dean’s hand, clenched muscles forced Dean’s fingers from within James’ body. Holding James so close, it was like unto Dean’s own peak being reached, and despite James’s strokes ceasing under the sheer pleasure that had his eyes rolled back in his head and his body curling limply against the mattress, Dean followed moments later, heavy breathing and jerking thrusts accompanying cords of white streaking over the white quilt.

Dean lay very still, basking in the glorious, soothing satiated fatigue that washed over his mind and suffused his body. He watched with dreamy, abstracted pleasure as James returned to himself, his eyes gradually focusing once more on Dean’s face, his lips curling into a lazy, slightly mischievous smile. Matching the look, Dean winked and brought his hand to his lips and tauntingly, lovingly licked every trace of semen from his hand. James watched him, wide-eyed, and groaned, running his hands over his own body as if imagining Dean’s lips moving so against him. Dean gave a sultry chuckle and enjoyed every moment of it.

“Happy anniversary,” Dean said with a smile. James gave him a playful shove in the shoulder, and he rolled with it, onto his back. The mattress shifted, and a moment later James was leaning over him, tousled hair and grin making him look unusually boyish. He leaned down and teased at Dean, licking at the corners of Dean’s lips before coaxing Dean to open his mouth. It was another long, lazy kiss for a long, lazy morning, and when it finally ended, their stared into each other’s eyes, and James gave a contented sigh.

“Happy birthday,” said James.

“Not until tomorrow! Which of them told you?” Dean colored. He hated to celebrate the day. It was no different from any other. Despite that, or perhaps precisely because of that, Charlie and Sam in particular took delight in finding ways to make the day exceptional. Last year, Charlie’s gift had been the invitation to the soiree. He hoped that this wonderful day was all they’d concocted for him this year.

“All of them did,” confessed James with a laugh. “Ms. Moseley, when she brought me tea while I was waiting for you alone in the parlor while the family was out. Ms. Harvelle took me aside before dinner. Samuel, who asked Singer to bring me to the study so he could tell me. Singer, while we were on the way to the study. Charlie, who sent it by way of Claire – who is not truly your by-blow, is she?”

“Of course not!” Dean wasn’t sure if he should be affronted or not, that James would even ask him such a thing.

“I thought it impossible, knowing you as I do,” nodded James. “Whence came she?”

“She’s a foundling, an orphan,” Dean explained. “Her mother was a despoiled gentlewoman. If she knows her father, she’s never spoken of it to us. We assume him a gentleman, though clearly a depraved one, to abandon her and her mother so.”

James rolled over and lay beside Dean, tugging the blanket over both of their bare, soiled bodies, grabbing Dean’s hand in his. “I believe I could grow to love your family very much,” he said thoughtfully. “I barely know them and I think I already do. Not merely because they are dear to you, though of course that matters as well, but because they are so...” He trailed off.

“Crazy?”
Laughing, James said, “no, no, not that – well, perhaps that – they are so open. With the best manners in the world – well, your wife and Ms. Harvelle, anyway – they are still unassuming and candid.”

“I would like to meet your family, if ‘twere possible,” said Dean.

“You’ll find them nothing like,” warned James. “They are all form, and little substance. Do not mistake me. I love them, especially my sisters, who are so determined to be all that they ought to be that sometimes I fear they forget that one of the things they ‘ought to be’ is happy. However, they are not like you and yours. They are ordinary.”

“I cannot believe that,” objected Dean. “You are not ordinary, and you are of them. Mr. Novak might be many things, but he is also not ordinary. If you love them, I am sure I will love them as well.” He gave James’ hand a squeeze.

“Rank romantic nonsense,” scoffed James. “I permit you to reserve adoration until you have become acquainted them. Or at least until you know their names.”

“Fair enough,” conceded Dean, laughing. James joined him, and the sound filled the room with joy, but in its wake, the air seemed cooler, the space more empty, and Dean sighed. “I must away before it grows later. If we have morning callers, I would not care for my wife or brother to be forced to lie about my absence. This has been the best night, the best morning, of my life.”

The grip of Dean’s hand tightened. “When will I see you again?”

“I suspect we will lay eyes on each other several times in the forthcoming days,” said Dean, evading the true question. “Then, there is the dinner here next Tuesday.” A shudder twitched the sheets as Dean thought of it, a night in a small company for an intimate dinner, Milligan sitting beside him or across from him and staring at him the entire time.

“Would you like me to call him out?” James rolled back and met Dean’s eyes seriously.

“Lord, no! How can you even suggest such a foolish thing? Can you even use a pistol, James?”

“I understand the principal of the thing,” said James gravely. “I aim the long thin end at the man I long to shoot, and pull the trigger. Seems most straightforward.”

“I’d not allow Samuel to do it, and I’d step before the bullet myself before I’d allow harm to come to you,” Dean snapped. James’ eyes widened in surprise. Grabbing him, Dean pulled James close, reveling in taut flesh and sinewy muscle and powerful limbs against his body. “We must trust in Charlotte to resolve this.”

“Dean...”

“Apologies, am I holding too tightly again?” Dean relaxed, allowing the flare of fear that had seized him to fade. Milligan would be destroyed before he could ever hurt James in the manners he had threatened. Whatever it required, Dean would make sure of that.

“Nay, never let me go,” James said earnestly. “Meet my eyes, if you will.” Smiling at James’ gentle phrasing, Dean did so. In the bright morning light, James’ pupils were mere dots of black amid the bright blue sea of his iris. “Keep watching,” James said, words sounding like a command but tone that of a suggestion. James leaned forward and their lips met. Eyes wide open, Dean saw every slight change in them as James and Dean worked their mouths and tongues together, the dilation of James’ pupils, the way the lids threatened to lower with pleasure, the movements as James tracked every slight change in the direction of Dean’s gaze. Falling into blue felt like being enveloped in affection
and safety and protection. With a happy sigh, James drew away. “When he looks at you, when he scowls at you, if he threatens you, if he frightens you, if – God help me! – he hurts you, think of that, and know that I will do whatever I must to protect you, no matter the cost.”

“Do not ruin yourself for me, love,” objected Dean.

“Whatever I must,” insisted James. “I place too much value in you to care anything for consequences to myself.”

“I feel precisely the same about you,” Dean protested.

“Is that not what love is?”

Shaking his head, Dean reluctantly disentangled himself from James. That wasn’t right, that wasn’t what love was, or at least not entirely, but he did not have the words to explain the rest. There was a basin of water on a stand in the corner, and Dean walked to it, shivering in the chill air, and used the frigid water to clean the grime from his body. His clothing was in a small heap around where he’d stood the night before, and he dressed slowly and silently as James watched him from the bed, expression unreadable, beautiful form completely hidden in a cocoon formed of the quilt.

... the mutual society, help, and comfort, that the one ought to have for the other, both in prosperity and in adversity ...

That was part of love, certainly. Sharing a bed was part of it as well, but only of one kind of affection. What Dean felt for Charlotte, what he felt for Samuel, what he felt for the rest of his family, each was different, and different again from what he felt for his children, and different yet again from what he felt for James. But Love wasn’t defined by equal willingness to sacrifice – Dean would happily make sacrifices that it would appall him to consider his children making in return, for example.

... wilt thou love him, comfort him, honor and keep him in sickness and in health, and, forsaking all others, keep thee only unto him, so long as you both shall live?

Love was all of those things, but even that did not describe it. Love was James holding him and quieting his fears, James’ eyes as he released, James’s face lighting up upon beholding him, James’ conscientious consideration as he politely suggested that Dean meet his eyes, James’ understanding and acceptance of Dean how he was. And in return, what did Dean do for his love? In the moment, Dean pushed the thought away – donned his clothing, adorned James’ cheeks with farewell kisses, and dodged the servants as he retrieved his own coat and hat and proceeded out into the gray morning. It returned to trouble him as he walked home through the snowy streets, as he arrived to find the family at breakfast and joined them. It tempered his happy smiles, and left him wondering over the days that followed.

Surely, love should put James’ interests and needs above his own. That was a granted, the very fundamental of the feeling. James was in danger from Milligan, but Dean trusted Charlie and Mr. Novak to handle that – he did! However, that was not the only risk. James was in danger from society. James was in danger from Dean arriving in the late afternoon unannounced, staying the night, leaving at the crack of morning through the front door for any to see. James was in danger from them making love noisily without a care for what the servants might hear and whom they might talk to. James was in danger from Dean.

If he and James reached an understanding, what would happen to James’ family? Would his shiftless elder brother ruin James’ family? Would his sisters be left to lonely lives of spinsterhood and poverty? If he and James reached an understanding, what of Ms. Milligan? Would she grow sad and
careworn as Mrs. Freeley had, abandoned by a man whom she had sworn to love, honor and obey? There was much more at stake than Dean’s own happiness. In the heat of passion, in the sunny days of newly found, newly renewed love, it was easy to look upon all as mere details, meaningless impediments between them and true joy. However, Dean had had adulthood thrust on him young, and he knew better than most that those burdens that seemed negligible when first assumed grew heavier day in and day out, wore on love and companionship and trust. Dean desperately wanted a future with James, wanted to face those struggles together, but he wondered if James was old enough to understand what he was promising.

On Saturday, Dean’s family feasted to celebrate his 34th birthday, and the thoughts yet niggled. If James was a day over 25, Dean would eat his hat. In two years, as James’ sisters came of age, would he still think it no matter that he’d thrown aside their chance to mingle with men who could bring them love and security? In five years, when James realized he’d never have children of his own, would he regret that he’d not taken wife? In ten years, when James saw all his fellows wed and come of age, would he long for a settled, comfortable, untroubled life of independence? In twenty years, when James saw Dean growing burdened with age so much before him, would he bemoan joining his fate to an older lover? In thirty or forty years, when Dean predeceased him, would James feel abandoned in a world that he’d never gotten the chance to fully engage with, always forced to hide, always forced into seclusion?

Of course, those were James’ decisions to make, not Dean’s to make for him. Intellectually, Dean understood that. It was for Dean to decide what was best for Dean, and James to decide what was best for James, and for the two to discuss those decisions candidly and together draw the conclusions that would best bring about mutual happiness. However, in James’ passionate immaturity, in his simple declaration that the matter was solved simply by deciding not to part, Dean saw the storm clouds hovering over the years of their lives to come, and he was deeply troubled.

What was love, then? The thought obsessed him yet as he sat a pew in a cold church, listening to the priest wax ineloquently on self-restraint and propriety and respect. Was it Romeo and Juliet, throwing family and duty to the wind in their desperation to be together? Was it Benedict and Beatrice, older and wiser, lovelorn and lovestruck? Was it Claudio and Gertrude, brought together by lust and greed and loneliness and power? Dean had the unpleasant suspicion it was all three, yea, and Lady MacBeth as well, and all the rest tragic and comedic. Hamlet and Ophelia was the parallel Dean dreaded the most, he realized – James, still bearing the fragile heart of youth, naive despite the wound that Dean had dealt him the previous year, eager to prove himself well and truly infatuated, eager to risk himself again despite suffering so much pain the first time. They’d recovered together from one near-mortal blow, but what if another should fall? It frightened Dean, knowing that the world could gravely injure James, that Milligan could, that Dean himself should.

A knock on his door on Monday night pulled Dean from his ever-spiraling introspection as he stared blankly at the pages of his account books laid out upon the study table. “Yes?” he asked.

It was Charlotte, of course – Charlie, who knew him better than anyone; Charlie, whom stood fully equal among the triumvirate of those Dean loved best, Samuel and James and she at the summit; Charlie, who looked at him now with a wry raised eyebrow and a quirk of her lips. She came in, thick dressing robe draped over her nightgown to fight off the mid-winter cold, and closed the door behind herself. Seizing a chair, she set it across the desk from Dean, sat down, and met his eyes challengingly.

“It bothers me that you still force me to come to you at these times,” she said without preamble.

“Excuse me...?” Dean asked, unsure what she meant.
“Something is eating you alive, and I would have expected after everything we’ve done – after the past year especially – that you would speak of it to me,” she clarified, exasperated.

Flipping the ledger closed, Dean leaned back in his chair. “I’m sorry, Charlotte,” he said. “However, to tell truth, I do not wish to share. I think I am talking myself in circles, allowing my fears to multiply in the absence of answers. There is so much that is indefinite and unsettled right now that I cannot see across the ocean that divides where we now stand from where we may be in a week or a month or a year.”

She opened her mouth, then shut it again with a rueful smile. “I was going to tell you not to be foolish, but I can’t say your words are actually unreasonable. You’re right, of course. It’s easy for me to say with confidence that all will work out as it ought, but there is still so much to come. We don’t yet know how events will play out, and it is stressful. Is this about Milligan or about James?”

“Oh, ostensibly, James,” he said uncomfortably. “In actuality, probably Milligan. You have some plan for tomorrow night, correct?” She nodded. “Will you not tell me what it is?” She shook her head. “Can you tell me anything?”

“What do you think will happen – how do you think you will feel – when you are with him again, sitting in parlor, dining at table?” she asked.

It was not difficult to picture. They would enter the house, and be shown into the blue and white parlor. Mr. and Mrs. Novak would be there already, Ms. Milligan, Ms. Masters, Mr. Inias Milligan, perhaps the elder brother Raphael whom Dean had yet to meet, and Adam Milligan, of course. Those eyes would fall on him and...

...black eyes, staring...Zeus mask, unreadable...a hand about his throat...lungs screaming for air...

...and James would be there too, watching him with blue eyes, offering him all the support and affection that Dean had longed for his entire life. The fearful thoughts faded in an instant.

That was what love was, he realized with a start. That James would look and Dean hadn’t the least doubt that his angel would intuit what Dean was thinking and feeling, would know how to help, would offer support unconditionally. That Dean, despite a lifetime of carefully guarding himself from everyone save his family, was prepared to accept what James offered, and of course would not hesitate to reciprocate when the need arose. An easy smile broke over his face, happiness warmed him. It had been that simple all along. Not, as James had suggested, to love and support while ignoring the dangers and consequences as if they were nothing – quite the contrary, for it to truly be love, Dean thought, the implications and outcomes had to be known and understood, and accepted anyway, because James was worth those risks, and because James thought Dean worth those risks.

“That was not the reaction that I was expecting,” said Charlie, bemused. “What has occurred to you?”

“Merely that I have solved the conundrum that has troubled me these past days, and as I thought, I had talked myself into a bind while missing how truly simple the problem was,” he grinned. “I love James.”

“Rain is wet,” agreed Charlotte, rolling her eyes.

“I think I will be able to handle Milligan,” said Dean. “What would you have me do?”

Leaning forward, Charlie’s eyes flicked over his features as she examined his expression. Self-conscious, he struggled to maintain a smile, fearing that it became more and more fixed as he grew
more disgruntled at her perusal. Finally, she laughed. “Fine, fine,” she said. “The full plan is complicated, and mostly already implemented – recounting all would be tedious and not edifying in the least. The details where the devil dwells, if you will, but no concern of yours now. However, the basic idea is straightforward. We’re going to ruin you.”

“I thought the whole purpose of all of this was to spare us ruin,” he said, quirking an eyebrow.

“I thought you said you assumed ruin inevitable, and that you were prepared to accept it?” she countered.

“Indeed,” he sighed. Just so easily, the dream of keeping James close died within moments of truly being born. If he were caught out and exposed, the risks of keeping James close became too great. Unless, he supposed, he were well and truly demolished – then Sam would have the estate, and Dean would be out of the limelight, and once society forgot him, no one would give a damn what he did or who he did it with.

“However, you will be ruined on our terms,” she continued brightly. “Though Milligan doesn’t know it, we own the field. All the groundwork is laid to beat him at his own game – blackmail. If you are truly feeling competent to face him, there is something you can do that will help further things – he will surely try to get you alone again. Let him. Say no.”

“That’s it?” Dean’s neck felt uncomfortably tight, his cravat constraining. He thought of how hot James’ body felt against his as they lay in bed together, how their bodies fit together, and the constriction eased.

“We’ll all be there,” Charlie said. “Samuel and I, Ms. Harvelle, Mr. Novak, James Novak – we’ll all be close, and fully prepared to intervene. Do you think you can do that – taunt him with further denial?”

With the thought of blue melted with affection, Dean didn’t even hesitate. “Yes.”

The evening at the Novak house began precisely as Dean had envisioned it. Dean, Charlotte, Ms. Harvelle, and Sam arrived punctually at seven in the evening to find the rest of the party already gathered in blue and white parlor. Every seat was already occupied when they stepped in, Ms. Masters and Ms. Milligan cozy on one side of the couch, spaced apart from Mrs. Lilith Novak, a picture of elegant disdain on the other. James stood at Ms. Milligan’s shoulder, lingering behind the couch like a bored watchman. Ms. Freeley sat very still in one of the chairs, and Mr. Adam Milligan sat the other. Mr. Novak and Mr. Freeley made a pair talking by the fireplace, and Mr. Inias Milligan was standing by the windows, but had turned to watch the Winchester family make their entrance with a relieved expression. For the first time, Dean wondered at the young man’s lack of a young lady, and at the way Inias reacted every time Sam entered a room. The look on Inias face bore a striking resemblance to the expression on James’, whose twinkling delight gave Dean heart as he greeted each person and turn and defiantly met Milligan’s cold green eyes.

With the arrival of the Winchesters, the groups rapidly rearranged themselves, and soon Dean found himself conversing with the older generation, the young men making a knot by the windows, and the ladies arrayed on the seats – with the exception of Mrs. Novak, who rose to join Dean’s conversation, and Mrs. Freeley, who looked sadly upon all and said nothing.

“When you proposed this gathering, I’ll admit I thought it unwise, Mr. Novak,” Lilith Novak broached the topic as she rose to join the awkward silence straining between Mr. Gabriel Novak, Mr. Freeley, Dean and the elder Milligan.

“After all these years, my dear Mrs. Novak, I’d like to think you had done underestimating me,”
replied Novak. “Am I not a master of planning out a dinner party?”

“Indeed you are,” she replied with a cold smile. Milligan was staring hungrily at Dean again, and it brought a lump to his throat that he found it difficult to swallow around. “Though I could wish we could find a friend for dear Mrs. Freeley, she always seems to quiet. Mr. Winchester, perhaps you know another like Ms. Harvelle – though perhaps older, with more experience?” Predatory, pale blue eyes flickered to Ms. Harvelle and Charlie, talking animatedly with Ms. Masters, who looked more engaged, if not happier, than Dean had seen her of late.

“I appreciate your concern for my wife, but I assure you she is quite content,” said Mr. Freeley quellingly. “In truth, I was surprised she decided to attend at all. Such gatherings are rarely to her liking.”

“I have observed such,” Mrs. Novak continued with a snide edge to her voice. “Some people simply cannot abide a party of pleasure. No matter what delights the invitation promises, they’ll not attend, or if they do attend, they’ll do so in a dilatory fashion, keeping to themselves, avoiding those who would wish to speak with them, or maintaining station only with those they already know without seeking wider acquaintance.”

“Well, Mrs. Novak, we must allow for differences in temper,” said Mr. Novak, a smile failing to give the least light to his eyes. “We cannot all have your love of meeting new people and the delights of prizing their secrets from them. Some prefer politely scrapping away the covering soil to openly digging through it for that which is not theirs to take.”

“Few hide their secrets deeply enough that much digging is required,” Milligan spoke, so abruptly that Dean started. “I’ve found that most place only the thinnest veneer of dirt over their most sacred treasures, and hope that others will not notice the inadequacy with which the riches are cloaked.”

“Ah, but if a treasure is buried so very deeply as to guarantee its safety, then even the owner can take no pleasure of it,” Mr. Freeley said. “If a treasure exists, but one denies oneself it entirely – surely, it becomes as if the treasure does not exist at all.”

“If the possessor of riches does not guard them well, they can have no cause for protest when a prospector seizes what has been left vulnerable,” Mrs. Novak said.

“This analogy has lost me completely,” declared Mr. Novak with a laugh. “Have we then declared that Mrs. Freeley has buried riches in troves across the British Isles? I think that’s where we have left off, surely.”

“And what of those riches can be seen but cannot be grasped?” For once, Mr. Milligan’s terrible eyes were fixed on another, they pinioned Mr. Freeley, who met them with an impassive sneer. “It must be frustrating, for wealth to be just out of reach, ever out of reach, while the one who would bury it and keep it safe is forced to watch it be frittered away.”

“Are we frittering now?” Mr. Novak said. “Nay, desist, mock not poor Mr. Freeley’s situation. In truth, he is blessed – that we should all live so long!”

“Dear Husband,” Mrs. Novak’s tone had all of the inflection of affection without the least hint of actual warmth. “Do not contradict my brother so – he is wiser and more conversant in such matters than you are.”

“If you believe it so, it must be truth,” Mr. Novak said with a slight bow. “I’d not contradict you for the world, Mrs. Novak.”
If this was the family that James had been exposed to his whole life, no wonder he found Dean’s so very strange! That people who were supposed to support each other would instead spend so much effort to undercutting one another was nauseating to watch. No wonder Mr. Novak and Mr. Freeley were so callous. They were but the product of such twisted surroundings. It saddened Dean. Glancing away for a moment from the fraught conversation, he caught James’ eye as he smiled at something Sam said, and Dean felt a surge of wonder that such an admirable creature could have come from such seed. Feeling another set of eyes upon him, Dean met Charlie’s and gave her a wink.

“Now, there is youth for you,” continued Mr. Novak with a melodramatic sigh. “So new to the marriage bed as to cast longing glances across a room.”

“Not so new as that,” objected Dean, forcing his attention back to the sea of sharks in which he was forced to swim for the night. “We’ve near a decade together.”

“Enjoy it while you can,” Milligan suggested with a chill smile. “It has been my experience that most marriages sour as the partners become better known to each other.”

“I’m sorry you have not seen better of the world,” Dean met Milligan’s gaze steadily, challenge for challenge, as he’d never been able to do before. A buzz of anger firmed his offense, and James’ love served as his shield. “I’ve found that when built on a foundation of honesty and mutual respect, a partnership between husband and wife, between brothers and sisters, between parents and children, will face little strife that cannot be weathered. It is when one tries to create such relationships on the shifting sands of deceit and secrecy that the whole is subject to collapse.”

“Wait, wait, are we burying our treasures in shifting sands, now?” Mr. Novak’s scoffing, defensive delight seized the floor. “Too far, Mr. Winchester, you’ve carried this too far! We are years removed from the age of piracy when such things were commonplace. This is the age of the gentleman, where we prefer to build our shaky foundations amidst stewarded rose bushes and trimmed hedges.”

“I disagree,” Dean shook his head and gave Milligan and Mrs. Novak a hard look. “My sense is that piracy is still very much alive and well.”

“Did you encounter many pirates, in the journeys of your youth?” Mr. Freeley asked politely.

“Some few,” said Dean. “But that is what I miss about the sea. While on a ship, there can be no secrets. A man can tell his fellows he is a gentleman until he is blue in the face, but the truth will out – a scoundrels cannot hide against the backdrop of the ocean. Amidst your rose bushes and trimmed hedges, I’ve found the modern pirate finds superior camouflage. Bright jackets and pale skin blend in to the backdrop of the salon as they never would the decks of a ship.”

“Well, then, we needs must bury them,” concluded Mr. Novak as if he’d made the paramount witticism of the year. Mr. Freeley laughed, and Dean did as well despite himself. Milligan managed a chuckle, his eyes promising harsh revenge, and Mrs. Novak looked murder at her husband.

The words fell into a room grown momentarily, inexplicably silent. Into the lapse, a servant stepped into the room and politely announced, “ladies and gentleman, dinner is served.”

Dinner saw Dean placed nearly as far from Adam Milligan as it was possible to be while still occupying the same table, and sat him between Inias Milligan on one side, and Mrs. Freeley on the other, with Charlie seated opposite him. His attempts at engaging Mrs. Freeley in small talk proved fruitless and frustrating. She was so retiring that it was difficult to believe that she was James Novak’s aunt, far less that she was a sister to Mr. Novak. Or perhaps, Dean thought upon further reflection, it was not so shocking as that. With a personality like Mr. Gabriel Novak ever at the table,
what room would someone shy find to ever speak? And if she did dare give voice, what mocking would she be subject to? Her presence and reticence were a constant, sad reminder that regardless of the aid that Novak rendered him, regardless of the blackmail to which Novak and Freeley had both been subjected, they were far from being beyond reproach. They’d wronged many, and Mrs. Freeley among them. Surrendering to the impossibility of drawing her out, Dean simultaneously resolved that, going forward, he would continue to attempt to engage her. After all, if he were to continue forward in pursuit of a relationship with James, the Novaks and Freeleys would be part of his extended family, after a fashion.

Where did that leave Anna Milligan?

At the moment, it left her sitting opposite her domineering father, talking almost defiantly with James and Samuel about the latest works of Keats, Buron, Shelley, Sotheby, others. Sam was in raptures over Ozymandias, and demonstrated over dessert how he had, in the scant two weeks since it was published, memorized it line for line precise. James mouthed the words along happily, clearly also having learnt it by heart.

…and a shattered visage lies, whose frown

And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command

Tell that its sculptor well those passions read…

As Dean watched, James’ eyes scanned the table and found the eyes of Mrs. Novak and Mr. Adam Milligan, seated side by side across from him, each scowling disdainfully to have such an uncouth work be the topic of such enthusiasm at a formal dinner.

…and on the pedestal these words appear:

“My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look on my works, ye Mighty, and despair!”

Nothing beside remains.

The hard expression on James’ face grew yet more intense, and he stared challenge at his future father-in-law and his aunt.

‘Round the decay

Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare

The lone and level sands stretch far away.

“Is it not perfect?” sighed Sam with happy delight. “Absolutely perfect.” James’ expression broke into a striking smile as he turned back to Sam. Yes, absolutely perfect, Dean thought with adoration. Mr. Adam Milligan’s lips curled into a cold sneer, and Dean pictured him carved in stone and lost beneath distant, arid sands.

Oh, certainly, they were going to bury him!

After the meal, the party separated, the women to the parlor, the men to the study. Once again, the group instantly separated by age, and Dean found himself standing at the fringes of the younger men. By right, though he was far junior to Milligan, Novak and Freeley, he should stand with them as a squire and a landowner, and leave the younger sons to their own conversation. However, he’d had
his fill of their backstabbing and innuendos. Sam, James and Inias Milligan were on Shakespearean sonnets – Dean was surprised to find Inias as interested and conversant as the other two – and Dean had not a thing to contribute. He stood aside and took pleasure in the animation on James’ face, how comfortable and open he had grown around Sam. Whenever Dean watched James, he could feel Milligan staring at him. Whenever he looked, he saw narrowed eyes and a cold, angry expression. The time when Dean must try to speak with Milligan alone was growing closer, and the unevenness of Dean’s breathing attested to his increased nerves.

When the time came to rejoin the ladies, Adam Milligan begged a few moments privacy to remain in the study and finish his drink. Dean trailed the young men down the hall, and just before entering the parlor, he spoke as steadily as he could.

“Excuse me – I’ve left something in the study. I’ll join you momentarily.”

All three stopped to watch him, Inias with ignorant indifference, Sam with a decisive nod, and James with bewildered concern that he directed first at Dean and Sam in turn. As Dean rounded, he had a last glimpse of Sam putting a reassuring hand on James’ shoulder and whispering something, and then Dean was crossing back down the hall to the crescendoing accompaniment of his heartbeat.

Dean opened the door, stepped in, and closed it behind him. Milligan stood by the fireplace, gazing into the dancing flames that painted the dark woods of the room orange, and though he didn’t glance up when Dean entered, his lips curled into a wicked smile. In the darkness, the pale green of Milligan’s eyes was completely swallowed by reflected orange, as if hellfire had found its way within the callous, cruel man. The tingle of fingers touching Dean’s throat ghosted over his skin, and he seized hold of his memories of James and clothed himself in them like armor.

... hands around his throat...

...soft lips working gently against sensitive, bruised skin, spreading pleasure in the wake of pain...

...black eyes demanding attention and obedience...

...blue eyes melting with passion, gentle even in command, accepting and affectionate...

“You are a fine letter writer, Mr. Winchester,” said Milligan menacingly. He looked up and captured Dean’s gaze, eyes aflame and black in the firelight. Dean waited for the terror to choke at his gullet, but it didn’t come. His heart continued to race, his lungs to labor, but neither surged into blind panic, at least not yet – not for mere ominous words, nor for a predatory gaze, while a room separated them. “Surely, upon reading such words, many will feel sympathy for the poor, forlorn, doting soul who inked them. Many will wonder who is the object of such fondly sworn contrition and devotion.”

Not trusting himself to speak, Dean continued to watch. Like a giant astride the world, Milligan straightened and crossed the room, crowding Dean against the door. He reached around Dean and turned the key in the lock. Blackness crept into the edges of Dean’s vision.

“This is your moment to be a hero, Dean,” Milligan breathed in his ear. “Men like you, that’s always what you truly want. You can be as brave as your dead father, sacrifice all for family and love as he once did for king and country. Not a noisy, public martyrdom, but a secluded, private sacrifice. ‘No greater love hath a man than he lay down his life for his brother.’ Not for glory or fame, but in the dark, with no one to know, no one to thank you or adorn your chest with medals.” His hand came to Dean’s throat, gripped loosely at his fluttering pulse and bobbing Adam’s apple.

...a warm body curled up beside Dean, sighing contentedly, inhaling when he inhaled, exhaling when he exhaled …
The thought was a lifeline, and Dean allowed his breathing to synchronize with that of James in his memory. The darkness clogging his sight receded. “The power to fix everything before it grows worse is yours. I will tell the world that Claire Richardson is not your child. I will relate to all the Ton how grossly they’ve misunderstood the events in my garden, how you valiantly stepped in to defend me from men who would have invaded my home, stolen my belongings, assaulted my person, ravaged my daughter. You can be the hero. I can protect your marriage, ensure your brother is forever raised above reproach. You can attend the finest galas, move among the highest of society. Your reputation will become inviolate, you will be envied by all.”

Compared to Dean’s honor, compared to his self-respect and the respect of those he cared about, compared to all the love that surrounded him, the things Milligan offered were shockingly hollow. With his thoughts still clinging to clarity, Dean felt a glimmer of pity for the man, for anyone who could think that such paltry rewards were worth sacrificing trust and affection and support. A thumb pressed against Dean’s pulse for a moment, dry lips brushed against the base of his ear, and Dean shuddered in disgust.

…a husky voice close against his ear, whispering I love you with unqualified conviction…

“They, of course, there’s James,” continued Milligan. Clutching Dean’s chin, Milligan forced Dean to turn and their eyes met once more. With the fire behind Milligan, haloing him slightly, his eyes were absolutely black in his aging face. “Do you honestly think, upon reading that letter, any will doubt which James you speak of? After he’s been calling on your house? After he was there for hours without my daughter to excuse his presence? After you called on him, and were seen by Mr. Alder to not depart until early the next morning?”

Breath rasped in Dean’s throat as panic began to overwhelm every defense that he could mount. Just as he’d feared, just as he’d dreaded, the risk had been too great and they’d been seen. The palm of Milligan’s hand pressed against his neck, hard, and Dean barely bit back a frightened noise.

“I won’t deny him the chance to marry my daughter,” Milligan spoke on relentlessly. “He’ll be a fine addition to my household, so pretty, so willing. Those soft lips that part around that honeyed voice, those legs splayed upon satin blankets, those eyes wide and begging – you know well how good he tastes, how sweetly he moves, don’t you Dean?” Tears filled Dean’s eyes as disgust and fear ate through him. Had Milligan already hurt James? It was impossible, James would never smile so freely if Milligan had harmed him. What if it had been willingly? Would James do that? Would James have bedded him, as Milligan or as Michael, and not told Dean?

No. Never.

But they knew each other so little – he could yet count on his fingers how times he’d seen James. It was possible.

Is this your first time?

No. It is my fourth time attending, after all.

It was possible, horribly possible.

It was also possible that every word was invention. Milligan need not have been with James to say such things, all were obvious, true of many a lover.

“It need not be so. All you have to do is say yes.”

The vision of an angel filled Dean’s mind, James dressed as Castiel that very first night, dancing in
robes and wings and mask with a stranger. He’d seemed happy dancing with that other man, the
same bland pleasure he displayed when he looked upon Ms. Milligan. If, that first night, James
hadn’t met Dean’s eyes across the room, would he have adjourned upstairs with that stranger? The
obvious truth was evident to Dean instantly – it didn’t matter. Whatever James had done before they
were together was no more relevant than all the nights that Dean and Charlie unwillingly shared in
the necessity of producing heirs. Even if Milligan spoke of memories and not myths, that changed
nothing. Even if James had been with the man who may yet be his father-in-law, even if he kept it
from Dean, that changed nothing. With all that had passed, had their positions been reversed, Dean
would never have shared such a confidence with James.

…blue eyes met his with absolute trust and undeniable devotion, and he returned the gaze without
the least hesitation…

“Can you, maybe, sweeten the pot?” Dean said, forcing his lips into a smile. A low growl came from
Milligan, and the hand around his throat compressed. “We’re low on funds. Some money might be
nice. If I’m to prostitute myself for you, why not make it literal? Failing that – I appreciate how
strapped the wealthy can become, your lives are so difficult, why not consideration? A presentation
at St. James has always been an object.”

“This is not a negotiation, Dean.” There was no air. He couldn’t breathe, and every corner of his
thoughts immediately switched from measured rejection to panic, frantic with the need to say
whatever he must, do whatever he must, anything to have the ability to breath returned back – no
matter how terrible the choice it was better than death, he had to have precious, life-sustaining…

There was a knock on the door, made dull by Dean’s weight pressed against the wood. Milligan
hissed in frustration, compressed a thumb against Dean’s windpipe.

“Mr. Winchester, your wife requires you for flapdragon,” said James, low voice easily carrying
through the thick door.

Help me, Castiel – help me, angel – save me, James!

“He’ll be out soon, Novak,” snapped Milligan.

“I’d like to hear him say that, thank you,” replied James in a measured tones.

The pressure released, and Dean gasped and threw his head back against the door with an audible
clunk. A soft tapping and clicking, loud in the otherwise quiet room, marked James trying the door
knob and finding it locked.

“This is ridiculous,” Milligan said with frustration.

“Flapdragon waits on no man’s pleasure,” James said. “Mr. Winchester?”

Dean’s fingers found the key, and he turned it. The knob turned again, but with Dean’s weight
against the door, it didn’t budge.

…blue eyes, just on the other side of the door, worried and waiting to meet his…

Musterling his strength, Dean forced his legs to steadiness. “Do your worst, Mr. Milligan,” he said
softly, meeting Milligan’s eyes, every bit of his expression and tone a rebuke. “The answer will
always be no.”

The door opened. James stood without, illuminated in faint hues by the candles lining the walls of the
hallway. Relief lit a smile on his face as Dean gave him a wavering attempt at a reassuring look. He
could feel Milligan’s eyes on them as they walked to the parlor, where the sounds of noisy merrymaking were easily audible, an Elysium a world away from the Tartarus from which Dean had just escaped.

“Did he hurt you?” murmured James.

“He tried,” Dean conceded. “Thoughts of you sustained me. I am not well, but I am as well as can be expected.”

They stepped into the room. James’ hand fell on his shoulder, a casual movement which none could think odd, and only Dean to know that James massaged gently, imperceptibly, with his strong fingers.

Milligan had intensified his threats, and as Charlie had instructed, Dean had said no.

The unshakeable conviction gripped Dean, as he joined his family and smiled and laughed hoarsely, acted for all to see as if nothing had happened, that there was going to be hell to pay.

Wednesday passed slowly, the eye of the storm passing overhead.

Thursday brought the hurricane.

_The Intelligencer, Ms. N---- reports:_

_Gentleman about the Ton, the renowned and much respected Mr. M----, of London, is pleased to report a full recovery from the recent, widely-spoken of unpleasantness that was attendant on his last foray into entertaining. To remind our readers at home, Mr. W----, of nowhere, belligerently castigated his gracious host. The mystery has been, why? While all know our country-folk to be volatile, this incident was so far outside the realm that it has prompted curiosity and talk from all quarters, even unto wondering if perhaps Mr. W---- be deranged. Exclusively, Mr. M---- has decided to reveal to the Intelligencer what was told him of the whys and wherefores._

‘Why, why?’ Dear readers, do you castigate me for leaving you in suspense?

_What lies at the heart of any conflict? Love of course! Mr. M---- provides us the following:_

Dearest Castiel,

I will not burden you with the explanation of how I came to act as I did. Instead, I write to say—

Nay, but the language I have for such a confession is so hopelessly inadequate. To declare ‘I am sorry!’ does not begin to convey the depth of my contrition. I merely say, that in the very depths of my heart, in the mired reaches of my soul, I am sorry, I have wronged you, I am to blame, and a lifetime would not suffice for me to make amends.

If you believe nothing else of what I have written, I beg you please believe that my heart has never wavered, will never waver, and that every piece of my flawed self screams regrets to the unhearing heavens for the wrong I have done. I love you, angel of Thursday, and shall ever remain your,

D. W----

_Alas, that this clarified all! Instead, it merely further tangles the skein. Mr. M---- swears ignorance as to whom ‘Castiel’ refers to, and the Intelligencer knows no one by that name among the Ton. Our religious scholars will note that Cassiel was an angel, along with Michael, Gabriel, Zachariah, Raphael, Ramiel, Barachiel – all whom share a very specific characteristic. The discovery of Mr. W-
--- in study of this letter is, says Mr. M----, what led to the explosion, the very public outcome of which was witnessed by all in attendance that evening.

If you can identify the pseudonymous Castiel, do contact Ms. N----, for the inquiring minds of the Ton long for the truth, and it will out!

Until then, Mr. W----, Ms. N---- speaks confidently with the voice of all gentlefolk of good breeding when she says, fie on thee! Your actions, past and present, are unbecoming of your station and unworthy a gentleman.

Dean set the newspaper aside. Charlotte instantly took it and began to read, face darkening with anger.

From her seat on the couch in the Winchester parlor, Ms. Masters gave Dean a wry smile. “I suspected that Ms. N’s column was not among your usual reading, and that you might appreciate receiving early warning of the scandal that is about to crash down about you. Ms. Milligan is sadly addicted to this drivel, though how she reads it each day without knowing that Ms. N is Ms. Naomi, and her own aunt besides, remains one the great mysteries of her naiveté.”

“But you are all too familiar with the truth of the matter?” said Dean, restraining a hint of bitterness. He had no right to be so angry nor so bitter. He’d known this was coming. Milligan had left him waiting only two days.

“It’s fairly obvious, is it not?” shrugged Ms. Masters. “Who but his sister would refer to Mr. Milligan as ‘renowned and much respected?’ Besides, read the rag long enough and the patterns are plain to be seen – too much is said against those who contradict Milligan, too much is said in support of those who are his allies, too much revolves around the whispers that circulate in the Milligan sitting room. There is nothing like appealing to the gossipers and tell-alls to ensure that none will act against you, knowing the consequences.” She paused. “Is a word of it true?”

“Does it matter?” said Charlotte, outraged.

“Very much so, I should think,” countered Ms. Masters with her usual dry calm. “If it be true, Mr. Winchester is extremely compromised.”

“I am no less compromised than if it be lies,” he said with a sigh, massaging his temples. “But the name! Why has he left out the name?”

“It is true,” Ms. Masters breathed in amazement. Charlotte gave Dean a furious look, but he could not trouble himself.

“Yes, yes,” he snapped. “It is truth as surely as every archangel in the bible be male. Do not be shocked, Ms. Masters, I’ve seen how you look upon Ms. Milligan.”

“Dean!” Charlie reprimanded him. “Do not take your temper out on Ms. Masters.” He looked up to see Ms. Masters cheeks perfectly crimson, the most flustered he had ever beheld. Though her face was lowered as if ashamed, her eyes peered straight at him through thick, dark eyelashes and blazed with restrained fury. “And Ms. Masters, cool yourself as well. You’ve sat in our parlor how many days? You can’t imagine that we didn’t notice.”

“You observed as well?” That, at least, brought Ms. Masters up short.

“Of course, how could any such as we see such thwarted affection and not recognize it?” Charlie rolled her eyes.
“I knew it!” exclaimed Ms. Masters triumphantly. “I knew it! We are just the same! Oh, tell me it is not hopeless!”

“As regards Ms. Milligan?” said Charlie, surprised by Ms. Masters’ vehemence. “I could not tell you. She is so very much of a kind with everyone that it is impossible to say. Knowing her so well as you do, I would think you could say before anyone. All I can say for certain is that the only people I have ever observed her to peculiarly distinguish with her attentions are yourself, Mr. James Novak, and her brother.”

“So is my observation,” Ms. Masters agreed sadly. “It tells me nothing, and now she be engaged!” She gave a firm shake of her head, setting dark curls bobbing all about her face. “Enough of the maudlin. At least now I know I am not alone, know it indisputably when before I was always left merely to suspect that I could not be unique among female-kind. Or male-kind, apparently!” She gave Dean a wry smile, and he met it feeling sick to his stomach. After a lifetime of keeping his preferences for his own gender a secret, now every busybody and tattle-tongue knew all.

“Thank you for coming to us with this,” Charlie gave Ms. Masters a sincere smile. “Please do leave your card if you wish to come again, with time and date, as I expect we will be closing our doors to unannounced callers for the foreseeable future.”

“That would be a wise course,” agreed Ms. Masters. “Many a person who have not the least concern in the matter will surely wish to make this their business.” She rose to depart, then paused. “I have at times been rude to you both. I am sorry. I have learned through long experience that being offensive makes a fine defense, and prevents any from looking closer at that which I know could not withstand scrutiny. You have my true regrets that this has befallen your family. Would that there were more of your like about London, and fewer like Ms. Milligan’s reprehensible family.”

“Be well, Ms. Masters,” Charlie said graciously, rising and taking Ms. Masters’ hands in her own. “Do watch out for yourself. I fear that the events of the coming days will make it all too clear how dangerous the world is to people such as ourselves.” Exchanging further pointless pleasantries, Charlie showed Ms. Masters to the door. When she returned to the room, her brow was furrowed with worry.

“Milligan does not pull his punches, does he?” she said, lifting the paper to peruse the damning article once more.

“He does,” disagreed Dean. “He has not named James, though he could have. All he needed to do was publish the entire letter instead of abridging it, and he’d have had us both. Instead, he has only outing me. Why?” Before she could speak, he answered his own question. “To retain James as a son-in-law. To be able to hold over my head the power he has to ruin James, hurt him, defile him, unless I concede. To force the wedding forward.”

“Dean.”

“To further manipulate me, knowing that even with our family disgraced, I will stop at anything to protect James,” anger mounted in Dean’s breast. “Damn the man. Damn him!”

“Dean.”

“And there is nothing I can do about it! It is the perfect trap! If James leave Ms. Milligan now, if he come to me, all will talk, all will know!” Dean leapt to his feet and prowled the room restlessly, furiously, heart pounding, lungs beginning to pump. “Perhaps Sam is right. Perhaps I should call him out. I am surely a better shot. Even if killing him will not solve this – it certainly will not – it will at least feel extremely good.”
“Dean!”

“What, Charlotte?”

“The Intelligencer is pleased to announce the impending nuptials of Mr. James Novak and Ms. Anna Milligan, to be held on Sunday, the 14th of February, 1818.”

“As soon as the bans are published,” he groaned, slamming a hand against the wall. A rasp of plaster spoke of unseen damage from the force of his blow. Pain throbbed through his arm, and he stood, breathing heavily. Charlotte watched him warily, holding the paper loosely in her hands, awaiting his next action as if eyeing a beast of unknown disposition. Dean’s shoulders slumped, and let his head drop. He whispered, “I am going to say yes.”

“No, Dean! You mustn’t,” Charlie tossed the sheets aside in a flutter of paper and was at his side on the instant, taking Dean’s face in hers and inducing him to meet her clear green gaze. “You have to trust me.”

“I’ll not let him lay hands on James,” Dean’s thoughts added an anguished *again* to the end of that sentence that he dared not vocalize, dared not believe. He had told Charlotte all that had passed between him and Milligan save only that. “Any indignity can be borne to prevent that.”

“They are not wed yet!” she insisted. “Novak yet resides with his uncle. Even with Mrs. Novak around, no harm can come to James while Mr. Novak is guarding him. Give me these three weeks. If I cannot resolve this by the 13th, and I cannot bring you to see reason, fine, do as you feel you must. But allow me that time. What did I tell you?” He shook his head, not recalling. “We are going to ruin you. We are ruining you on *our* terms. This is the plan. This was *always* the plan.”

A clenched fist at Dean’s heart, at his throat, urged him towards anger and haste and sacrifice, but he heard the entreaty in her voice, saw the fear and desperation in her eyes. Dean heaved a long, painful breath, releasing as much of the tension as he could.

“Three weeks.”

Chapter End Notes

If you’ve somehow never read Ozymandias by Shelley, you totally should - [full text is on Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ozymandias). By the way...no, I didn’t plan ANY of that, I wrote an entire extended silly thing about dirt and burying people, and then went to look up recent poetry for January 1818, and discovered that Ozymandias had come out on the 11th, and it was just too fantastic a coincidence not to run with. :)

Deliberate nod in this chapter to one of my first fandoms - Babylon 5, the show I was so crazy about that when the anticipation built in the lead up to the S3 finale, I finally couldn’t stand the tension week after week and I tracked down a script for the last episode of the season a week before it aired. If you’ve seen the show, you understand how COMPLETELY unsatisfying said discovery truly was, but, well, it was an important moment in my life as a screamingly nutso fangirl. :)

Also...I try to keep my meta-commentary on the act of writing this to myself but...it was all I could to not to have Dean look at Milligan and say, ”can you throw in a set of steak knives?” In my outline for this chapter, that’s what I literally wrote at the point when
Dean rebukes Milligan by suggesting that Milligan offer him more in exchange for his body.

...two chapters left, folks!
The Talk of the Ton

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The front door opened and closed. Dean ignored it pointedly. They’d had no callers in a week, even Dean’s friends loathe to put in an appearance until the initial crazed explosion of talk died down. What news they received was thanks to Samuel, who braved all scorn and scrutiny to continue his usual social rounds. Charlotte and Ms. Harvelle made morning calls to their intimates, but had reserved their evenings for thoroughly public affairs such as concerts, avoiding any gathering where small talk was a must and where strangers were abundant. Dean, of necessity, stayed in. Wondering what was said about him was driving Dean insane. He didn’t care what the Ton might say. Though it was frustrating to know that he could be made or broken by the idle chit chat of strangers, their condemnation and calumniation affected him personally but little. However, to not know what his friends made of matters, to be in the dark as to how his family was being abused, to be denied even sight of James, was slowly wearing his spirit down. Each afternoon, his loved ones returned from their day’s misadventures and spoke of censure heaped upon them, of the ludicrous range of sins now ascribed to the dastardly Mr. Winchester, of the lies that bubbled to the surface like sulfur in a midden. On his behalf, they weathered all, and he sat safely at home, swaddled and ignorant and inactive as a babe.

Strange sounds came from the hallway. There was a thump, something hard striking wood, followed by a shuffle of feet. Something dropped, and something shattered. Growing steadily more alarmed and curious, Dean began to rise. However, it was the sound that followed that urged his legs to sudden speed. Someone was crying.

Emerging into the hallway, Dean took in a scene he knew not what to make off. Claire Richardson, blossoming healthily with care and regular meals, was normally a picture of happiness, but now she lay knelt on the floor, crying. Scattered about her were tattered flowers in pinks and whites and yellows and the curved fragments of glass that must have once formed a vase. Dark spots marked where water was slowly seeping into the carpeting. A finger was in her mouth, and with her other hand she half-heartedly attempted to gather the stems while eying the whole with a helpless, distressed expression.

“Claire, are you well?” he asked with concern.

Startled, she squeaked and pulled her finger free from her mouth, tip streaked red with blood. “Mr. Winchester,” she said with evident consternation. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to bother you sir!”

Squatting before her, Dean cupped one hand and gathered shards of glass carefully. “Leave the flowers be. It is alright, there’s no harm done – ask Ms. Moseley to see to your hand.”

“No, no, the flowers are important!” said Claire insistently. “I brought them for you, sir.”

“It’s no moment,” Dean repeated. “I’m worried about your hand, please – see to it!”

“My hand is a trifle,” she said with determination. “You might cut yourself on the glass, sir. I will...” She rose, then stopped, at a loss. “I’ll fetch a new vase.”

“But—” Dean watched in bemusement as she darted from him – still running away, nearly a year after they brought her in! – but this time she returned moments later bearing a new glass cylinder half-full of fresh water, and she hastily retrieved the blooms and put them in it. She’d wrapped her
hand in the apron she normally wore over her youthful dress, and she’d tucked a basket under her arm, which she now offered him.

“The glass can go in here, sir,” she said, pale face streaked red from tears. “I am sorry. I meant to do something nice, to bring you cheer, and instead I’ve only caused you yet more trouble.”

“Don’t worry yourself over these matters,” he said soothingly. “They’ll pass, and I promise whatever happens, you’ll be safe.”

Far from calming her, his words seemed to cause her fresh upset. With a childish, rapid shaking of her head, she left as abruptly as always, skipping to his study. Dean blinked after her in wonder, sighed uncertainly and finished gathering up the broken glass. That done, he set the basket aside on a table and followed the girl.

The flowers, only a little the worse for wear, made a pleasant arrangement above his mantle place, and a bright spot of color in the otherwise drab, dark room. Claire stood before the fire, staring at her feet, hands wringing around the balled up apron.

“My mother always loved flowers,” she said quietly. “However upset she was, they would always make her smile.”

“Will you tell me what’s troubling you so?” asked Dean. Biting her lip, she flicker her eyes to his face, looked down once more, and suddenly Dean had an armful of crying eleven year old, her face pressed to his vest.

“They say such terrible things!” she sobbed. “All you had to do to make them stop was turn me out, but you’ve kept me! Why, sir?”

“Turn you out?” Dean asked blankly.

“I’m not your daughter! I tell them so whenever they ask, but they do not believe me, and I’ve been too much a coward to tell them the truth,” she continued as if he’d not spoken. “And now...and now...” Kneeling, Dean wrapped Claire in his arms, laying a large hand against her pale blonde strands, encouraging her to cry against his shoulder. “Now I’m grown even more bothersome! Whereas if I’d said all to begin with...”

“However much you have seen of the world before your time, that does not change that you are but a child, Claire,” Dean said, growing increasingly curious what had her so overwrought. “No one with sense ever thought you my daughter, and the rumors of such did not upset me. Is that why you are distraught?”

“Nay!” she said with a burst of temper. She hiccupped and pulled away from him as his confusion deepening. “Did you fight Mr. Milligan about me?”

“What?” he asked incredulously.

“The ladies at the market told me you fought Mr. Milligan,” she stomped a little foot. “You should not fight him about me. He’s frightening. He’ll hurt you. You should stay away from him, Mr. Winchester.”

“How do you know Adam Milligan?” said Dean.

Claire’s expression transformed once more. Her pink lips went pale, flat and thin. Her eyes lowered and swam with tears. Horrible thoughts sprang to Dean’s mind. Knowing what a monster Milligan was, knowing the behavior that Milligan allowed to continue unchecked in his friend Mr. Alder, a
host of disgusting, unthinkable possibilities sprang instantly to mind. Visibly gathering herself, Claire hiccoughed again, wiped the moisture from her face with her apron, and then looked up at him with a challenge in her eyes.

“Mr. Milligan is my father,” she said with unexpected defiance. “And if I’d done as I ought, I’d have told you and everyone, and then you’d not have had to fight him.”

Dean’s jaw dropped.

“That’s...but...how do you know? No, but don’t worry, whatever your mother told you, it’s only your word against his since she is past and not able to give evidence,” Dean’s wits reassembled themselves hastily. “Nothing would have changed. You’re not at fault. Besides, that is not why Mr. Milligan and I fought.”

“She didn’t tell me,” Claire shook her head.

“Then how—”

“She wrote me a letter that was given me after she died,” said Claire. Amazement spread through every part of Dean. “I took it to him, and he turned me away.”

“A letter! You have a letter, in Amelia Richardson’s hand, naming Adam Milligan your father?” Distractedly, Dean ran a hand through his hair, at a complete loss. “Does Charlie know – have you spoken to Charlotte about this, Claire?”

“I’ve never told anyone,” she shook her head. “He told me that he’d hurt me if I did. When I was alone, that seemed dire, but I live here now – so I thought that why he tried to hurt you because he could not hurt me, when I heard of it earlier. If you did not fight about me, then why quarrel?”

“There are numerous reasons to fight with Adam Milligan,” Dean said with a wondering shake of his head. “He is a profoundly terrible man.”

“Yes, sir,” she said with a faint smile. “The letter – would the letter be of service to you?”

“Immeasurably,” he said.

“I’ll fetch it.” And she scampered past him and out of the room.

Adam Milligan was Claire Richardson’s father? Milligan himself had debauched Amelia Richardson, his daughter’s school friend, when she came to visit at his home for those weeks so many years ago? Rising, Dean scrubbed at his cheeks and mouth with a nervous hand. Claire had a letter describing her parentage, in her mother’s hand for any to recognize and compare to other letters she had written. If she were willing, Ms. Anna Milligan could likely produce dozens that would prove the authorship. Whatever Charlie was planning, she could surely not have been expecting such a chance to fall into their lap. He paced senselessly about his study as he awaited her return. It was so arrogant, so on the nose, so in character a thing of Milligan to have done, and Claire was so unimpeachably honest, that Dean had not the least doubt of the veracity of her account.

The child returned bearing a somewhat tattered, ragged sheet of once-fine parchment. Dean watched her, and now that he knew the truth, he could see something of the Milligan in her. With her fine blonde hair, round face, and pale blue eyes, she was the very image of Lilith Novak, nee Milligan. If Mrs. Novak hadn’t looked just the same when she was a youth, Dean would be amazed. Claire placed the letter in his hand, and Dean unfolded it gently. Upon it, a fine, elegant script could easily be read.
My dearest Claire,

There are so many things I would write to you, my precious daughter, yet time is short, and my hand grows weak. The doctor tells me there is not the least hope for my recovery, and though my illness pains me, my true agony is knowing that I will leave you, a mere child, to shift on the mercy of the world. Once, there was a time when I would have thought that enough, but now I know...but no, it’s not for me trouble you with such as that at a time such as this. My apologies.

I love you. Had I it all to do again, I would change nothing. You are my treasure, my beloved child, a blessing that I awake to every morning, dream of every night. I dread the hardship that will now fall upon your thin shoulders, and bitterly lament that I have nothing that I can offer you to mitigate it save these two things:

Firstly, there is a box I have kept stowed in the mattress. Within, you’ll find my few remaining pieces of finery. Take them to Mr. Whittaker’s shop and there sell them, and you will have some funds. If you write to Mr. Silver of ----, mayhap he can be convinced to take you in for schooling.

Secondly, take this letter and speak with Mr. Adam Milligan of 3 North ----- Street. He knows as well as I that he is your father, and has spurned my efforts to seek aid of him in such terms as I have not broached the topic again. However, with myself gone, and you left with no one, I cannot believe that even he would be so shiftless as to abandon you. When he sees you, and understands the dire straits into which you have been cast, I believe even such as he will help you. Dear God I pray it be so. Mr. Milligan, when you look upon this letter, I beg you please: help our gentle angel! Do not leave her alone. If you but give her a chance you will see she has all the airs of distinction, and will be an honor upon your household should you just claim her as she deserves.

Darling Claire. Never forget that you are a gentlewoman, and you are worthy of everything. Good things will come. I’m sure of it. With all my love, sweetest child, light of my life, your mother,

Amelia Richardson

Fresh tears streaked Claire’s face as she watched Dean read the contents. When he was done, he stared at it for long moments. That Milligan would deny the dying entreaty of a woman he had wronged, pleas put in such terms, left Dean wishing he had kicked the man several more times while he lay disoriented in the garden during the ball at 3 North ----- Street.

“I have been able to help you?” asked Claire nervously.

“Child, you help us every day,” replied Dean with warmth. “Your mother spoke truth, you are a blessing.” She colored pink and bit her lip shyly. “Did Charlotte and Ms. Harvelle give any indication of when they would return?”

“No, sir, they...”

The brass knocked clanged against the door, echoing dully through the house. Dean rolled his eyes at the interruption, wondering who had come in the hopes of filling his ear with drivel this time. Several had made the attempt, to call him out and accuse him of buggery, immorality, depravity, corruption, even deviltry. He knew because though none had gained admittance, two had not been above spewing their displeasure at the closed door, loudly and at great duration.

“May I keep this?” Dean asked Claire hurriedly. She nodded. “Go upstairs and find work about your mistress’ room.” If there was to be more abuse of his door, he’d rather her not hear. Nodding again, she sprinted from the room, and Dean stepped hesitantly into the hallway, lingering beneath the staircase that overtopped the door to his study. As she disappeared out of sight, Singer came
clomping down the hallway, shrugging the livery jacket over his shirt but not bothering to button it. The brass knocker sounded once more.

From Dean’s position, he could see what was happening, without being seen. Singer opened the door a crack. Had it been a stranger, Singer would have spoken then to inquire their business. Instead, he proceeded to open it completely.

“Good morning, Ms. Masters,” said Singer in his usual gruff imitation of manners. “The family is not at home to visitors today.”

“I think they’ll want to speak with me, Singer,” she said with a drawl, stepping past him into the front room. “But if you’re not sure, we can ask Mr. Winchester, as he’s standing right there.”

Dean stepped out from the shadow of the stair case, a smile forming and then immediately falling from his features as he took in the grimness of her expression.

“Is all well with you, Ms. Masters?” he asked with concern. It seemed to be a morning of trouble already, early as it was. They’d surely been lucky to have escaped the clouds overhanging them for a week. A sudden longing struck him in the pit of his stomach, to see James, have his love smile at him and reassure him that all would be well. Impossible, though, and so he clung to Charlie’s reassurances that, despite all the signs of disaster, the situation was under control. Singer looked quickly out the door, then closed and locked it.

“Fantastic,” she said without conviction. She was giving him an assessing look, and she clutched at her reticule as if worried it would fly away if she did not keep it close. “Are Mrs. Winchester and Ms. Harvelle in?”

“Nay, nor do I know when they will return,” Dean snagged Singer’s arm as he walked by.

“They’re calling on the Bradbury’s,” Singer supplied. Muttering under his breath, he added, “I can’t wait until we leave this damned city.” Tugging his arm free from Dean, Singer disappeared down the hallway.

“You have the most interesting servants,” Ms. Masters said in the imitation of delight. Dean gestured her to the parlor, assuming it had now become his duty to entertain her until the ladies returned and they could discuss whatever business they had in mind. “Where do you find them?”

“Why do you ask, are you looking to establish a household of your own?” he asked with amusement, waiting politely as she took a seat and then taking one of his own.

“Never in this life,” Ms. Masters shuddered artfully. “I am in a fortunate position. My family is well enough off that I need not wed, and Ms. Milligan is at least enough attached to me that I can remain by her side. In my prayers every night I thank God that I shall never have to suffer the touch of man.”

“How candid of you,” smiled Dean. Words sprang to his mind, and for an instant he debated speaking them aloud. Yet, she had been entirely aboveboard with them, and Dean had every reason to think that Charlotte trusted her, so he put on a wicked smirk and said, “You are missing out.”

She made a disgusted sound at the back of his throat, and he laughed. A moment later, she joined him ruefully. “You know, Mr. Winchester, had I not known you personally I would likely have believed the worst of you, as many seem to be doing. There does appear to be something most unnatural in the idea of two men...” She paused, hand making a lazy circle in the air as she fished for the correct word. “...together.”
“You need not tell me so,” he shrugged. “When I first noticed the decided nature of my inclinations, I was at sea, and there were none but men around. I thought it normal. After all, in the flush of youthful desire, what more natural than to lust after that which surrounds you? There were men aboard who would happily share intimacy while on the ship, only to act nothing like ashore. It was not until we left the navy in ’03 – I was 18 – that I began to suspect that something was amiss. There were women around me once more, yet my preferences did not change in the slightest. I thought myself deranged, diseased, and tried all I could think of to fix it, all I could hear of while not giving myself away. Only a fiend could feel such things, I thought. However, life was complicated, and I pushed it from my thoughts. I was a new-made squire by then, my father recently deceased. Samuel was struggling, and thanks to him, I met many who were steeped in the worst depravity. Over time, I couldn’t but see the differences between one such as myself and ones such as they. With that, eventually, came peace. With my marriage to Charlotte came acceptance. We spoke of it much before we were betrothed and ultimately I admitted all to her, to my family, and it became merely another fact of life. Some people like to gamble, some people like to drink to excess, some people enjoy poetry or artwork, and I like men.” He colored. “I’m sorry, I have presumed to share so much with you.”

“No, the confidence is not unwelcome, in light of what I know,” she said. There was an undertone to her words that left him unsure precisely what she meant, but she offered no more, and he didn’t ask. “Ms. Milligan was my roommate. She was the only person I had ever met who did not think me brash and uncontrollable. Though we were contrary in so many ways, she was ever gentle, ever understanding.” Ms. Masters made an unladylike snort. “Those first few weeks I remember thinking it must be an act. No one could actually be so saintly. Yet, I’ve learned it to truly be the case. Considering all you know of her family, all you know of...” There was that undertone again. Dean frowned, a conviction stirring that this concerned James. “...you do not know her as I do. She is the most innocent, blameless, naive creature in the world. I fear that the coming days will be extremely trying for her. I am here in part today to try to shelter her from that. For as long as possible, I will protect her from the harsh realities of the world – whomever I may hurt as a result.” The vow in her last words sent a shiver down Dean’s back.

A bustle at the entryway spared him having to concoct a reply, prevented him from demanding that she speak clearly on what she meant. Ms. Harvelle, shedding her pelisse as she hastened past the doorway, happened to scan the room and stopped short upon seeing it occupied.

“Charlotte, we have a visitor,” she said. Charlie stepped into view a moment later, curls disordered by the wind, hands juggling parasol, gloves, and a bag as she looked in, bemused.

“Good morning, Ms. Masters,” Charlie said brightly. “We’ll join you in a moment. Shall we send for tea?”

“That would be lovely,” Ms. Masters replied. Her fingers went to the strings that held her reticule closed, but she stopped short and set it aside.

“My apologies that Mr. Winchester did not offer,” Charlie shoved all of her belongings in Ms. Harvelle’s arms and allowed her to take everything short upon seeing it occupied.

“Gentlemen often do not think of such things,” said Ms. Masters with a chuckle. “I assure you, aside from that oversight he has been the soul of hospitality.”

Small talk filled the minutes as they awaited Ms. Harvelle’s return with refreshments. Charlotte spoke of her visit to her sickly mother, Ms. Masters spoke of a party that she attended the night before, and Dean paid all little mind, his worries multiplying.

The instant Ms. Harvelle took her seat, Ms. Masters entire affect changed. She leaned forward
avidly, met each eye in turn, drawing surprised silence from the Winchesters. “Long have I stood aside in the household of an odious man,” she said without preamble. “Having known him, I could not doubt what he was, but I knew that any scandal would touch on Ms. Milligan, and so I said nothing, did nothing. I saw his affection for his daughter, and could see no further. It was selfish of me, and now it appears likely to cause harm to all. I thank you for the edifying example you have placed before me, Mrs. Winchester, Ms. Harvelle – I am better person for it. I am come today to begin to make amends. Or, rather, I have already begun to make amends, and I am here to deliver the consequences of those amends.”

“You are speaking in riddles,” laughed Charlie. “I’ve not the least sense of it.”

“Alright, let me begin again,” Ms. Masters took a deep breath. “To quote that most illustrious of playwrights, Sir William Shakespeare: Mr. Milligan is an ass.”

“Ms. Masters!”

“What?” she asked blithely. “I did not say it, the bard did, though he spoke of Dogberry. And it’s the truth.” The tassels on her reticule were finally undone, and from within she withdrew a letter with shaking hand. “He is arrogant, overbearing and proud. And, he thinks me content in his household, and does not think to lock his study. Though he did seal the drawer that contained this. There were a number of others similar within, and I have those safe as well, but I wished to return this to its rightful owner.”

Ms. Masters passed the sheet to Mr. Winchester, past the astonished eyes of Mrs. Winchester and Ms. Harvelle. The moment his fingers touched the sheet, Dean knew from the texture and weight precisely what it was he held. Only a slight unfolding confirmed truth, the words, Dearest Castiel – Dearest James, writ in his hand atop. With a gasp, he crumpled it.

“Do not destroy it!” said Charlie in alarm. “What is it?”

“My apologies,” he exhaled shakily and smooth the paper on his knee. “It is the letter, the letter I wrote...” He trailed off and met Ms. Masters steady, candid expression. “This is the source of your innuendos. You saw it, and now you know.”

“It’s extremely interesting, is it not, that Mr. Milligan published the missive in the Intelligencer and neglected to include that the object of your affection is Mr. James Novak,” Ms. Masters said steadily. “Do you not think so?” Taking another steadying breath, Dean passed the letter to Charlie, but none of them answered. “Mrs. Winchester – Ms. Harvelle – I love Ms. Milligan to the heavens. I would be the Johanna to her Charlotte if only I could. I must know – is this truth? Does Mr. Novak reciprocate the warm expressions of affection contained in that letter?”

“That is not for me to say,” said Charlie uncomfortably. All eyes turned to Dean, and he felt it as keenly as being singled out in a vast crowd. Every doubt and fear his mind could muster sprang instantly to life, crashed in on him, amplified by the pain of a week’s division and near two weeks lack of intimacy. Yet, from the corner of his eye he could swear he saw a smiling face, a gleam of blue, and all the fears quieted, every part of him that whispered this is impossible, I can never have this was quelled.

Dean met Ms. Master’s eyes steadily, without the least doubt, when he said, “He does. We are entirely, hopelessly, devotedly infatuated with each other. I adore him, Ms. Masters.”

“You will kill her,” Ms. Masters sprang to her feet, face flushing red with anger. “Oh, I feared this, I suspected it, the way you looked upon him when you first met him, the way Mrs. Winchester watched you each in turn, the way you fled from that damned necklace as if the sight of it seared
you. But I told myself it was impossible, that people – that men – do not act that way! Yet, clearly
they do. So, what happens now – is she to live a sad life with a man whom she loves who cannot
possibly love her in return? Is she to be abandoned by him without explanation? What a _cad_ he is, to
woo her knowing his heart belonged to another!

“Too far,” snapped Charlie, rising as well and confronting Ms. Masters. “That is taking it entirely too
far. He has not your fortune to rely on and see him through the years, nor the patronage of a wealthy
friend as you have to allow you to pursue your spinsterhood in comfort. Further, the limits on men
are greater than on us. A woman may, in her spinsterhood, move in with another woman and none
will think it odd, whereas a bachelor to do the same with another bachelor there would be
uproar. The constraints of society and demands of a pocketbook do not make him a scoundrel,
regardless that the woman he takes to him be the one you happen to love, Ms. Masters. For all your
affection, you have never even had the courage to speak to her of it. You’ve chanced nothing, from
top to bottom, until now. You’ve allowed the object of your affection be courted by another. You’ve
observed her father to grow in evil and said nothing solely to spare her the pain of learning what sort
of man he be. By coming here today, I assumed that you wished to improve yourself, but to hear you
speak so – what can you mean by it?”

They stood toe to toe, eyes locked. Ms. Masters, her cheeks faintly gaunt from the weight she had
shed over the preceding months, trembled with the strength of her emotions. Charlie, for her part,
was steady, calm, and commanding. It was no surprise that Ms. Masters blinked first, looked away,
the flush in her cheeks fading to a more maidenly blush, her shoulders slumping.

“It is all so unfair,” she said miserably.

“It is,” agreed Charlie with implacable anger. “But James Novak is no more to blame than the rest of
us. The tangled skein of our relationships is not the issue of the moment. Something must be done
about Adam Milligan.”

“They are not separate issues,” Ms. Masters countered. “Milligan has intentionally kept Novak’s
name from the public. There must be a reason for it.”

“Milligan wishes to bed me,” said Dean bluntly, feeling a flash of temper. “And I’ve said no. He’s
been most insistent, however, and has told me in no uncertain terms that if I do not as he wishes, he’ll
make sure that James suffers for it. Thus, he ruins my reputation while he hastens James and Ms.
Milligan to marriage, for the sooner they are wed, the sooner James will be under Mr. Milligan’s
power, and the sooner his revenge against my denials can commence.”

“That’s disgusting!” exclaimed Ms. Masters.

“Do you agree that something must be done about Mr. Milligan?” repeated Charlie.

“Do you mean to tell me that he wishes his daughter to marry a man whom Milligan _knows_ cannot
love her?” Ms. Masters was working herself into an impressive show of outrage. “Do you mean to
tell me that the reason he wishes to see this marriage takes place is so he can...he can...he can _violate_
the man in question? And all a ploy so he can get to you? It’s not merely disgusting, it is insanity! It
makes no sense!”

“Yet, it is the case,” said Ms. Harvelle. “Mr. Milligan cares not about people, he cares for power.
Can we please cease these theatrics? Surely you see now that if we do not stop Milligan, the hurt to
Ms. Milligan will only grow greater. Correct?” Ms. Masters nodded reluctantly.

“There is more,” Dean said. “Charlotte, I have learned something very interesting today, that I think
might further sway Ms. Masters. Have you ever spoken to Claire about her parentage?”
“Claire?”

“A foundling,” said Charlie. “I’ve known since you and Ms. Milligan told us of Amelia Richardson that Claire must surely be her daughter.” Ms. Masters gasped. “We took her in last year. The identity of her father is a mystery.”

“No longer,” Dean rose. “She told it me this morning. She’s known all along, but she was threatened into keeping her silence.”

Wide-eyed understanding dawned on Ms. Masters face, color draining. “Ms. Richardson was visiting with Ms. Milligan and I in the city, staying at 3 North ----- Street, when she...”

“Do you mean to tell me that Adam Milligan is Claire Richardson’s father?” demanded Ms. Harvelle, a shrill note in her voice.

“No longer,” Dean said with a broad smile. “Ms. Richardson wrote it in a deathbed letter, which Claire has delivered into my hands.”

Charlie’s jaw dropped, and then she began to laugh. “Oh, we have him!” she cackled. “We had him already, but now we have him! We will drag him by the ballocks before we are done. Between what Ms. Masters has acquired, and Claire’s proof, and everything that Mr. Novak and I have already done...Ms. Masters, once and for all, will you help us?”

“What of Anna?”

“I promise we’ll not neglect her,” said Charlie. “But there’s not time to wait now. The wedding is in two weeks and it must be averted, and with new information, we can act now, with your help.”

“What are your intentions?” asked Ms. Masters.

“To destroy him, completely and utterly, so that he can never show his face in London again,” said Charlie. “To make sure that Mrs. Novak is similarly demolished, and Mr. Alder as well. All I need you to do is to grant us an audience at a time you name, when you are sure that Mr. Milligan will be home. Can you do that?”

Ms. Masters looked at each of them in turn, Charlie’s face lit with exuberant enthusiasm, Ms. Harvelle’s indulgent and focused entirely on Charlotte, and while Dean could only imagine how he must look, he knew that the feeling nestled warmly in his heart was hope. Finally, she nodded. “Call on me Monday, I will make sure he is about, or will reschedule if it proves otherwise.”

The days between Thursday and Monday passed in fits and starts. On Friday, the entire founding membership of the Intercontinental League appeared on his doorstep, and spent the day making nuisances of themselves in the best possible way. It was, Dean thought, the kindest thing his friends had ever done him. At the risk of censure, they installed in his parlor, sitting room and study, and they talked of the nearly-complete terms of admission, bantered on business and the latest news, settled with newspapers, played at cards and drank. Lafitte was last to depart, well after dark, waiting until they were alone before he spoke.

“Winchester, I have known you going on 15 years,” he spoke softly, his drawl making the words come slowly. “To say you are my acquaintance would scarce do justice to the intimacy of our friendship – I would hope you’d say the same.” It wasn’t a question, but Dean nodded nonetheless. “There are secrets that are scant kept between intimates – the hints there to be seen if the words are never spoken. I cannot believe you would think any who know you to be scandalized by nonsense, yet I have seen the gratitude and surprise that paint your features at each show of our support. Your
face has ever been an open book to your heart, Winchester, and it has perhaps revealed more of you than you’d have wished it to. Yet, see the men who come here today. Whatever they know or suspect, clearly none cared. None feared they would be tainted by association with you, none worried what wagging tongues might make of it. So will it ever be. Those who are worth having as friends will appreciate your worth as a friend. You will ever have a place in the Intercontinental League, and there shall ever be a seat for you and Mrs. Winchester at my table.” There was a pause, and Lafitte turned to go, only to look back with a broad, easy grin. “That said, it might make talk if you brought the mysterious him along, so perhaps wisest not to.” Dean’s jaw dropped, leaving him speechless. Lafitte laughed, shook Dean’s limp hand, and departed for the night. After years of subtle hints that Dean had dared hope meant nothing, there it was, the simple truth. Lafitte had known since who-knew-when and cared not one whit.

The words reassured Dean in a way that no others had. In his mind, discovery had guaranteed ostracism, and only the promise of Charlie’s plan to potentially circumvent ruination had given him hope for a future with any kind of society. Never had it occurred to him that there would be men who’d not leave his side even if the truth came out. Knowing it removed the last impediment between him and the growing glimmers of hope and happiness that threatened to overwhelm him. Even should the worst happen, he had his family, James loved him, and there were still those who would speak to him. Though he might be forced from his title, there was Samuel to turn things over to, and though he and Charlotte would have to retire to a secluded life, it was not to be a solitary one. The prospect warmed Dean through, and he found himself looking increasingly forward to Monday, the keenest kind of anticipation growing in his gut.

The morning dawned dull and brisk, wind scuttling gray clouds across a leaden sky. Frost in the air promised rain or, if it grew cold enough, snow. No one seemed inclined to linger on the streets as the Winchesters made their way to 3 North ----- Street save a group of youths who inexplicably appeared to take great delight in the way the wind whipped through their clothing and made a crow’s nest of their hair. Their laughter made a strange counterpoint to the melancholy whistle of the wind, the 'lorn flapping of their outer clothes, and the curious worry that gnawed at Dean’s gut. Between them all, they had done what sense, effort, luck, larceny, contacts, and devotion could accomplish. There was nothing left now save to take what they had and confront Milligan. All of Dean’s trust rested in his wife – if it were solely up to Mr. Novak, he’d be far less sanguine.

The more he reflected on it as they walked through the chill, the more surprised he became that the conclusion of all was to be a direct confrontation with the man. He’d assumed that some scandal would break that would do the deed – they knew now of multiple such scandals merely waiting for dissemination – yet clearly the intention was to speak with Milligan. Without knowing why he so thought, Dean suspected this had not been the original plan, but with the additional information they’d gathered, with men like Demian and Barnes ready to step forward, with damning proof such as Claire’s letter and Claire’s very existence, things had changed. All that Charlie would tell him was that they were going to turn the tables. Added to Mr. Novak’s promise that they would “bury” Milligan, Dean was entirely at a loss for what to expect. The prospect simultaneously excited and concerned him. At no point, after all, had Charlie actually promised that his reputation would be salvaged from amidst the ruins.

Mr. Gabriel Novak and James awaited them on the corner of North ----- Street and ----- Lane as they turned the corner. The last of the weight pressing Dean’s shoulders lifted to see James present as well. It seemed only fitting that all be in attendance for...whatever this was to be...and it had been near on two weeks since they’d last met. Always more beautiful and perfect that Dean remembered, shy blue eyes met his and offered a flash of strength and confidence before turning away as James greeted the rest of the party. They must not appear too familiar in public. Dean sighed.

What intimacies, what future, might await them in private?
They made a large party walking to Number 3. Taking a position alongside Mr. Novak, Samuel contrived to have Dean and James walk side by side in silent comraderie. Ms. Harvelle and Charlotte talked idly of nothing. With every appearance of making merry and not a worry to be had in the world, they stood upon the entryway and laughed, awaiting the servant to show them in. Upon entry, Ms. Masters joined them as they removed hats and pelisse and coats and passed all to the woman who had granted them admittance.

“Ms. Milligan and Mr. Inias Milligan have gone to a gallery,” she explained tersely. “Mr. Raphael Milligan is as always wherever it is worst for him to be, with whomever suits his fancy, doing whatever he wishes, unchecked. I’ve pled a slight indisposition and remained home, and Mr. Milligan and Mrs. Novak are in the study, planning a dinner party. What now?”

“Now, we have a heart to heart conversation with them,” Charlie said, rubbing her hands together in anticipation, a strange glimmer of excitement in her green eyes. “Would you care to join us?”

“Mrs. Winchester, I’d not miss it for the world.”

The door to the study was a short way down the hall, and closed.

“How do you think it locked?” asked Charlie.

“I’m sure it’s not,” Ms. Masters said with a wry smile and a self-satisfied drawl to her voice. “Wouldn’t you know, the key has gone missing.”

A long beat passed, looks were shared all around, and then Charlotte put her hand on the door and opened it.

Within was a room whose appearance was very much of a type with the owner, dark, taciturn, and ostentatiously wealthy. The walls were stained very dark and polished to a high sheen that reflected the fire light. Bookcases lined the walls filled with leather-bound volumes, not a one of which appeared to have ever been opened. A painting over the mantle showed a glowering older man who bore a family resemblance to Adam Milligan. Sconces gave candle light that flickered and bobbed wildly as the door opened and allowed in a burst of air. Though it was morning, the curtains were drawn, lending the room a timeless feeling. Milligan sat behind an enormous desk, completely neat and bare save for the usual tools – blotter, seal, wax, ink well, and the like – and a sheet of paper partially covered in tight script. Mrs. Novak leaned over him, in the midst of pointing to something on the page.

“—perhaps say…” she stopped the moment she heard the interruption and looked up at them, blue eyes piercing. Milligan stared them down as well, brow brooding with fury as he jumped to his feet.

“How dare you intrude upon me unannounced?” he said with cold rage. “Ms. Masters, what is the meaning of this?”

No one answered as the entire Winchester and Novak party stepped, one by one, into the room. Ms. Masters had led the way, and took up a guard post just within the entry way, beside the door. Dean stepped to the fireplace, anticipating that he was present primarily to listen, rather than to contribute, and content to be unobtrusive. Charlotte came in next, flanked by Sam, she to stand before the desk and he to stand just at his shoulder with his arms crossed intimidatingly over his chest. Ms. Harvelle happily took the other side of the doorway, and Mr. Novak crossed the room with a casual saunter, every step a challenge, stopped beside his wife, wrapped an arm around her waist and gave her a kiss on the cheek.

“My darling, I think I’ve never seen you look better,” he said mockingly as red suffused her fair skin.
She met his gaze with outrage, lips curling into a sneer that was practically a snarl.

James came last, his silhouette against the bright light and white walls of the hallway appearing as a halo to Dean’s eyes. Blue eyes flicked over the scene, and he hesitated a moment before crossing the room to stand near Dean, far enough to prevent any unseemly appearance, close enough that Dean could meet his eyes at any time, should he wish to. While Dean appreciated the consideration, for the first time since he’d met Milligan he didn’t feel the least fear. He was angry and tense, certainly, but as steel-green eyes met Dean’s with a derisive challenge, Dean didn’t lower his gaze. They were storming the gates, and Dean had an army at his back, and he had no cause to be frightened.

“I asked you a question!” barked Milligan. “Ms. Masters, do not forget on whose sufferance you are permitted to stay in this household.”

Still none answered him, and his face grew purple. Striding the length of his desk, he rounded on them.

Immediately, Mrs. Novak was behind him, a restraining hand on his shoulder. “Dear brother,” she said soothingly. “Allow cooler heads to prevail. I’m sure there’s a completely innocent and innocuous explanation for this apparently untoward behavior. After all, if our guests intentions were anything but irreproachable, people would learn of it, and mouths do talk so.”

“Indeed,” Charlie agreed coldly. “That’s what the blackmailer counts on, right?”

“Baseless accusations,” Mrs. Novak said with a serpent-like smile. “Is this display in regards to that?” As she spoke, Milligan made an obvious effort to collect himself, and by the time Mrs. Novak was done speaking, he wore a matching smile.

“Actions do have consequences,” Milligan continued from where she’d stopped. “I thought you all well acquainted with what those would – or will – be.” A snide look at Mr. Novak punctuated that last. Novak took a snuff box from his pocket and sniffed indifferently, pocketing it again with a deft turn of his wrist.

“Mr. Milligan, kindly sit down and be quiet,” Charlie said with saccharine sweetness. “For once in your life, your role in this negotiation is to sit and listen and then make a difficult choice. Having been on the opposite end of many such talks, I’m sure you know how to comport yourself properly.”

“There is no negotiation,” disagreed Milligan. “You will kindly leave my home or…”

Silently, Ms. Harvelle placed a hand on the door which swung easily on well-oiled hinges. It closed with a faint click. On the other side of it, Ms. Masters produced a key as if by magic and locked them all in.

“What are you on about, Mrs. Winchester?” said Milligan, tone somewhere between exasperation
and petulance. Truly, he was far less intimidating when he had not constructed a situation to his advantage. Dean had thought shooting Milligan sounded like an exceedingly gratifying option, but watching him squirm and throw about baseless bravado was far more satisfying.


“This is the most absurd show of arrogance,” Mrs. Novak declared, but the confident words were belied by a tightness about her eyes. “Everyone knows that he—” She pointed at Dean. “—is disgraced, and that you are all his family. With only a few hints, everyone will suddenly realize that he—” She switched that claw-like gesture to James. “—is the reason why. No one who thinks about it for two minutes together will take the younger Winchester seriously,” she turned her sneer on Sam, who returned it with a light-hearted smile, “and the rest of you are no one. As to you, husband of my heart, we both know that you will grow bored before you see anything through.”

“This marriage is exceedingly tiresome,” agreed Mr. Novak with a yawn. “I’ve rather had my fill of it, I think.”

“I hate you,” snapped Mrs. Novak.

“You’ve said nothing that’s ever given me more pleasure, dear,” Mr. Novak gushed, covering the space between them to plant another kiss upon her cheek. She flinched and cringed away, and he managed to leave an impressive amount of slobber in his wake, clearly delighting in the look of utter disgust she aimed at him.

“Mr. Novak,” said Charlie mildly.

“My apologies, Mrs. Winchester, I didn’t mean to distract with my domestic drama,” he said, stepping back to stand beside the desk once more. “We’ll talk later, precious.” If Mrs. Novak were any more red, steam would burst from her ears, and it seemed to require all her self-restraint to keep from gnashing her teeth.

“What can you possibly believe you have to force my hand, Mrs. Winchester?” All of Milligan’s composure had returned, and he watched them coolly with his cruel eyes. A flick of blue caught Dean’s eye, and James gave him a reassuring smile, no less welcome for being unnecessary. He was calm, wonderfully calm. Each moment increased his conviction that they could do this.

“The rumors haven’t been as much in your favor as you expected, have they?” Charlie asked rhetorically, assuming the sing-song, slightly lecturing tone of one about to explain something complex. Milligan made no answer.

“They’re truly not,” Ms. Masters chimed in. “Many have come to call, and commented that Mr. Dean Winchester has such a fine reputation, such a picture-perfect family, that the things being said about him are entirely far-fetched.”

“As it turns out, Mr. Milligan, you attract more flies with honey than with vinegar,” Charlie interjected James thoughtfully.

“When one garners a reputation as a bully, and then are seen to speak against one long thought innocent, it causes people to wonder — who is the victim, who the aggressor? For some reason, people seem to find you overbearing. Not that I’ve had any hand in encouraging that belief.”

“This is all fascinating,” sneered Mrs. Novak. “Congratulations. People whisper. It doesn’t matter.”

“Really? Is it so irrelevant as that?” Charlie watched Mr. Milligan, and she smirked when he said
nothing. “This entire scheme of yours is based on whispers. You understand exactly how powerful whispers can be.”

“Not as compared to printed truth,” Mrs. Novak seemed undeterred by her lack of support. She didn’t even glance as her brother as she stared Charlie down, trying – unsuccessfully – to take advantage of several inches of height she had on Dean’s wonderful wife. “The letter is out there. There’s no escaping it now.”

“Is there really not?” Charlie’s eyes went wide with mock innocence. “No one but Mr. Milligan and Ms. Naomi of the Intelligencer have ever seen the letter. This has been whispered in many ears already, and soon those who require proof before granting belief will come to call. When no evidence can be provided, they will work to quash the rumors. Mr. Milligan begins to gain a reputation as a man who will lie about anything, or anyone, if it suits his ends. Once established, such a troublesome public image will be inescapable – it’ll serve to name him trouble no matter where he calls.”

“Except it’s not a lie,” Mrs. Novak rolled her eyes. “We’ve the letter.”

“Do you?”

“What nonsense is this? Of course we do!”

“We don’t,” said Milligan, nostrils flaring. “How did you get it?”

“It doesn’t matter,” snapped Mrs. Novak. “We’ve both seen it. The Ton will never doubt us.”

“Even when the public learns that Ms. N----, the ever-elusive Ms. Naomi, is none other than Mrs. Lilith Novak, Mr. Milligan’s sister?” Charlie suggested. “An impressive amount of the gossip that Ms. N---- has ‘exposed’ in the Intelligencer has been to the benefit of Mr. Milligan’s friends, and to the harm of his enemies. When Ms. Naomi’s identity becomes public, that will generate a great deal of suspicion, don’t you think?”

“Why would they learn her identity?” Mrs. Novak was putting up a brave show of continuing her protestations, but judging by the growing resignation on her face, she was coming to understand that the Winchesters held all the cards. Dean’s smile broadened. They hadn’t even gotten to Mr. Demian and Mr. Barnes, or Claire Richardson.

“Because the two of you will tell them,” said Charlie triumphantly.

“Absurd,” Milligan laughed, still defiant. “Why would we ever do that?”

“Hmm…let’s see,” Charlie looked towards the wood-lined ceiling like she was thinking hard. “First, there’s the rumors of your coercion and braggadocio. Those are definitely damaging to your reputation, and they’ll only grow louder. Second, we’ve got the letter that Mr. Winchester wrote, and all of the other letters that you were storing in your drawer. Once the original letter writers are informed that your hold on them is gone, you’re going to have considerably less leverage than you once did. A lot of people who once happily spoke in your support are going to grow exceedingly quiet on that score.”

“Tell him about Claire,” suggested Ms. Masters.

“Of course – do you remember Amelia Richardson?” The increasing furrow of Mr. Milligan’s brow indicated clearly that he did. “Well, she wrote a most remarkable letter about the identity of the father of her by-blow. I suspect Ms. Richardson’s family would be very interested in learning who disgraced their daughter, and will be far more difficult to intimidate into silence than a nine year old
“No one will listen to you,” hissed Milligan.

“Then there’s Mr. Demian, Mr. Barnes, and the seven other men we’ve found who are willing to step forward and tell the Ton about your behavior,” continued Mr. Novak thoughtfully, as if Milligan hadn’t spoken. Dean blinked. They’d found so many others? Mr. Novak and Charlie had been very busy indeed! “When they each thought they were alone, all were quiet, but some realized – with help, mind you – that you were behind the campaign to damage Mr. Winchester’s reputation, and wanted to speak. Then, after the fight – and especially after that charming article that my beloved wrote,” he tipped a hand to Mrs. Novak, who looked like to stab him with a tempting letter opener on the desk, “they just started coming out of the wood work. Turns out, when they understand that my charming brother-in-law has laid hands on other men, intimidated multiple innocents, recognized that Mr. Winchester was surely working in self-defense and yet you saw him made a villain...in short, faced with the knowledge that their silence caused further crimes, there are some who are prepared to do the right thing.”

“And you’re one of them?” Milligan said with obvious disbelief.

“I am, though Mr. Freeley is not,” Mr. Novak shrugged. “If only his father would die already.”

“Don’t forget the three other girls we’ve learned of whom you’ve, er, debauched,” Ms. Harvelle added.

“And my darling Mrs. Novak?” Mr. Novak’s smile became positively cruel. “You really shouldn’t leave important information in your desk. I’ve got this wonderful list of all the invitees to the next Soiree, including their real names and their addresses. As they all know that you are the only who has that information, imagine who they’ll blame if their secret becomes public?”

“None of this means anything,” said Milligan, but there was little strength in the refutation. He was sweating now, and the grit had faded from his eyes. “None of this is enough for such as you to stop such as me.” A feeling of strength surged in Dean’s breast.

“Alone? No,” Charlie concurred. “No single piece of it would be enough – but taken as a whole? If the high society in which you move learns that you have taken advantage of some daughters, what’s to convince them that their daughter might not be your next victim? If the men you have blackmailed or abused step forward, some distinguished themselves, whose to doubt that you will stop at nothing? All will be able to see what is already clear to us: that you will use anyone simply to feel powerful, simply to get what you want. That’s not very gentlemanly of you.”

“Not to mention the sodomy,” added Dean, earning several startled gasps from the ladies that he’d speak the word aloud. He didn’t care. He felt like he was atop the world. “I’ve been noticing the last few days, people don’t look kindly on that. I know at least one of those men will accuse you of it. All it takes is the hint of a rumor.”

“Speaking of,” there was an edge of franticness to Mrs. Novak’s voice now, “none of this will save you, Mr. Winchester. Everybody knows. Only we can make that disappear. If you will keep your silence…”

“Ah, you guess my goal!” Charlie said happily. “That was precisely where this negotiation was going. What will our silence cost?”

“It doesn’t matter,” Milligan leaned back in his chair with an easy smile, steepling his fingers before his face. “You won’t do it.”
“Oh?”

“All these people you’ve alluded to, you’ll ruin every single one of them simply to topple me,” explained Milligan. “You’re good people,” Milligan managed to make it sound like an insult, “you’d never do that.”

“I’m already ruined,” shrugged Dean. “I’ve got nothing more to lose. And it turns out, some people care about things beyond their reputation, such as the people they love, and their families, and truth, and justice.”

“Precisely,” Milligan pressed on with a callous grin. “You’re ruined. No one will believe you.”

“They will,” disagreed Charlie. “If we went to the Ton and said, ‘Adam Milligan and Lilith Novak are scoundrels, liars and blackmailers,’ none would believe without proof. However, we’re the proof. What you have done to Mr. Winchester serves as proof. That was why we allowed you to out him as you have. All who know my husband, my family, know the kind of people we are. Even those who do not have wondered that a name never before associated with scandal has suddenly become the center of attention – and more than a few have noticed, when it’s been pointed out to them, that you are the originator of all. Having seen the lengths you’ll go to in order to ruin one man, there will be few prepared to doubt that you would do the same again.” Dean nodded. Hence the need for his ruin. It did make sense. Accusing Milligan of blackmail, when there was no public sign that he’d ever blackmailed someone, accomplished nothing. Accusing Milligan of blackmail, when Dean was an extremely public example of someone Milligan had recently dramatically damaged in the public eye? That single example could serve as proof of a host of wrongdoing, with the right supporting evidence – the supporting evidence that they had in abundance.

“Do your worst,” Milligan met Dean’s eyes, and there wasn’t a thing about them that was intimidating. They were merely green eyes in the face of a tired, sad man whose best days were fading slowly behind him. Milligan was no one.

“Brother,” Mrs. Novak said, and she sounded suddenly tired and resigned. With a quiet exhalation, she deflated on herself. “We cannot stand before society if even a fraction of this comes out.”

“You think so, sister? I have always been able to do this without you,” he gave her a pleasant smile, and her eyes widened.

“Well, then, do so,” she snapped. “What do you wish me to do?”

“All I want you to do is leave, Lilith,” Mr. Novak said tiredly. “Reveal yourself as Ms. Naomi. Print in that libelous turd you call newsprint that it was all a pack of lies – about Mr. Winchester, about the others you’ve deliberately hounded into obscurity – and then go. How does Paris appeal to you? At this point I will pay to never have to look at you again.”

“I can do as I will while I’m there?” she said, suspicion lighting her eyes, her posture growing slightly more confident once more.

“With the understanding that if it wrongs me or mine, or if you come back, I will still have all of this to use against you?” He quirked an eyebrow, and she scowled and skulked back. “Have the time of your life. Write me occasionally – you may even gloat if you wish. I’ll not begrudge you that.”

“Why, thank you, Mr. Novak,” she gave him a mocking curtsy, and Novak returned it with an equally scathing bow.

“Lilith, if you tell the Ton that your articles were untrue, they’ll turn on me,” said Milligan. For the
first time, Dean heard something other than callousness in his voice, there was a hint of pleading.

“It’s over, Adam,” she replied. “It was always a danger. Methinks you wanted this one a little too much. I hope he was worth it.” She gave Dean a keen look up and down, then dismissed him with a slight turn of her head.

“He would have been,” Milligan caught Dean’s eye, a lascivious smile on his lips. Before Dean could reply, before anyone else could even react, James crossed the intervening space and backhanded Milligan so hard that he tumbled from his chair. With a grunt of pain, James shook his hand out, smiling cockily, as every stared at him in amazement.

“That was far more satisfying, and more painful, than I thought it would be,” James observed. Dean was the first to laugh, then Ms. Masters, and then all of the Winchesters and Novaks, gales filling the room. Under the onslaught of their good humor, the complete lack of fear that it revealed, Milligan wilted against the floor. Even Mrs. Novak, though she didn’t laugh, ignored his apparent distress.

“Congratulations, Mr. Milligan,” Charlie finally managed through her humor. “You’re going to be the talk of the Ton.”

“Unless I…?” the words were a whisper muffled against the ground, barely recognizable as the man who had so superciliously snubbed Dean before others, the man who had used words and a firm grip to disassemble all the defenses of a lifetime as if they were nothing.

“Tell all the truth of what has passed between you and Mr. Winchester – that you sought to proposition him, and told lies when you were turned down,” Ms. Harvelle said.

“Admit that you cast aspersions on to Mr. Winchester as regards Claire Richardson to hide your own indiscretions,” Ms. Masters said.

“Confess that you and your sister created her vaunted monthly salons as a means of gaining material with which to blackmail and manipulate the luminaries of the city,” Mr. Novak said.

“You will stop protecting the loathsome Mr. Alder, and let him suffer as he ought for the crimes he has committed,” suggested Samuel.

“And,” Charlie had reached the conclusion of all her careful work, and her words rang like a battle cry. “You will step down from your position and retire to your home in the country – permanently. You’ll increase Ms. Milligan’s dowry to the greatest extent possible, and divide your estate to ensure that Mr. Inias Milligan has an independent living.”

A fist slammed into the carpeting with a dull sound and a roar of frustrated anger.

“Don’t throw a tantrum,” said Mr. Novak distastefully. “You brought this on yourself, Milligan. Just had to see how far you could push things, didn’t you? Each time it worked, the temptation to try again was that much greater, and you have ever been a self-indulgent prick.”

“Language, Mr. Novak,” Ms. Harvelle said, rolling her eyes.

“Well, Mr. Milligan, Mrs. Novak, it’s been a pleasure,” Charlie said brightly. “I believe we’ll show ourselves out. I expect to see signs of your compliance – by which I mean your immediate, unhesitating surrender – starting in tomorrow’s Intelligencer. We’ll show ourselves out.”

As if it were all planned – perhaps it was, for all Dean knew – Ms. Masters unlocked and opened the door. Like a queen departing her throne room, Charlie turned and regally left the room, trailed by entire court: her knight, Sam; her jester, Mr. Novak; her consort, Ms. Harvelle; her prince regent,
Dean; her lady-in-waiting, Ms. Masters; and James, who Dean supposed was his own champion, in such an analogy. The thought made him smile, and he appreciatively watched the slight sway of James’ hips as he walked out of the room before Dean.

When they’d all exited, Ms. Masters turned and locked Mrs. Novak and Mr. Milligan in. “Let them stew about it,” she said with grim satisfaction. “We need to speak.”

The group repaired to the parlor in much better humor than they had arrive. Everywhere Dean looked, he saw growing smiles and relaxed shoulders, and he felt the same. The delight in James’ face brought swelling joy to Dean’s heart, and less publically acceptable parts of himself, as well. The way James kept rubbing his aching hand was adorably endearing as well.

“Ms. Masters, to what do we owe this unexpected influx of company?” Ms. Milligan came into the room, looking confused at the general air of merriment. Her arrival instantly dampened it. Singlehandedly, she was a reminder of how many barriers yet stood between each of them and happiness. Only Mr. Inias Milligan, entering in her wake, seemed immune to the sudden pall cast upon the assembly.

The expression on Ms. Milligan’s face when her eyes alit on James was particularly difficult to bear, especially considering the obvious difficulty that James had in meeting it. Where he had looked moments before on Dean before with eager, ingenuous excitement, when James turned his eyes on Ms. Milligan he was all proper politeness and restraint. An ache in Dean’s heart coalesced at once, and the considerations he’d thought settled days before suddenly returned to trouble him.

What was love? Looking at James and Ms. Milligan, Dean had a profound moment of understanding. Love for James necessitated understanding what was best for the young man, what he needed. As much as James wanted Dean, James didn’t need him. James needed the stability and protection of a wife, the security of the income that would come from her sizeable dowry, the ability to protect and forward his family. Dean could give him none of those things. Only Ms. Milligan could. As greetings and welcomes were exchanged all around, Dean turned towards the window, the elation of their triumph over his tormentor turned leaden in his gut. If Dean loved James, he had to be sure that before anything, James had what he needed. What Dean wanted, and even what James wanted, was irrelevant in comparison.

“I’m glad we’re all here, together,” Charlie said, her happiness bubbling over into effusive chatter. “We have so much to talk about! To begin with, Ms. Masters, why don’t you acquaint Ms. Milligan with the sequence of events?”

Knowing what was necessary did not make it any less painful to contemplate, nor would it make it any easier to implement. Dean stared sadly out at the London streets, made dead and gray by a steady rainfall that had begun sometime during their talk with Milligan and Mrs. Novak, and wished they lived in a world that didn’t look on love as forbidden if the partners be of different social classes, different ethnicities, different homelands, or the same gender. Reflected in the clear glass, he could see James watching him, but he didn’t dare turn around, couldn’t bear to look into those guileless eyes while his soul was so troubled, while the impossible so preoccupied him. Love was not defined by sacrifice, but that did not mean that love did not sometimes require that sacrifices be made.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this one ended up a little on the late side, guys. I’m sitting here feeling super
worried that it's not written clearly, but decided to post it tonight rather than review it again tomorrow morning and break my "chapter a day" goal. So...hopefully everything makes sense?

(I'm a bit of an anxious stress ball just now, don't mind me)

Speaking of "chapter a day" goal...with my weekend as it is, chances are extremely high that the last chapter will not be out until Sunday. Consider yourselves warned. :)

I left it on a horrible cliffhanger. I'm sorry (not sorry...) ;)

Garlands of pure white ribbon, woven round with foxglove, poppies, thrift and roses made swags between each pew. The festivity of the colors was added to by the fractal of rainbow swatches created by stunningly bright sunshine scattering through immense panels of stained glass. The walls of the church were perfectly white, but seemed to absorb the colors, reflect them, remake them anew even brighter than before. As Dean walked arm and arm with Charlie down the wide, red-carpeted aisle, he felt like he’d stepped within a kaleidoscope. Walking just ahead of them, Ms. Harvelle looked every way, eyes wide, mouth ajar, green and blue staining her blonde hair. Standing with Samuel, Jessica made an audible ‘oh!’ every time she beheld some new wonder, a hand on her new-swelling belly. The wonder of it was not lost on Dean. It would have been beautiful had Dean’s heart not felt so heavy.

It was over. Everything was over.

Wearing a smile painted on as if his face were a mask, Dean arrested Ms. Harvelle and indicated the row beside which they stood as a reasonable place for the Winchesters to ensconce for the duration of the long ceremony. The hard wood pew, cushioned in faded green velvet, was a modest distance back from the apse – close enough to indicate that they were close acquaintances with the family, far enough back to not indicate over familiarity with them. Several rows ahead, Ms. Masters craned her neck back to catch her first sight of Ms. Milligan. Her face had grown thin, her eyes showed moisture and a spider’s web of red veins that gave proof that she’d been weeping. Nevertheless, she donned a smile that Dean suspected was very similar to his own as she gave them a forlorn imitation of a friendly wave.

These months had not been easy for any of them. As Charlie kept reminding him, and kept reminding him, and kept reminding him, fixing social problems took time. It took time for people to realize that Mrs. Lilith Novak had sincerely meant her printed retractions and her confession that she was Ms. Naomi. It took time for people to believe. It took time for them to accept that her flight to France was tantamount to an admission of guilt, and more time for them to realize that she would not be coming back.

The pews were rapidly filling with people, the finest of London society come to see two of their own wed. With the increase in Ms. Anna Milligan’s dowry had come an equally impressive increase in the number of those who wished to solicit her acquaintance. Unlike Inias Milligan, who had handled the sudden influx of fortune and the accompanying pressure of society by behaving precisely as he always had, Ms. Milligan had felt that she had to be a presence in the Ton to match her wealth. Her personality didn’t shift one bit save for her shyness, which gave way instead to the kind of self-effacing modesty that couldn’t help but win over nearly everyone. The guest list for her wedding was truly enormous. Dean felt as out of place here as he had at the Milligan ball, a life time ago January last.

Though the confrontation had taken place in early February, the work of completing their coup d’grace – coup d’etat, more like, a true rebellion – was far from finished. Whispers reached the Ton from all directions of the Milligan crimes that, supposedly, the Winchesters were not revealing to the public. None alone was enough to be damning, but slowly, surely, the name on every gossiping tongue became Adam Milligan. It took time for people to put together the careful trail of breadcrumbs and realize that Mr. Adam Milligan was the culprit of all. It took time for them to reason
out what that implied about Dean Winchester, about his family, about the others against whom
Milligan and Mrs. Novak had acted in the past. It took time for the public to realize that it was the
threat of worse scandal that drove Mr. Adam Milligan to a small estate in the south of England, the
fear of reprisal that kept him there, the danger of exile or even arrest that kept him forcing a smile and
explaining by word and letter to all who asked that he was the villain of the piece.

When Dean’s temper had finally gotten the better of him in late summer, Charlie had sat him down
and explained why he had to be patient. Gradually, she promised, ever so gradually, she and Mr.
Novak were leaking every truth to the public, in terms that meant no others would be ruined. By
doing it thus, they presented the Ton with one vast, enticing mystery to unravel, with new tidbits
coming out all the time. It kept people interested, it kept them talking, it kept them distracted from all
other scandals that might have tempted them. None would wonder at the identity of the mysterious
Castiel, not after Ms. Naomi printed her retraction less than a week after the original piece was
published, not after the word got out that Mr. Milligan was the true father of Claire Richardson.
Intrigue drove talk, and what was more intriguing than the tantalizing puzzle of Adam Milligan’s fall
from grace? Indeed, as time passed, even Charlie and Mr. Novak lost some control of the helm, as
information – perhaps true, perhaps not – reached wagging tongues that they had no hand in
disseminating. It took time, but the overall jigsaw assembled was damning. There was ignominy
from which one would recover from time – that society would forget or overlook as new events
occurred or as public opinion changed. Such was the nature of Dean’s exposure and disgrace. Then,
there were misdeeds on the level of a Mr. Alder or a Mrs. Novak or a Mr. Milligan. Opprobrium
would follow them for the rest of their lives. It drove Mr. Alder to the United States, it drove Mrs.
Novak to Paris, and it drove Mr. Milligan to the seclusion of a quiet life alone on an estate that he
loathed. Eventually. Given time.

Outside, the weather was everything that was fine and perfect for early fall. The trees were just
beginning to turn, and Mr. Gabriel Novak had promised his interested guests a ride and a hunt the
day following the wedding. Dean was looking forward to it, something to take his mind off of
everything that hurt. The role of country squire fit Dean like a second skin, another mask, and he was
happy to don it to prevent himself feeling too much that he ought not to at such a time. Mr. Novak’s
estates, known by the vaunted name “Heaven’s Respite,” comprised a vast manor house currently
stuffed to the brim with guests and equally lovely grounds. The past few days – yea, it took days –
had been spent in tours of the many delightful paths through the parks and gardens.

The church bells began to toll, and Mr. Gabriel Novak finally walked in, mock seriousness on his
face as he gave his best proper nod to all he passed. Those he liked best were easy to single out, for
he named them with a mischievous gleam in his eye. The Winchesters received a playful wink.
Beside Mr. Novak walked Mr. Freeley, and both were dressed in their Sunday best. Mr. Freeley
wore an easy, relaxed smile that, far from making him look casual or approachable, gave him an air
of such distinction that it was practically forbidding. Behind them, drifting like a ghost, was Mrs.
Freeley. There was nothing in her expression to indicate that she was even present. She walked
through the fractured dazzle of colors as if through the familiar hallways of home, or as if through a
grayyard. Dean had never felt more sorry for anyone in his life. Must it always be the case, that for
some to be happy, others must suffer? He’d done his best to minimize the hardship that devolved
upon his loved ones, but undoubtedly it had been the most difficult year of Dean’s life save the time
after his father and uncle died. Even the 19 months of Samuel’s descent into dissipation had been
neither so stressful nor so impenetrable. Both of those times, there had been action that Dean could
take, things that he could do to ease the troubles. Now, there was nothing he could do but wait until
the last of the storm clouds finally blew over.

Soon, he told himself. A lot of the pain would pass once the wedding was over, and all of the
possible futures that he’d caught glimpses over the months, all of the things he’d dared dreamed of,
disappeared. After today, the potentialities would collapse into one, actual reality, with which they
would all have to live as best they could.

As Dean had roamed the manicured lawns of Heaven’s Respite, enjoyed the carefully placed shrubberies, walked through wallpapered halls hung with generations of portraits and paintings by the finest artists in the history of Europe, he’d fully understood the difference between £2,000 a year and £8,000 a year. This was luxury on a level he’d never conceived of. He wasn’t jealous, and he wasn’t humbled, but he saw now the gulf between a family such as his and a family such as the Novaks. As he never had before, he could apprehend what James had meant when he’d spoken of the wealth and the expectation of wealth among the members of his family. It was vindication, in a cruel fashion, of all that Dean had seen done. James deserved more than Dean would ever be able to do for him, deserved the comfort and security that could come only from this marriage.

It took time, though, for that not to feel agonizing, time for it not to feel like a betrayal, though Dean knew it not to be.

The priest overseeing this fine, beautiful church was the elder Mr. James Novak, James’ father. His entire, large family – five children, and his eldest son’s wife and their three children – sat in the front pew, wearing fashion that would have cost Dean’s discretionary income for several years. From what James had told Dean, it was far more than they could afford, as well. Dean sent a prayer heaven-ward that God would not permit the family accustomed to much but possessing little to bring disaster to their sensible brother and his over-generous wife. The thought made Dean flinch. Mr. James and Mrs. Anna Novak. He made himself repeat the names over and over again, had repeated them over the preceding days, and he never stopped until he could make himself mouth them without cringing. Mr. Gabriel Novak and Mr. and Mrs. Freeley took their seats with the rest of the family. Mrs. Lilith Novak had not returned from the Continent, and only lip-service paid to suggest that anyone cared for her absence.

The Milligan family sat in the other front row. Adam Milligan was, unfortunately, in attendance, but he was not the man he had been. Without the fawning attention of the masses, he was a nonentity. He clearly felt it keenly. As his estates were not far, he had arrived only the day before, and would departing the following day. To his surprise, Dean felt not the least desire to gloat in his family’s triumph. What was the point? Their victory was absolute. At least Milligan had attended for Ms. Milligan’s sake. Though she knew now all that he had done, like the impossible little angel she was, she avowed to yet love him. Dean believed her. Since it was obviously important to her that her father be there, for her, Dean could find it in his heart to even be pleased that Milligan had come. He’d be even more pleased to never see the man again.

The front of the church was all that was elegant and fine. Centuries of endowments, and a family who’d somehow managed to preserve the wealth of those donations from the ravages of the Dissolution and the upheavals of the 17th century, made it one of the richest establishments of its kind that Dean had ever seen. Silver and gold and ebony made the altar and accoutrements, an enormous triptych alterpiece painted by a forgotten Italian master made a gorgeous display of the crucifixion behind the altar, a mosaic in glittering tiles lined the domed roof over the apse and depicted the ascension of Christ, and a reliquary of the finger bone of some saint or other was housed in the chapel. Dean was not a particularly religious man, but he was happy to lose himself in a minute inspection of the holy family in stained glass, because the alternative was looking upon the two people standing in the apse.

One, of course, was Mr. James Novak, the elder, robed to serve as the officiate for his son’s wedding.

The other was James.
Nearly a year and a half had passed since Dean had attended Samuel and Jessica’s wedding and imagined how James Novak, Dean’s beloved angel Castiel, might look on the occasion of his own nuptials. The reality was surprisingly similar to Dean’s fantasy. His suit was all in white and fit him to perfection, revealing the smooth lines of his lean body, the slight slope of his chest and abdomen, the contour of his legs. The boots that accompanied the gleaming satin were black and polished to a high luster, probably new-bought for the occasion judging by their complete lack of scuff marks. A busy summer had brought some color to James’ skin, giving his face a faint pink-brown hue, and he was clean shaven. Through some contrivance, his dark hair had been brought to complete order, swept back from his forehead, long strands left to curl about his ears and the nape of his neck. The only colors about his person were a red rose at his lapel, the reflected light of the stained glass windows painted dully on the satin of his clothing, and his astounding blue eyes, glowing in the luminous sunlight and directed towards the door through which Anna Milligan would enter.

James did not look happy, but he looked like he had accepted that this was what had to be.

Resignation, well masked to any save those who knew him best, tightened his eyes and balled his hands tightly enough that his skin paled beneath the grip.

The letter that proved the resolution that Dean had so cruelly forced on James was yet nestled in Dean’s pocket.

_Dear A._ , it read,

_With a heavy heart, I concede defeat. You are right, of course, but I would for all the world that it were not so. Let the words “it is for the best” never cross my lips nor drip from my nib, but I will own, “it is what must be.” My feelings are unaltered, will never alter. Though she hold my hand or live in my home or even share my bed, it will ever be your eyes I seek, ever be your touch I long for, ever be your name I whisper into the still of my lonely nights. At least, this way, I will be able to see you sometimes. It will be enough – it must be enough. All my love,_

_C._

Dean had no need to take the letter to know its contents. He’d read it so many times over he had memorized it, and only on his best days did it fail to stir tears in his eyes. Even fully understanding the dangers of carrying incriminating letters, as he’d learned to his damage, he usually bore it on his person, most often in the pocket with his watch and the locket of James’ likeness. Whatever Ms. Anna Milligan might have wished for when she accepted this marriage proposal, there were things she would never possess.

The doors of the church opened with a loud clatter of wood, and all eyes turned to see the bride.

Radiant, Ms. Milligan wore a gentle smile as she greeted those assembled to congratulate her with bashfully lowered green eyes. Her dress was exceptionally fine, cream colored and modest with trim and tassels of silver all along the lines of the skirt and the hem. It was embroidered about the bodice with more cream, and had a lace train that stretched behind her, pierced all over with knots of silver. A delicate veil did nothing to obscure her face, and her bright red hair was mounted with chains of silver, pendants in blue, and fresh flowers. A bouquet in her hands matched the garlands strewn about the pews. At a stately pace, she made her way down the aisle. Having taken in her appearance, Dean was satisfied, and turned his eyes forward to return to James. Dean’s heart threatened to break anew at the bemused sadness that lined his face. By the time Ms. Milligan had reached her position, all such was gone, and both turned to face Mr. Novak.

_“Dearly beloved, we are gathered together here in the sight of God, and in the face of this congregation, to join together this Man and this Woman in holy Matrimony...”_
Fixing his eyes on the mosaic overhead, Dean let the words wash over him and refused to let himself think of what they meant, refused to consider their ramifications. With what detachment he could muster, he realized that, in the astonishing work of art, even as Christ ascended to heaven, there were perfect stone teardrops inlaid in his pale face. It was all Dean could do not to join the Lord in sorrow.

The day passed in a blur after that. The ceremony was endless and over far too soon, the only words piercing through Dean’s enforced reverie were James speaking his vows in a steady, deep voice that reverberated through the room and through Dean’s body.

“I, James Novak, take thee Anna Milligan to my wedded Wife, to have and to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, the love and to cherish, till death us do part; and thereto I plights thee my troth.” There was no inflection in the words, no happiness, no sorrow. James spoke them as simple reality. Dean coughed to cover a burst of grief, and prayed that time would pass quickly, that the evening would come soon.

Afterwards, the assembled guests return to Heaven’s Respite to feast and fete, and Dean remained upright solely for Charlotte supporting him on one side and Ms. Harvelle on the other. Both wore matching reproving looks that spoke louder than words that he thought he was behaving immaturely, and he supposed they were right – it was only a wedding, what did it signify? Yet, it was easy for them to be judgmental. Neither of them had been forced to watch the person they loved wed another. Dean and Charlie had already been married when Charlie and Ms. Harvelle had met, and Ms. Harvelle faced no societal strictures requiring she take husband. The only person present who could share Dean’s pain that day was Ms. Masters, and true to his sympathies with her, they secluded themselves for a time and inveighed angrily against a world that would force this on them. It was the most fun he had all day, even if their railery ultimately reduced them both to miserable tears.

As soon as he could, Dean fled the festivities for the privacy of his room. He wore his finest clothing, the outfit he had worn to his own wedding. It still fit, for a wonder, close on a decade later. His jacket was black, his vest deep green that Charlie swore brought out his eyes, and beneath he wore a crisp white shirt and cravat. The only remarkable thing about his tan breeks was how well they fit his thighs and calves, and he wore his usual boots, for no matter how special the occasion, they were his, comfortable and perfectly fit and well-worn. The room that Mr. Novak had set aside for him adjoined Charlie’s room, and a door connected the two so that none need know that husband and wife were not together. His was the more modest room, surely meant for a servant, and he didn’t mind. Small, with plain white walls and a simple wood frame bed, he’d been in it for over a week and was entirely pleased with the accommodations.

Regrets hounded through him, running him in ragged circles that he’d retread so many times over the past days and weeks and months that it was maddening that he yet dwelt on them. Standing at the small, uncurtained window, he looked down at the guests yet entertaining themselves on the green below in the fading sunlight. His view was full west, and the sunset was stunningly beautiful, streamers and wisps of orange, pink, blue, even green and purple, making a light show every bit as lovely as that which had decorated the church. It was as if the heavens themselves celebrated the wedding. Dean’s fingers traced over the hardened leather of the mask he’d donned for the first time one cold January night, painted black with a long, crooked nose, large holes for his eyes, ears thin and veined like the wings of a bat, and lips painted in a bright red scowl. That was how it had all begun, an angel and a demon, dancing together, with nothing but their sight of each other’s eyes to tell them aught of the person hidden beneath.

All things considered, Dean supposed they’d both proved true to their roles. James was certainly an angel, pure of heart, loyal, honorable, honest and steadfast. Dean was the devil who had shown him temptation, led him down a path to pain and loss, taught that naive youth the hard truths of a world that required sacrifice of even the best of men and women.
There was a faint click and a squeak of hinges as the door opened. Dean’s heart began to race instantly. Slipping the cloth of the mask backing over his head, he donned the face of Asmodeus the demon for the first since that terrible night in May, and allowed himself his a smile. A clatter of wood striking wood marked the door closing once more, a key turned with a dull rattle of tumblers, and Dean struggled to keep his breathing under control. From across the room, he could hear his efforts being matched, quick inhalations and exhalations speaking of nerves and need and fear and longing.

Dean turned around.

An angel stood before his door, body clad in a white wedding suit that Dean longed with every fiber of his being to peel off button by button, black boots showing the faint marks of the busy day. The face of Castiel looked at him, blue eyes vibrant and alive in the dead porcelain face of a doll, smooth cheeks painted with a faint blush of color, creamy skin unblemished and smooth. His black hair was no longer neat, riffled by dance and nervous fingers. On his back, a harness strapped over his wedding suit, were black wings that caught the fading sunlight of the evening and shimmered with iridescence. Dean thought he would cry, that such perfection was before him, that after everything that they’d been through, this was something he was permitted to have.

“Castiel,” Dean breathed.

“Asmodeus,” whispered James.

They bridged the space between them in a heartbeat, James ripping the mask from Dean’s head, Dean flipping up the angel’s face, and their lips met. Even dry from a stressful day, nothing matched the rightness of the feeling of James pressing his mouth to Dean’s. Gently, Dean parted his lips to lick moisture against James’ lips, and James sighed into the contact and wrapped an arm around Dean’s back, drawing their bodies together, hard planes matching and contouring together as if they were meant to be. They were meant to be. As happiness finally melted the cares of the preceding months away, the mask of Castiel feel from Dean’s benumbed fingers and fragile porcelain shattered against the hard wood floor. It didn’t matter anymore. They’d never need it again.

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Six Months Earlier

“To begin with, Ms. Masters, why don’t you acquaint Ms. Milligan with the sequence of events?” Dean turned from the window to watch the group, pushing grim thoughts aside. The room fell quiet as Charlie’s assertive gaze alit on Ms. Masters, who appeared suddenly shy beneath the attention of all.

“I don’t understand,” Ms. Milligan looked at Ms. Masters with wonder, then scanned every other expression in the assembly. They presented an overwhelming collection, a wide array of reactions to the satisfactory conclusion of the conversation with Adam Milligan. They ranged from Mr. Gabriel Novak, looking profoundly relaxed as he leaned casually against a wall, watching everyone silently, to James, who looked positively triumphant as he stood near Dean, to Dean’s own face, which he suspected revealed how relieved he was. After all, Lafitte had said that Dean’s expressions were a mirror to his heart, and at that moment, comfort and deliverance were foremost in Dean’s thoughts.

“It’s a long story, and one you’ll not enjoy, Anna,” said Ms. Masters, take a deep, fortifying breath. She continued more assertively, “but it needs to be told.” And so she did. Drawing from her own knowledge of what had passed, she acquainted Ms. Milligan and Mr. Inias Milligan with all of Mr. Milligan’s many misdeeds, from the misuse and abandonment of Amelia Richardson and her daughter all the way through his assaults on Dean. Occasional interjections from the Winchesters or
Mr. Novak filled in the details, and nothing was omitted save for the role that James had played. Somehow, though there had been no discussion of such before hand, everyone seemed to agree that this was not the context in which to reveal that particular hard truth. Poor Ms. Milligan showed all the range of distressed emotion that could be expected upon learning that a beloved father was in fact a beast in human form. By the end, she was weeping, and a clearly reluctant James had taken up station at her side and laid her head upon his shoulder, apparently oblivious to the way that Ms. Masters’ eyes were stabbing through him as surely as any dagger could.

When she’d cried herself red in the face, Ms. Milligan took a kerchief silently offered by Mr. Novak and wiped away the stains. “There’s more to this, I’m sure of it,” she managed with a small, grief-stricken voice. “Let’s have all the blows at once, I am strong enough. Please tell me all.” Courage marked her features, and acceptance.

To say that everyone was surprised at this announcement was an understatement. Think what they each might of Ms. Milligan, none expected to find such mettle beneath her meekness. No one spoke, though. Where to begin on the rest? Dean looked to Ms. Masters. It seemed to him, at least, that her declaration must come next. Perhaps she sensed it as well, for her face blanched and she licked her lips and looked around as if seeking escape.

“Nay, spare me not!” implored Ms. Milligan. She looked up and was clearly alarmed to see that none would meet her eyes. Finally, she focused on Ms. Masters, who grew, impossibly, more pale. “Are you well? Is there illness? Has he killed someone? What can be worse than knowing that he attempted to...defile... Mr. Winchester ...and nearly killed him?”

“L...” Ms. Masters’ eyes darted left and right, pleading with all for rescue. “I know not what to say,” she whispered, and looked away from Ms. Milligan, who went wide eyed and frightened.

“Meg?” she asked, horrified. “What’s the matter?” She hesitated, then said with steely anger making her voice rich and threatening. “Did he hurt you, Meg?”

Taking pity on the poor, speechless Ms. Masters, Charlie crossed the room and managed to find an edge of seat on which to sit beside her. “It’s alright, Ms. Masters. Tell her the truth. She deserves to know.”

Fingers twitched about skirts. James shot Dean an alarmed, confused look over Ms. Milligan’s back, and Dean realized that there’d been no time to acquaint James with this particular aspect of the situation. Dean replied with a half-smile and a faint shrug that caused James to roll his eyes.

Ms. Milligan rose and crossed to Ms. Masters, knelt beside her chair and took both Ms. Masters’ hands in her own. With her departure, James was free to rise as well, and he took a position beside Dean. Ms. Milligan and Ms. Masters shared a soulful look. “Please, Meg, you can tell me anything. Is it the presence of all these others that makes you so uncomfortable? Say they word and I will demand they remove.”

“Nay, at this point there are few secrets left among us,” Ms. Masters said with that strain of bitterness that was too common in her voice. “Let us have all out.” She took a deep breath, squeezed her eyes shut, and then opened them again. “I love you, Anna.”

Confused, Ms. Milligan looked about for an instant before locking eyes with Ms. Masters again. “What nonsense is this to cause such alarm? Was our mutual affection ever in doubt? You are my dearest friend in the world, Meg, of course I love you as well.”

“Oh, precious Anna,” said Ms. Masters effusively. “Of course you would think I mean...nay, I love you, as...as a husband loves wife. I love you!”
Ms. Milligan blinked.

James met Dean’s eyes, and he blinked.

Mr. Inias Milligan stared boredly out a window. Mr. Novak’s lips quirked into a smile. Sam shook his head in wonder.

“Meg, I think you mistaken,” said Ms. Milligan, her tone impressively delicate and restrained. “Women do not love other women as they do men. That is not the way of the world.”

“Untrue,” interjected Charlie hastily, sparing Ms. Masters’ having to come up with a reply to such a categorical rejection of the possibility of the existence of her feelings. “Believe me when I say – I speak from personal experience when I declare that it is entirely natural for women to feel such for other women.”

“Personal experience?” Ms. Milligan’s bewilderment grew, she blinked at Charlie where she yet sat beside Ms. Masters. “You love a woman, then, in such a way? Romantically?”

Wordlessly, Ms. Harvelle took up position behind Charlie and put a possessive hand on Charlie’s shoulder. Ms. Milligan once again merely blinked in evident confusion.

Mr. Inias Milligan yawned.

“Then...” Ms. Milligan did a quick survey of the people in the room, clearly in awe of how little shocked or moved a single one of them was by a revelation that took a sledge to her entire worldview. “Pray, what then of Mr. Winchester?” Her green eyes fell on Dean, and he blushed despite himself as the gazes of the rest of the room followed.

“Ah, well,” Dean’s eyes flicked to James, who gave a helpless shake of his head. He did not know what to say, either. “It doesn’t trouble me. Charlotte is like unto a sister to me, but not else.”

“I don’t...”

“If women can love other women,” said Charlie gently, “can it come as such a further surprise that men can love other men?”

“Oh...Oh!” Ms. Milligan flushed, flustered. “So, when my father made advances on you, he must surely have known your...unusual...preferences? And he shared them...I suppose...?” The prospect appeared troubling to her, but there was no disgust in her tone, merely confusion and distress as she tried to bring order to the different information she had learned.

“That I know not,” shrugged Dean. “My sense has been that your father – forgive me for being blunt on the matter – cared little of the preferences of the individual involved. He is rather more interested in the power he could exert in the taking of that which he wanted, and the gender of the individual was an irrelevancy.”

“Right,” speaking but faintly, Ms. Milligan set a hand to the carpet to steady herself. “Forgive me – I believe I need a moment.”

“Of course,” Charlie rose and offered a hand to help Ms. Milligan up. “Perhaps we could take a turn about the house? ‘Tis a pity the weather be so foul, the garden and fresh air would be best.” Dean shuddered at the thought of the garden, breathing momentarily ragged. The change was not lost on James, who looked at him with concern, nor on Ms. Milligan, who saw his reaction and looked horrified as the reality of what must have happened to Dean while he was at the ball finally, truly struck her.
“Wait,” James voice came out strangled, and instantly all eyes were on him. Dean shook his head vehemently in denial, his lingering fears dissipated at the thought of James exposing himself to danger, but James gave a slight shake of his own. “If she is to know all, she should know all.” He hesitated to see if anyone would object beyond Dean’s own continued discouraging scowls. “Ms. Milligan, I know you saw the letter in the Intelligencer purporting to be written by Mr. Winchester to another man, a man known by the pseudonym Castiel? That’s me – I’m Castiel. The man that Mr. Winchester is in love with is me.”

Ms. Milligan’s eyes were as wide as they could go, and her expression was suddenly very white. The sorrow on James’ face hurt Dean to see, the determination was awe-inspiring. “Mr. Novak... James... do you love him in return?” she whispered.

“I do.” James met Dean’s eyes and gave him a warm smile that, a moment later, Dean returned it. There was such confidence and trust and love on James’ face, Dean couldn’t stand it. His resolution to give James time and space, to step away in order to ensure James’ needs were met, wavered. Ms. Milligan fainted.

“Well, that went well,” Ms. Harvelle said, exasperated, as Charlie caught the slighter woman and eased her to the floor.

For the first time, Mr. Inias Milligan looked faintly interested in the proceedings.

The couch was vacated, Samuel lifted Ms. Milligan to lay upon it, and Ms. Masters fetched smelling salts. Hovering over her side with concern, Ms. Masters sought to rouse Ms. Milligan as everyone stood uselessly surrounding the couch. With a sneeze and a flutter of pretty eyelashes, Ms. Milligan awoke and looked at the faces arrayed around her.

“I know not what to say,” she murmured, taking in each in turn. Rising, Ms. Masters shooed them all away to give Ms. Milligan more space. When they’d all backed up, Ms. Masters knelt once more.

“It’s far too much to lay on your lovely shoulders,” said Ms. Masters. “I’m so sorry. I tried to shelter you from all, but it was to no avail.”

“Why shelter me?” asked Ms. Milligan.

“Because you are my angel,” Ms. Masters replied. The moment seemed to personal to witness, and Dean felt intensely like he was intruding. James stepped beside him, placed a hand with apparent negligence on Dean’s shoulder, and Dean gave his love, his angel, a grateful smile. “I’d do anything to spare you grief.”

“But had you told me sooner...”

“You loved your father, and I thought he loved you,” Ms. Masters explained. “I had no wish to take that from you.”

“Not that,” Ms. Milligan waved the words away and rose on her elbows, shifting to lean against the arm rest of the couch. “Why did you not tell me you loved me?”

“Because you so clearly did not reciprocate my feelings,” said Ms. Masters, as if it were the most obvious thing in the world.

“I did not even know such a thing was possible! How was I to know my feelings?” Ms. Milligan’s tone was growing warm, tinged with anger. “I am not a delicate flower, to bloom in the sun and wither in the moonlight, Meg! I deserved to be told, and have a chance to decide my inclinations on
“It does not work that way,” Ms. Masters protested. “One likes men, or one likes women! You have given every indication of being in love with Mr. Novak – do not deceive both of us by pretending otherwise.”

“Don’t be absurd! Gender clearly made no difference to my father, why should it to me?”

“You are not your father,” Ms. Masters objected, shaking her head. “Do not even think to make such an odious comparison! You are...”

Whatever Ms. Masters had been about to declare was lost as Ms. Milligan threw an arm around Ms. Masters’ shoulders and drew her into a kiss. In the first instant of contact, Ms. Masters looked more shocked than anything, but it took mere moments for her eyes to slip happily shut and her body to shift into the contact and Dean politely turned around lest he see any more. Beside him, James nearly jumped to face the windows as well, his cheeks coloring pink.

“Ah, yes,” Ms. Milligan spoke at length, and Dean turned back to see her dreamily gazing into Ms. Masters eyes. Ms. Masters had a wide, relaxed grin on her face, eyes softened with happiness. Her shoulders lowered, she looked calmer than Dean had seen her appear since the first time Ms. Milligan had come to their house and spoken of meeting a man she found charming. “I think I could grow to like that very well.” She gave a gentle laugh. To one side, Charlie and Ms. Harvelle traded knowing glances, Ms. Harvelle’s elbow nudging at Charlie’s waist.

Silence stretched out, none wishing to interrupt the clear joy that Ms. Masters and Ms. Milligan were finding in staring at each other’s faces. It was as if they’d never truly seen each other before, though they had been friends for over a decade. A touching moment, and intensely personal. Neither seemed troubled by the scrutiny, but despite that, everyone turned towards their friends and quiet conversations broke out. The overwhelming question of what now filled Dean’s mind. Stealing glances at James, he could see the same preoccupation on his face. What did this mean for the two of them? What did it mean for Dean’s so-recent resolution to ensure that James had what he needed for happiness? The obvious answer was that Ms. Milligan and James would need to wed, but the problems that potentially posed for a relationship between James and Dean were multitudinous. As Dean had known all along, there never was a chance of quietly taking a second son into his home and hoping things would be well, that no one would notice the unusual nature of the situation added on top of all of the other unusual things about the living arrangements at Lawrence Hall.

“Mr. Novak?” Ms. Milligan said hesitantly.

“Yes?” Mr. Gabriel Novak answered the call. He’d not budged from his post leaning against the wall. His expression was rapt as if he watched a play, a genuine grin spread his lips, a sparkle lit in his eyes, but traces of sadness made a cobweb of lines on his brow.

“Nay, I mean Mr. James Novak,” she corrected.

James and Dean turned from the window to find her twisted to look at them over the back of the couch. In her hand, she held the blue star sapphire by the chain. It twisted and gleamed in the light, white lines forming and dissolving in the depths to make a twinkling star.

“It occurs to me why this gem has occasioned such distress,” she continued. “Mr. Winchester, this was a gift from you to Mr. Novak, wasn’t it?”

“Yes, it was,” admitted Dean. “I’m sorry if my behavior seemed beyond the pale, but things were not well the day you brought James to our house for the first time. We’d been long separated, and I
thought him lost to me, and then to see him so unexpectedly! And to learn he’d given away that which I gave him!”

“Yet James, you didn’t seem the least out of sorts...?” Ms. Milligan said with confusion.

“I knew him not, then,” admitted James. “We met and came to know each other in unusual circumstances – at a masquerade – and though I knew myself to be entirely in love with him, I knew not his name nor had I ever even seen his face. I know sounds strange, but is truth. I am sorry, Ms. Milligan. The world has no place for men such as Mr. Winchester and I. I had no desire to mislead you or hurt you, but I knew not how else to proceed. I think you the sweetest, most endearing example of womanhood that I have ever met.”

“But you love me not?”

“Not per se,” he agreed. “As Mr. Winchester loves his Mrs. Winchester, perhaps – a sister, a kindred spirit, a woman I would be delighted to go for a walk with, read poetry to, accompany to the theater or a concert. However, as a lover? To tell absolute truth, it is a prospect I dread.”

“I see.” She offered the pendant, and James crossed to her and took it in his hand. A shudder ran through his entire body as his fingers enclosed about it, and he gave Dean a look of such profound relief, eyes swimming with tears, that it was all Dean could do not to wrap his arms around his love, and the opinion of the room be damned. In fact... to hell with it , he thought. If ever there was a group with whom he could be open! Dean seized James aggressively and crushed their bodies together. Another shudder wracked James, and a pulse of James’ chest against Dean’s spoke to a sob held back.

“I’m sorry, Dean,” he whispered. “I never meant to...”

“I know,” Dean murmured reassuringly, patting James’ hair. “I own as much of the blame as you do. Do not trouble yourself. All will be well.”

“You really do love him,” Ms. Milligan shook her head wonderingly.

“More than I ever thought I could possibly love another,” Dean agreed, looking a challenge at her. “And I needs must see him safe. He needs a wife.” Against his shoulder, James shook his head, but Dean ignored him. This was what had to be.

Ms. Milligan glanced at Charlie, who shrugged slightly, then at Ms. Masters, who bore every hallmark of sad acceptance in her tear-filled eyes, knit brow and fixed smile. “Well, I suppose I shall need a husband.”

“Bravo!” Mr. Novak said happily from his post of observation. “Bellissimo! Encore!”

A knocking, fists pounding on thick wood, was heard from the hallway.

“What’s that?” Ms. Milligan’s head whipped in that direction.

“I believe Mr. Adam Milligan and Mrs. Novak have finally discovered that they are locked in the study,” Ms. Masters commented, all her usual aplomb and wryness restored in an instant.

“Because...?”

“Why not?” Ms. Masters shrugged and gave Ms. Milligan a broad smile, who returned it in kind. Though the sadness remained in Ms. Masters eyes, it was tempered. Difficult times remained ahead, but there was a prospect of happiness on the horizon. With that thought, Dean settled James’ head on
his shoulder once more and wondered how long it would be before he could hold his angel in his arms again.

“So, what do you think of people who feel no arousal towards men or women, nor anyone or anything?” Mr. Inias Milligan spoke for the first time the entire conversation. Everyone turned to him in surprise. “What? Have I said something odd?”

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**The Wedding Night**

James broke off their kiss with a throaty laugh when the mask broke. “We’re going to have to beware the shards all evening,” he chided. He leaned in for another kiss, and was arrested by Dean hastily placing a finger on his lips.

“Wait,” said Dean. Nerves sent a thrill through him. Retreating slightly, James watched Dean, his head quirked in curiosity. Dean took a steadying breath. “Castiel.” A shy smile played on James’ lips. “From the first time I laid eyes on you, I thought you the vision of perfection. As I came to know you, my conviction only grew. It was not long before I realized that, however little time we’d spent together, I was owned completely by an angel whose name I did not even know, whose face I had never even beheld. Losing you was agony, and finding you again was the rapture of resurrection.” Dean dropped to a knee, took one of James’ hands and laid it upon his heart. Tears swam in James’ eyes as he watched, increasingly amazed and breathless. Emotion threatened to choke the words from Dean’s throat, but he pressed on, staring at a button on James’ jacket to avoid the distraction of that gorgeous face peering at him with such intensity. “James Novak, beloved, there is none of me but that is yours. This body, this heart, this mind, all are in concurrence and ever shall be. There are things that can never be known publically, never be spoken of openly, but in the privacy of this room, I am at liberty to say to you what I thought never with conviction to speak to any. I love you, completely, without the least reservation. James – would you make this a true wedding day – would you marry me?”

“Dean,” James breathed. Hesitantly, Dean looked up, and was swept away by the breath-taking joy on the face of an angel. Mouth parted slightly around excited breaths, eyes brilliant and moist, cheeks pinked with delight, James was beautiful. “What happens if I say yes?” he said in a rush.

A slow smile broke over Dean’s face. “You’ll have to decide if that’s what you wish – I’ll not spoil the surprise!”

James stuck out the tip of his tongue tauntingly, and then burst out, “Yes! Yes! A lifetime of yes! If it were possible, I would be husband to you, Dean Winchester, and let the world be damned in their opinion!”

With fingers trembling so he could scarce make them function, Dean reached into his pocket and withdrew that painful letter that James had written to him. The months preceding the wedding had been difficult. Appearances had to be maintained, the furor of Dean’s purported improprieties had to be allowed to die down, and James had to maintain the appearance of doting fiancée about to embark on a happy life. They’d seen each other, from time to time, and exchanged vague letters while apart, and so had passed nearly six months, all leading to this moment, tonight, when they could begin a life that would bring them frequently together. The friendship between Ms. Milligan – Mrs. Anna Novak, now – and Mrs. Winchester was well known, and none to think it odd that the new couple, family so recently rocked by intrigue and infamy, should choose an abode far from the city and close to their intimate friends. James and his wife and Ms. Masters had taken domicile in the neighborhood of Lawrence Hall, and all expected the two families to be very close – if perhaps only a select few
understood how very close. Unfolding the letter, Dean attempted to grasp the band of gold he’d
stored within, but his fingers were near numb, and he dropped the ring amid the wreckage of the
porcelain mask.

“Damn,” he muttered. James stared without understanding, and Dean didn’t think he’d seen what
Dean had held. Feeling carefully amidst the shards, he found the wring without doing injury to
himself, and raised his eyes to meet James’ once more. The angel’s breath caught when the last rays
of afternoon sunlight played flame red over the surface of the gold.

“Dean—”

“I, Dean Winchester, take thee, James Novak, to my wedded Husband, to have and to hold from this
day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to love and to
cherish, till death do us part, and thereto I plight thee my troth.” Taking James’ hand, Dean gently
rubbed his palm, encouraging him to part his fingers. He slipped the ring onto James’ fourth, holding
it in place. “With this Ring, I thee wed, with my Body, I thee worship, and with all my worldly
Goods I thee endow.”

“Dean!” James pulled free, forcefully placed his hands on Dean’s cheeks and dragged Dean to his
feet and into a sumptuous, deep kiss. Every corner of Dean’s mouth was marked by James’ tongue,
and he wrapped his arms around the slighter man as a wave of dizziness momentarily washed over
him. He’d not been eating much of late, upset at the wedding, stressed about the evening. He’d been
worried how James would react even though he knew he was being absurd to doubt the strength of
James’ feelings for him. All of that washed away in pleasure as James marked ownership with his
mouth as Dean had done with a ring. The kiss ended abruptly, and, breathing heavily, James said in
an urgent rush, “I, James Novak, take thee, Dean Winchester, to my wedded Husband, to have and
to hold from this day forward, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, to
love and to cherish, till death do us part. And dear God do I plight thee my troth. You, Dean. Only
you – forever you.” James kissed him again, arms wrapping around Dean and grasping possessively
at his flesh.

“You never saw those letters,” muttered Dean with confusion. “How could you know...?”

“You never saw those letters,” muttered Dean with confusion. “How could you know...?”

“Those have ever been the words in my heart,” James met confusion with confusion. “I don’t follow
you.”

“I burnt them,” Dean clarified. “The letters I’d written you and brought to give you that May. After I
returned to my inn, having...said what I said...I couldn’t bear to think of them more, and I destroyed
them. I signed each off just so – you, only you, forever you, my Castiel.” He raised a hand to caress
James’ cheek, and adored the way James shifted into the contact, the way his eyes softened with
love.

“Is it such a mystery, such a surprise, that I feel so very much in accordance?” A smile played on
James’ lips, danced in the light in his eyes. Deliberately, Dean leaned in and kissed him again,
placing a gentle hand on the small of James’ back. The cloth of James’ wedding couture was pristine
and smooth beneath the coarse skin of his hands, and James’ lips were soft and giving beneath his.
“Our tendency to concur has always been one of the things that has drawn me to you most, beloved
Asmodeus. From that first dance, you’ll recall that I noted it.”

“Yes,” Dean breathed, skimming his lips to the curve of James’ chin, placing kiss upon gentle kiss
along the firm line of his jaw.

“Yes,” echoed James. Fingers found the buttons of Dean’s jacket and unhurriedly opened each. With
steady, easy pressure, James pushed into Dean’s body, making him step back begrudgingly. Dean’s
jacket fell open, and James immediately shifted to his vest, moving more quickly, until it was open as well. With a sharp tug, James untucked Dean’s shirt. There were hands on Dean’s chest, chill against hot skin, a band of metal plain to be felt, palming up his muscles, brushing against his nipples. Dean’s back hit the wall, and for an instant he felt the barest whisper of fear, the ghost of fingers closing over his throat. Despite himself, Dean flinched. James interpreted his reticence instantly and the movement stopped abruptly. “Is this alright? If I pin you to the wall? If I take you all the ways I’ve been dreaming about for weeks?”

The words filled Dean’s mind with images, of all the ways he’d dreamed of being taken, and he couldn’t repress a faint moan, wrapping his hands around James’ arms to encourage him to continue.

“Nay, I’ll not proceed until you answer me,” said James. “I’ll not risk triggering your fears.”

“As long as it is you, your voice, your eyes, your body against mine, I am fine. If I begin to feel alarmed, I promise I will speak before it grows to panic. Please, James, I—” Lips on his swallowed the remainder of his plea, an adored body captured Dean against the wall forcefully, hands ravaged the skin of his chest, nails raked along his sides and back, fingers teased his nipples until they were so tight and aroused that further touch bordered into the painful, and then teased further still. Rolling his head back, Dean let his eyes slip shut as he moaned. With fumbling hands, he blindly sought the buttons of James’ wedding suit, chased the feeling of skin on skin. If he could, he would enshroud his entire body with James’. Even as he undid the first, James’ hands grabbed his, seized both his wrists and lifted them over Dean’s head, pressing them to the wall. Straining, Dean attempted to win free – he could have, had he truly needed to, and he took reassurance in that knowledge, but the feeling of permitted restraint was enticing, and he struggled against it, enjoying James’ strength and dominance as he prevented Dean from escaping.

Cool air raked his chest as James hitched his shirt up, and lips were upon his abused nipples, soothing, caressing, sucking at the sensitive skin. The only word he could form was a breathy sigh of pleasure, “James...” as he ceased struggling against the hold on his arms, went practically limp, his legs barely supporting him. With his free hand, James slipped a hand to the small of Dean’s back and chuckled hotly against the nipple, puffs of air tantalizing against Dean’s skin. Dean whimpered.

“I love how sensitive you are,” murmured James as he switched to attend to the other poor, neglected nipple. Crowding closer to Dean, James pressed their hips together, slipped a thigh between Dean’s legs to hold some of his weight. Surrendering to his desires, Dean rutted into the contact, thin, needy sounds accompanying each of his breaths. The aggressiveness of James’ approach was driving him wild. The calm control that James asserted effortlessly was irresistible, the way he knew from their time together where and how to touch Dean to drive him to distraction. Bucking against James’ thigh, Dean moaned as their hard members brushed through the fabric of their breeks, and James broke away from him with a huge groan, laying his forehead against Dean’s chest as he panted. “God, I wanted this to last, but you are so unbelievably gorgeous. I can’t stand how much you want me, Dean.”

“What do you want me to do?” whispered Dean. “I’ll stop, I will, anything, as long as I get to feel you inside me.” With effort, Dean stilled his hips. “I’ve got oil by the nightstand. I’ve got cloths by the bed for us to clean up afterwards. I prepared everything. I need this, I need you, tonight.”

Throwing his head back, James laughed. “I love you,” he said with delight. He claimed Dean’s lips for a kiss, and Dean’s lips curled in a smile as he returned the pressure. Blue eyes caught and held Dean’s. “You perfect man, I love you! Very well. On your knees.” Matching action to word, the thigh supporting Dean shifted away, and James used his grip on Dean’s arms to force him down before releasing Dean’s hands. They dropped limply to Dean’s side, tingling as blood returned to flow through his extremities. Positioned thus, Dean’s face was directly before James’ crotch, and
Dean leaned forward to mouth at James’ hardness through the cloth. “Yes,” murmured James, “yes, that’s exactly what I want. I’m going to make you feel so good. Do you trust me?”

_I need you to trust me, Dean. Do you trust me?_ A voice from the past whispered through his thoughts. The memories weren’t gone, the fears still stirred when something reminded Dean of them, but they were no longer associated with terror. The shadow that had hovered over him and his family, over James, was gone.

Dean nodded and drew more of the cloth and cloaked cock into his mouth.

“No, you have to tell me,” The voice of the most important man in the world washed all else away. James spoke low, breathy, trust and love and a hint of concern in his voice. He always checked. He always made sure Dean was well. And Dean was, he was better than he’d ever been in his life. James placed a hand on the back of Dean’s head and firmly pulled him away. Looking up, he saw James staring down at him, expression determined, eyes gathering the fading light to gleam brightly yet darkly, pupils grown wide with lust. “Do you trust me, beloved?”

Implicitly.”

James expression broke into a smile. Holding Dean’s head still with one hand, he awkwardly tried to undo the buttons on his pants with the other hand. With thick, awkward fingers, Dean tried to help, but James swatted him away. Finally, the flap came free, and eagerly Dean nosed the remaining cloth aside and pressed a light kiss to the tip of James’ cock. The way James’ member twitched and bobbed in response, dancing against his lips, was entirely satisfying and rewarding, and Dean continued to tease at only the tip until the first drops of thick liquid emerged. Licking, he swallowed with a pleased sound, indulging his desires, enjoying the heat that pooled in him, that hardened him to strain against his breeks, that thrummed in his ears. Leaning over him, James placed one hand on the wall to support himself and curled the other over the back of Dean’s head, murmuring indistinct words of encouragement. His wings peaked over his shoulders and made a shadow against the ceiling. Circling his lips, Dean took the head in his mouth and suckled on it, drawing faint moans tinged with gratitude that James. Fingers cradled about the base of Dean’s skull, supporting him, soothing him, easing out all of Dean’s tension, and with that encouragement he dipped further, took in more of James, and sucked hard.

Groaning, James his hips burst forward in response. Such reactions no longer took Dean by surprise – this form of love making had been relatively easy to steal time for even during their separation, a few minutes and a closeted space all that was needed. Smiling around the thick weight in his mouth, Dean rode each of James’ thrusts and jolts, controlling deftly how deeply James went, sucking to draw him in further, shifting back to lave the head with his tongue when James seemed most determined to crowd into his mouth completely. Each action brought broken sounds of relish from the other man, and the pleasure in Dean’s gut grew and spread through him. The urge to see to his own arousal grew, to stroke and moan his own enjoyment around James’, but he restrained himself. James was going to take care of Dean, and so Dean took care of him first. He loved doing it, loved being able to concentrate entirely on James enjoyment.

Hands finally recovered, Dean lifted one to encircle James’ hips and slipped the other into the flap of James’ pants, seeking amidst cloth until he found James’ sacks. In tempo to the rise and fall of his mouth, he began to massage the wrinkled flesh. “That feels so good,” moaned James. Dean thanked him for the praise by swallowing hard and humming, and James’ hand slid down the wall, his knees shaking with the effort of holding himself up, of restraining himself from thrusting for all his worth into Dean’s enticing throat. Through panting breaths, he said, “I love your mouth, Dean. I love to see your lips wrapped around me. I love the joy in your eyes as you do it, love knowing that it makes you happy to make me happy.” Dean hummed agreement. Hot liquid spilled onto his tongue, and he
drew back, swallowed it down, and used his tongue to tease at James, urging James to give him more of the salty pre-release. The fingers cradling the back of Dean’s head tensed.

A hard thrust took Dean by surprise as, simultaneously, James firmed his grip and prevented Dean from drawing back. He choked and took a frantic breath through his nose, waiting for startled tears to clear from his eyes. Musky arousal filled Dean so completely that coarse hairs tickled at his chin and nose, and he had to close his eyes and concentrate not to sneeze. As he strained to repress it, his throat stuttered and contracted, and James moaned and didn’t move, waiting for a sign from Dean that he was prepared to proceed. Tilting his head to accommodate the deeper intrusion, Dean let the relaxation that had crept through him as James had caressed his neck fill his thoughts. His jaw relaxed, the clench in his throat eased, and he let the hand holding him carry the weight of his head, shift him, place him so that James could invade him as he wished. Only then did James begin to move again, hips subtly guided by the arm Dean yet had around them, thrusts deep and hard, the blunt head of James’ cock pressed into the back of Dean’s throat.

James was close. Tension filled the body arched over him, increasing urgency drove his movements. Fingers trembled against Dean’s skull. Dean’s thoughts screamed for him to interrupt, not because he minded James filling his mouth with semen, but because if James finished so soon, what of his promise to penetrate Dean? Trust me, James’ voice repeated in his thoughts, a strange counter point to the desperate grunts and moans winning through James’ gritted teeth as he used Dean’s mouth to reach the apex of his pleasure. Longing and faint regret teased at Dean, a hollowness between his legs reminded him of his own arousal. His neglected cock twinged against the fabric of his pants, even that slight brush causing him to burn. He pushed the need clawing at him aside. James wasn’t going to let him have anything other than a fabulous night, and he was going to do his part.

Firming the arm gripping James’ hips, Dean seized control, tipped his head up, and took all of James that he could, swallowing as cock filled him far past the point that normally made him gag. James’ voice broke into a fluttering, stuttering moan and he released, body giving way to rest heavily on Dean’s supporting arm. Pulling back enough that he could swallow and breath, Dean took all that James spilled, licked him clean, teased out more, until James was whimpering from the continued stimulation. The hand that had gripped Dean’s head now gently threaded through his hair, patting him, communicating unspoken thanks and gratification. Only when he felt James begin to grow soft did he stop, withdrawing his lips, placing a gentle kiss on that beloved cock, and leaning back on his haunches, breathing hard.

Dazed blue eyes looked down on him, a lazy, satiated, lopsided smile showed James well-pleased. Dean couldn’t keep the hunger from his face as he looked back. His entire being buzzed with the need to be touched, to be thrust into, to be stroked.

“You didn’t touch yourself,” James said hoarsely. With growing strength, James got his legs under him and straightened, tottering only slightly as he adjusted himself within his breeks.

“I trust you,” Dean’s voice was very low and gravelly, tongue and throat roughened by James’ treatment. The smile James gave him was worth the sacrifice of the moment’s pleasure.

“Get your clothes off and get on the bed,” said James. “I need to show you how appreciative I am.”

Taking a slow, calming breath, Dean shifted so he could remove his boots, setting them aside. As he rose, he shrugged off his open jacket and vest, then pulled his shirt over his head. Walking over, he unbuttoned his breeks, and tugged them off even as he flopped down onto the mattress. Even the brush of his own fingers against his skin was over stimulating, making walking difficult, making it hard to think of anything except all of the ways that James could bring him bliss. James was deliberately, slowly, removing each article of his own clothing. The wings went first, set carefully
aside. He unbuttoned his jacket and vest next and removed them, carefully folding each before setting it aside on a low bench. A taunting smile played on his lips as he saw Dean watching, saw how Dean’s breathing grew ever more rapid, saw how Dean’s cock twitched and danced with longing. Even more slowly, James pulled up his shirt, revealing the pale skin that never saw the light of day, nearly glowing in the dusky darkness. Only the necklace remained, silver pale, star sapphire black save for a gathered light in its core as if it emitted the beams. It shifted and twisted with every motion James made, winking in the night.

James’ pants were removed last, leaving James revealed in all his splendor, muscled and strong, lithe and gorgeous, his limp member nestled nearly invisibly amongst the dark hairs that trailed down from his belly. Dean swallowed, wondering what would be involved in bringing James back to arousal. They’d never had time enough to make the attempt for twice.

“Don’t worry,” James said as if reading his mind. “With you lying there, looking like sin, tempting me, I’ll be ready soon. Would you mind preparing yourself for me?”

With a slow nod, Dean rolled over on the mattress and took the pot of oil from his nightstand, dipping his fingers into it. The viscous liquid coated them thoroughly, chill against heated flesh, and he tried to keep it from dripping and staining the blankets as he hitched his hips up and reached around himself. The angle was poor, though, and he knew it would be unsatisfying. Practice at pleasuring himself was another thing he’d had far too much of over the months. Grunting, he twisted onto his front, laying his chest against the bed with one arm curled around so he could rest his chin on it, knees supporting his butt in the air. Reaching, he tentatively explored himself. It wasn’t great, but he’d have some access to himself. It would give James a good view, too. James, who was… Dean swore. He’d positioned himself facing away from James, he hadn’t even been thinking. He started to shift again, but a hand on his shoulder arrested his movement.

“Wait. I like this idea,” said James teasingly. “You won’t be able to see what I have in mind. I like keeping you in the dark.” The very thought forced a groan from Dean. He’d not be able to lose himself in blue, watch the play of muscles as James moved, but it meant that at any moment, James might be aroused again, might be about to touch him, might be about to fill him.

Sighing with acceptance, he stopped trying to change his view. An anticipatory shudder wracked his body, and he reached his pucker and brushed oil over himself. Breath hissed from James lungs, the hand on Dean’s shoulder left, and, achingly untouched, Dean continued to finger at himself, pressing in only gently to coat the exterior and the first, tightly contracted muscle. The only way he knew that James was near was the sound of breathing, barely audible over his own. He could feel eyes on him like a touch, though, and he strove to satisfy that gaze. Between his legs, the weight of his arousal bobbed, dripping enough that his early release and droplets of oil fell to the blankets. He’d owe Novak an apology for ruining his bedding. Laughing at the thought, Dean pressed a finger into himself and allowed his eyes to slip shut at the wonderful feeling of having even the inadequate penetrate him.

A moan whispered from Dean’s lips, and a faint echoing moan came from James. The mattress shifted as weight settled behind him on the bed. Immediately, Dean’s thoughts spiraled out with imagined touches, caresses, and kisses, but none came, and a longing mewl escaped him. The desire to look behind him and see what James was doing was immense, but he resisted. He knew his task. His finger thrust in and out as he focused on building up the slickness in his channel and opened himself in preparation for the greater thickness to come. It felt good, but it was the promise of better that had him moaning with increasing desperation, had his hips pressing up even as his finger quested deeper.

Hands settled on the front of Dean’s legs, just above the knees, and he groaned at the firm touch.
Fingers dug into his flesh, urging his legs further apart, kneading at his muscles, spreading pleasure that increased in intensity the further up his legs the hands roamed. Dean stopped moving within himself to add a second finger, waiting with marked impatience as his muscles eased. The intrusion was pleasant, adding to the craving that sucking on James had left him a-hum with, but the difference between that which he could give himself and that which he received when James administered to him was marked. His own actions were by definition expected, predictable, known, whereas when James opened him, when James touched him, when James thrust into him, Dean never knew until it happened whether the movement would be hard or soft, fast or slow, angled or straight. Wishing he could imitate that, Dean arched his back, shifting his rear further into the air, and pushed into himself harder.

“I know what you want,” whispered James. “I’ve got you.” Weight settled between Dean’s legs, and he trembled wondering what was coming. When nothing immediately followed, he grunted, answering the demands of his body by pressing in a third digit. It was an action that gave mixed gratification – he was more stretched, more filled, and that felt excellent, but rendered the angle awkward, and he could no longer thrust his fingers in past the first knuckle. Frustration forced tears from his eyes.

“What are you waiting for?” Dean said, voice strained and wrecked. “Please, James.” A hand settled on Dean’s back, fingers splayed, easing him, soothing him, as James made inarticulate noises like he was calming a spooked animal.

Lips brushed against the dripping tip of Dean’s cock, and a groan lifted Dean’s entire body from the mattress. Paralytic pleasure froze him in place, stilled his hand, tensed him. “Don’t stop,” James urged him on, continuing his mollifying touches. Shivering, Dean took up the stuttering, weak thrust with his fingers once more. James’ mouth enfolded the head of his cock, tender, soft, and James lips and tongue expertly massaged against his aching flesh, throbbing in time to his heart beat. The feeling enflamed Dean’s mind, and he needed more, needed James not to stop, needed to be filled from behind, needed both at once. He’d never imagined such a thing possible. His body simultaneously tried to lower into the heat of James’ mouth and buck up into the pressure of his hand, and only James’ anchoring hand on his back keeping him from falling. His hand cramped and froze, and James stopped again. A growl hummed from Dean’s throat, pulsed through him, annoyance and desire. James gave a discouraging cluck, and Dean knew that he’d get nothing more unless he continued to fill himself. Hand spasming, he forced himself on, feeling his tension mount, the heat mount with in him. With an approving hum, the lips returned. Sucking and teasing at him, James showed as surely as Dean had done all he’d learned of how to use a mouth to create pure, unadulterated pleasure. Dean finally found a rhythm, pulsing his hips into perfect wetness, raising them to meet his own hand. The combination was unbelievable, could only have been better if...

One of James’ fingers pressed in beside Dean’s, easily slid in to the knuckle, far deeper than Dean had been able to manage, and a searching fingertip found that indescribable place within him, and an explosion of pleasure caused the world to disappear for an instant.

When Dean returned to himself, heart pounding, James was still within him, his own fingers had stopped moving, his gasping breath rasped in his throat as his head was bent at an angle just shy of painful, and James had shifted his hand from Dean’s back to the flat of his lower belly, supporting his hips and murmuring, “It’s okay, you’re okay. I’ve got you, my love. I’ll not let you fall.” He waited until Dean’s inhalations were less frantic, then asked, “Are you alright? Was that good?”

In those first moment, all Dean could manage by way of answer was a groan triggered by the mere memory of how good it had felt. “Very good,” he managed to gasp. “But I want…”

“If I do that,” James interrupted, “I can’t do this.” James’ mouth was all around Dean and a second
of James’ fingers insinuated its way into Dean’s hole, forcing his own fingers out. Liquid moisture coated him and drove Dean to the brink, and James barely thrust as he applied near constant pressure to that glorious spot.

There was nothing Dean could do but go limp and feel. The unbelievable ecstasy of it coursed through him, overwhelming his muscles, overwhelming his mind. He wasn’t sure what sounds left his mouth, he wasn’t sure how he moved, he wasn’t sure what James did, only that he felt amazing and didn’t ever want it to end. The thrust and friction and bursts of bliss from his backside collided and melded with the feel of lips and tongue playing expertly over his cock. His vision flickered and he seemed to see the room in glimpses as bright as day though he’d not opened his eyes.

But James was still not inside him.

“No,” he croaked. The movements ceased as James obeyed without hesitation, and in the absence of blinding pleasure, Dean felt like all his strength was gone. Only the continued hand pressed to his belly kept his hips from collapsing atop James’ body. “Please, James, I want to feel you. Please, please, you, James, please, you...” The word dissolved into inaudible, incomprehensible pleading that mumbled against the blankets.

“Shh,” the exhalation of the soothing sound brushed against Dean’s cock like a shock. He was so close to his release that even hot air on his skin was more than he could bear. “I’m going to, I’m still going to.” Dean’s hips surged weakly against James’ hand. There was a low moan, and James said something Dean couldn’t make out that nonetheless managed to communicate profound desire. “This first. Okay?”

For an instant, Dean actually thought about it. Was it okay? The fingers in his rear twitched suggestively, and he moaned, long and low. He pressed back against them, and whatever his mind might think, he knew his body was desperate to reach the climax that was just out of his reach. “Yes,” he whispered. James wouldn’t continue until he actually said the word. Wonderful, caring, loving, gentle James...Lips kissed Dean’s cock, massaging up and down his length, a third finger swelled him and all thrust gently together. James hummed a sweet tune as he closed his mouth over Dean once more, and to such soothing, tender ministrations, Dean moaned and released, hips rolling uncontrollably. “James!” he ground out a low moan, face pressed into his arm and the blankets, mind filled with bliss and blue. “James...” His only answer was a swallow, and he moaned again. The hand slipped free of his behind, and James eased Dean back to the mattress even as he slid up, wrapping arms around Dean’s torso. Dean allowed James to coax him, relax him, draw them together chest to chest to lie on the mattress. Overwhelming feelings made independent action impossible, each touch causing shock through him, and he didn’t dare open his eyes. Any additional stimulation would be too much for him.

Trembling against James’ steady body, he luxuriated in the feeling of being together, of knowing that they did not have to move unless and until they wished to. James’ fingers threaded through his hair, and affectionate, throaty whispers filled Dean’s ears, filled his mind. “Did you like that?” Too spent on lethargic bliss to conjure speech, Dean nodded against James’ chest, trailing a hand over firm breasts and defined muscles, tangling his fingers in the necklace. As far as Dean knew, James hadn’t taken it off once from the day he’d gotten it back from Ms. Milligan. “Me too.” The arms around him tightened, smudging his arm with oil, drawing a faint grunt. “We finally have time, Dean. We finally have each other. I know I urged that we handle our relationship elsewise, but you were right. Though we will not be together all of the time, we will have the stability to see each other over the years, can be less concerned for we will not be forever hovering on the edges of discovery. It is what must be, and I’m sorry that I resisted so long. It wasn’t fair to you.”

Dean opened his eyes and he was instantly met by James’, navy in the darkness that filled the room.
“I wish it were otherwise – you know I do,” Dean murmured. “But we have this. We’ll continue to have this, as long as you want it.”

A hand came to his forehead, brushing away sweat and strands of hair, then drew back and flicked him stingingly. “Absurd as usual, my love.” James’ other hand drifted to rest at the slight crook at Dean’s waist. “As long as we each want it – forever. Were we not wed, mere minutes ago?” Fingers traced along Dean’s cheek, settled beneath his chin and urged him up into a gentle kiss. Dean shifted into the contact, finally feeling able to support some of his own weight. His body slid against James and he worked into the kiss, dragging it out indulgently. Dean’s thigh brushed James’ arousal, and he sighed happily.

“What was that?” asked James with amusement, a glitter in his eyes.

“You made me a promise,” said Dean with a bawdy wink.

“Were you worried I’d break it?”

“Never.” Dean took hold of James’ shoulders and rolled them both over, Dean onto his back, catching James easily between his arms and legs. James kept an arm beneath Dean’s neck and kissed him again, lips skilled, tongue gentle, teasing out the first hints of renewed arousal from Dean. A mostly-hard cock settled between Dean’s legs, temptation incarnate. “I've never met a man in whom I repose more faith.”

“Does that mean you are ready for more?” James lifted himself over Dean and wiggled his hips suggestively.

Dean laughed. “God help me, yes!”

Leaning back on his haunches, James grabbed a pillow and slipped it beneath Dean’s hips. With his back straight, his body bare save for the necklace, his hair disheveled by love making and sweat, his erection prominent between his legs, he was a sight to be seen, and Dean drank it in. Raising an eyebrow, James put on a cute, curious frown and began to play with Dean’s limp member. The heat of James' touch trailed like fingers down Dean’s spine. “I know you didn’t wish to wait,” said James casually as he reached into the oil jar and coated his fingers. “We are always forced to such haste.” James brought the hand to his member and coated it liberally, stroking away his last lingering traces of softness.

“You’re absolutely gorgeous, you know,” Dean breathed, awed by the sight.

James’ grin was absolute perfection. “What if, thought I, we did the deed, had a wonderful time of it, and sated that urgency.” James broke eye contact to look at Dean’s hips consideringly, and then lifted them on the pillow, shifted them, adjusted Dean’s legs. Unsure what James was attempting to do, Dean relaxed and allowed the manipulation of his body. “Afterwards, we’d be placid. Then...we could go again. Not in hurry. Calmly, slowly, tenderly.” Leaning forward, James used a hand to position himself against Dean’s entrance. The pressure, though expected, drew a faint moan of longing from Dean nonetheless. No matter what else they did, this was ultimately what he wanted, what he always wanted. They’d had no opportunity in months.

“I’ve missed you,” Dean said. By way of answer, agreement, James pressed in with a low, burgeoning moan. Muscles fought against the initial intrusion, the broad tip sought to spread the tight constraint, and the moment stretched out, feeling like they would never be joined. Then, James was in, Dean’s muscles surrendered completely in the wake of his earlier relaxation, and the copious amounts of oil coating each of them enabled James to seat all the way home in a smooth, slick motion. Like a key in a lock, James filled him perfectly, slotted into place, applied wonderful force to
every inch of needy flesh, and a groan of profound satisfaction rattled him, combining with James’ as their bodies combined. Flaccid flesh hardened between Dean’s legs, and he reached for James, running hands along firm, smooth skin, coaxing him to keep moving.

Biting his lip against another moan, James slid back just as easily, thrust into Dean again, and his eyes slipped shut rapturously. “This,” groaned James. “No franticness. No desperation. Just an opportunity to show you with my body how much I worship and adore you. Oh, Dean.” Shifting his hips up, Dean wrapped his legs around James’ waist and urged him to adjust his angle slightly. Expertly, James followed Dean’s lead, sank in slowly, and brought the full strength of his hips to a stop against Dean’s pleasure. Dean’s body arched deliberately into the contact, straining, asking for more instead of begging for it.

Bending from his waist, Dean put his hands to James’ shoulders and drew him down into a kiss. “James,” he said. Another lazy thrust ended in another bone-melting shiver of pleasure, and Dean’s member awoke completely, pressing into the skin of James’ pelvis. Dean sighed with satisfaction. “I want to do the same for you. What do you want?”

“I thought I was perfectly clear,” James said, not pausing in his steady movements, “this is what I want.” He shifted further forward as he rolled in and out again, easing Dean’s shoulders back down to the mattress. “More than anything.” He cupped Dean’s cheek with one arm, supporting his weight with the other, and kissed him gently. “Every time your muscles clench around me.” He pulled back and pressed in, a little harder, drawing a startled grunt from Dean as pleasure manifest as light burst before his eyes. “Every sound you make.” James repeated the movement precisely, and Dean anticipated, raising his hips to meet it, drawing James into himself perceptibly deeper. “Every time...” James broke off with a faint moan, settling his hips to gain even more depth. “...Every time your body moves to meet mine.” He paused and gave Dean a cocky smile. “Every time you beg for me to be inside you.” He thrust hard and Dean moaned. “God, you’re tight and hot and powerful and it feels so good.” James shuddered and forced himself back to his slow, deliberate pace, in and out, their hips rising to meet flush, drawing apart again, pressing together.

It was wonderful. Dean started barely aroused, thought himself content, but each movement of their united bodies built at the heat within him. Each brush of James’ skin against Dean’s cock sent sparks coursing through his blood. Each new push within Dean hit him like a blow, spurred his heart beat, sent pulsing light and want through his thoughts. Each sound that dripped from James’ mouth drove Dean to urge him deeper, drove Dean to encourage James to take everything Dean could give him.

Their bodies moved as one, their lips periodically brushed, Dean’s hands gripped James’ shoulders, and together, gradually, wondrously, they rose higher and higher.

The effort of maintaining such a relaxed pace was telling on James. There was sweat on his brow, his eyes grew increasingly unfocused, his arms trembled. An idea struck Dean. Reaching up, he placed a hand on James’ cheek. “Look at me, beloved.” With obvious difficulty, James forced his sight into focus and met Dean’s eyes. A silly smile played on his face. “Stop moving.” The smile dipped into a frown. “Trust me.” The smile returned, and James ground to a halt, buried within him, panting, the pendant dangling in the open air between their chests.

Dean sank his hips into the mattress to force James out, then used the combination of his hips and his legs to drive James back in deeply, clenching his muscles as he did so. A deep groan growled from James’ throat, his entire body shivering. Pleased with the reaction, Dean repeated his actions again, again, again, adoring the slackness overtaking James’ expression, the pleasure evident in the dilation of his pupils, the liquid leaking from the corners of his eyes, the moans that started as discrete sounds but slowly bled together until one continuous, rumbling sound of profound bliss came from Dean’s angel. Driven by the urge to see James finish, he forestalled his own pleasure. James would never leave him unsatisfied. He thrust his hips again, and James’ moan was interrupted by a whimper as he
bit his lip, tensing with the effort of restraint.

“What about...”

Dean interrupted him, clenching hard, and James groaned.

“But Dean...”

Rolling his hips, Dean cut him off again. The threads of James’ self-control snapped, and he lowered his body so he was resting on his elbows, his damp forehead pressed to Dean’s chest, and with sharp jerks of his hips, he sank himself into Dean’s heat, releasing with a cry ripped from his lungs. Breathing hard, he didn’t move for several long moments, and then he shifted his weight as if his body were too heavy for him to lift, got a hand on Dean’s cock. The touch brought home in an instant how thick Dean’s thoughts had become, how much longing possessed him. Feebly, James fondled him, thumbed his head, and Dean thrust weakly, hoping for a stronger grip, a confident stroke. True to Dean’s desires, James’ fingers curled around him and began a loose-gripped caress. The glow in his thoughts became overwhelming, and he teetered at the edge of heaven.

“That wasn’t fair,” muttered James petulantly. With his quickly fading hardness, he managed one final thrust that hit Dean squarely in that most wonderful spot, James’ hand gave a decided twist as he stroked down Dean’s length, and Dean climaxed with a whispering sigh of pleasure that whistled through his teeth.

“I’m sorry if you didn’t like it,” murmured Dean. Their bodies slid together, slick with sweat, and they tangled arms and legs together, conjoining their flesh “I promise I’ll make it up to you next time.” James chuckled, low and raspy, and gave Dean a squeeze.

“I look forward to it.”

The night grew slowly pitch black, their bodies grew cool, and the sounds of frivolity outside faded until all that remained was a faint strain of piano music seeping up through the floor boards. They lay together, breathed together, ran hands gently along the smooth lines of each other’s bodies. Tomorrow morning, they’d be able to wake up together. Everything was alright now. The threats to their future together were gone. Things would not always be perfect, but they had built as safe a world for their love as could be managed within the constraints they could not escape. Both their families knew the truth, and the small community around Lawrence Hall would look the other way provided the manor was well tended. Dean’s friends at the Intercontinental League – rapidly becoming James’ friends as well – had clearly guessed all, and couldn’t care a farthing. When Dean looked at the situation taken as a whole, he had to confess himself the luckiest man in England. He was enfolded in the arms of a man he adored, and who adored him. His loved ones were accepting, society was ignorant, and all their futures were secure. If he hadn’t experienced it, if he were not still experiencing it, he’d not believe it. Some part of him, a small voice that couldn’t believe that complete happiness was actually attainable, mumbled in fear-laced tones that it was all a dream and would come to an end.

In his heart, Dean knew that wouldn’t happen. Not because life was fair, or because he deserved this, or because of luck. No, he would be able to hold on to this because he wasn’t alone, he and James were not alone. Any problem that arose, however insurmountable it might seem, would meet the Winchester family, the Novak family, Singer and Ellen and Ms. Moseley and Ms. Masters. It would have to overcome all of them to overcome one of them. Illness or mischance might yet rob them of a happy ending, but society? Society would never touch them again.

“That’s Mrs. Freeley playing,” James murmured into the night after they’d lain in comfortable silence for some time.
“She’s very good,” observed Dean.

“Yes,” James nodded against Dean’s chest, hair tickling Dean’s chin. “It’s her only love in life. She’s never cared for Freeley, you know. Doesn’t care what he gets up to. Had she not been a gentlewoman, she’d have been a concert pianist, I believe, but in her youth such was denied her by her birth, and now it is denied her by the rheumatism that often plagues her hands. It is a sad story, and naught a thing any of us can do about it.”

“Shall we go downstairs and do her the honor of hearing her performance?” Dean suggested.

“I should like that,” James said.

As rapidly as they could, they used washcloths to clean themselves and donned their clothing, being careful not to step through the fragments of pottery that Dean would have to clean in the morning. It was a challenge in the darkness, and judging by the fit they had accidentally traded boots, and possibly shirts as well, but Mrs. Freeley hadn’t stopped by the time they stumbled out of their door into the comparative brightness of the hallway. Feeling content and joyful in a way he’d never dreamed of, Dean brushed James’ fingers as they walked together, and received a priceless smile in return.

Hurrying down the stairs, they turned and confronted a delightful scene in the parlor. The day’s mess had been cleaned up, the furniture had been pushed aside, and couples were arrayed in Mr. Gabriel Novak’s sitting room, now an improvised dance floor. As Mrs. Freeley began a spirited reel, Sam and Jessica began a promenade. Ms. Masters and Ms. Milligan followed, and Ms. Harvelle and Charlotte. Inias Milligan had seized the hands of young John Winchester, who clearly hadn’t a clue what they steps were, but Inias seemed not to mind. Singer and Ellen, come along to see to the carriage and help with the children, made a couple. Though they each refused to look at the other, Singer wore the happiest smile Dean had ever seen on his bluff face, and Ellen was flushed with happiness. If only they’d actually gaze at each other’s faces, they might find their embarrassment dissipating in the discovery that the pleasure they took in the pairing was shared. Ms. Moseley danced alone, carrying the infant Henry. Mr. Novak and Mr. Freeley pranced a stately pace, both ridiculously maintaining the appearance that they were not with precisely the partner they’d have chosen. Little Diana, left to her own devices, skipped along by herself, littering her pathway with cloth petals that she plucked from her adorable dress. As Charlie brushed by her, the child began to tumble, and before Dean could react Claire was there, hands under Diana’s arms, righting her. That done, Claire took Diana’s hands, and they skipped together across the floor in an imitation of the formation the adults followed so familiarly.

Dean gave James a suggestive, cocked smile, received an identical one in return, and in perfect harmony, they joined hands and stepped into place at the back of the line.

It was the most unusual dance that Dean had ever participated in, and the most wonderful, for everyone in it loved, and everyone in it was loved. It was a pleasure he hoped to have repeated many times in the future.

Chapter End Notes

So...that's that! I hope you guys have enjoyed this wild ride with me! When I first started thinking about writing a Regency AU last month, I can't say I had the least clue that it would grow into this, nor that I'd finish a novel in 16 days (!!) All the wonderful
feedback and chat with ya'll has really been awesome, and has kept me going, and I can't thank you enough.

Is there more?

Well. I'm a writer. I've only got two short stories out so far, but I hope to be published someday - if I opt for self-publishing, maybe even later this year, as I have several manuscripts in various states of completion. This is completely original fiction - not modified from prior fanfic. The trilogy I'm currently working on is an urban fantasy series set in a world where much of mythology is true. There's a strong romance component, male/male - not erotica like this, but just as much angst and cuteness, promise. My pen name is Nina Waters, and if you want to see what I do in the future, you can follow me on Tumblr or Goodreads. (In case your curious, my real name is Claire, and writing Claire in the story was SUPER weird, I've never tried to write a character sharing my name...)

I expect to publish mostly fantasy and romance, m/m, m/f and f/f depending, and at least some will be erotica. Both my published short stories (both fantasy, neither romantic, neither erotica) are also listed on my Goodreads profile. In everything I write, as in this (to the extent possible, given the constraints of the SPN cast), I strive to represent the diversity I see in the world, so I try to include characters of different sexualities, races, gender identities, ethnicities, as well as folks with mental illnesses and/or physical disabilities. I am VERY committed to such things.

Beyond that, well, if you prefer your m/m smut to be free (heck, that's how I prefer mine!) I'll definitely be writing more Destiel. I expect to have the next two stories of the "I Dream of Deanie" series done by the end of the week - it's a Canon divergence Destiel AU, branching off S5ish, and really don't ask about the plot because the whole point is that it's Plot, What Plot? All Dean and Castiel porn, all the time. :) I'm also working on "The Devil Went Down to Detroit," which is AU, has a slow build but will be erotica soonish, and for which I'm writing (and recording and posting to YouTube...) original music.

As to future longer historical pieces...I have the kernel of an idea for a Civil War era AU, that might happen after I finish the first draft for my next original novel. It would, of course, be Destiel, and erotica. (I'm a history buff, and I'm particularly interested in the US Civil War.) Not sure beyond that. Need a little brain reboot time. :) 

In terms of more of THIS SPECIFIC STORY...well, I have a sort-of outline for a chapter from Charlie's point of view set mid-book, and I have two or three outlines for sex scenes I didn't end up writing that I thought I might type up as bonus content. So, though I'm marking this complete, if you want more, subscribe, cause I'll add them as further chapters, I expect, rather than make it a series.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you! Your subscriptions, your kudos, your comments, your bookmarks...writing a novel this fast has been *really really hard* and if I hadn't kept seeing the encouragement, it would never have happened. I hope that you have enjoyed reading it as much as I have enjoyed writing it. You all are amazing!! :)

Don't be strangers, now!
Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!