The First and the Last

by peridium

Summary

The soul bomb doesn't work, and God is going to die, but Amara has a soft spot for Dean. She gives him the gift of time: the end of the world will be slow.

Dean, Cas, and Sam travel the country in the breaking-down Impala to get in one last road trip and help their scattered friends wherever they can. Between looted gas stations and empty motels without wi-fi, monsters even more monstrous than usual, and heat so stifling not even Dean can wear more than one layer, they're fucked.

Unless they're not. Unless Billie the reaper is right and Cas has something amazing up his sleeve. Dean just has to get his head out of his ass and accept that the power of love might not be a total load of crap after all.

Notes

AH GOSH OKAY. This story is canon-divergent from near the end of the season 11 finale. It also fought me a LOT, so I owe thanks to Julie and Vivian and Sophie for initially letting
me hash shit out with them. Pretty much everyone I know put up with whining and excerpts and more whining, so further love and thanks to Kora and Nicole and Cecilia and a million other people, you know who you are. Not to be gross, but y'all are the best friends a nerd could have.

Bexy gets her own paragraph for being my god-given solace and also for her tireless betaing skills. And also for being the best ever, in the world.

And of course TheFriendlyPigeon for her RIDICULOUS amazing beautiful art and also being an excellent new friend in this fandom. Y'all, isn't she amazing? You will find her art embedded throughout this fic for your marveling purposes, and the art masterpost is here.

I'm on Tumblr over at sunbeamdean and I always wanna talk about Dean and Cas touching gently and/or doin' it. Come on by.
Amara had called it a gift. Dean could’ve done without watching the world end again. He was ready to go. He’d been finished with fighting.

“You tried so hard,” Amara had said. She was earnest, her smile radiant as she held Dean’s face in her hands. “And you know how much I like you, Dean.” The bright heat taking shelter in his chest had guttered and begun to fade.

He’s tried snapping his fingers four times already. The souls are gone, all victim to Amara’s hunger. He doesn’t know why they bothered trying.

The sun, an overlarge specter watching over a doomed planet, beats down on Dean as he walks. Sweat gathers at the small of his back and under his arms so his shirts stick to his skin. Every couple of minutes, he fishes his phone out of his pocket to check if it’s started working, but so far, no dice. The display is fuzzy and it barely responds to his touch. Dead pixels shaped like a crack in a cheaply-painted wall creep across the screen, obscuring what’s left there.

They’re going to know he failed. Maybe Chuck’s already dead or maybe Sam and Cas are trying something else stupid to save him. It’s anyone’s guess whether Rowena’s helping or hurting their efforts.

There’s nothing but empty highway and rolling green hills opening up around him as he walks. Maybe he’s in Tennessee. Or it could be Kentucky. He was so fired up, so ready to pull the trigger, that he didn’t even ask where Chuck was sending him. Sam would’ve called him on his careless shit if it’d been any other hunt.

If it’d been any other hunt, Dean would have ganked the son of a bitch and he’d be splitting drinks with Sam and Cas. He’d be laughing and bullying Cas into taking another shot.

Dean’s throat is burning with thirst by the time he spots a cracked highway sign advertising a Waffle
House. Definitely somewhere in the South. He rolls his cuffs up for the umpteenth time, then leans himself against the splintering wood post holding up said sign and sticks his thumb out toward the road.

He hasn’t had to resort to hitchhiking since he was a kid whose dad left him at a Wyoming rest stop to teach him a lesson. Maybe he’s learning a lesson this time around, too: sometimes things just end, no matter how hard you try.

“I’ll give you a little gift,” Amara had said. Her palms were warm on Dean’s cheeks. “Time. Enough to finish your business.” She’d cocked her head to the side and given him another smile, small and private. “Enjoy.”

Dean wipes sweat off his forehead with the back of his wrist. He thinks about praying to Cas, but he figures it’d be pointless; Cas can’t swoop in and rescue him anymore. Sometimes things never start in the first place.

Going home might be pointless, too, but it’s instinct. Like a pigeon. Some uncomfortable hours later, pretty much out of charming smiles and flirty things to say to male truck drivers, Dean opens the door to an empty bunker.

“Son of a bitch,” he says. The words echo down the stairs to the war room.

The bunker’s huge, but Dean can tell it’s empty. His footsteps whisper dully down the halls, the kind of quiet that tells you right away you’re alone.

Everything’s the way they left it. Sam’s bed is rumpled, the sheets a mess and his shelves bare except for a tangle of cords—all the electronics he’s abandoned for newer models over the couple of years they’ve lived here. Sam likes his stuff up-to-date. Pretending like they thought everything was gonna be fine, they’d assigned Cas a room, too, down the hall and around the corner from Dean’s. It’s almost empty, the bedclothes never touched. The only contents are two mass-market fantasies, covers torn off, borrowed from Dean and stacked on the desk, and a handful of smooth pebbles leaning against the books’ spines. Maybe Cas is an aspiring collector.

He wastes a few minutes cleaning up the kitchen. The counter needs wiping down and the last dishes from the time he made casserole still need scrubbing. That was before Chuck zapped his way into their lives, while Dean was desperate for anything to do with his hands that would take his mind off worrying about Cas. The sudsy water feels good on his road-grimy palms.

To reward himself, Dean snags a fifth of Jack. Before he shrugs into his jacket, he slides the bottle into the inside pocket, where it clanks quietly against his pistol.

A long-nosed Cadillac Coupe de Ville sits tucked into the back of the bunker garage. Dean lifts the tarp, drawing his fingertips across the hood: they come away mostly clean, just a little dust stuck in his prints. There’s no accounting for the Men of Letters’ taste, but right now he’s glad for a ride that isn’t a motorcycle or an actual racecar. He flips the keys off the nail in the wall where they’re hanging, tosses a badly-packed duffel into shotgun, and starts her up.

And then he tries again. The engine protests. It actually whines at him like a kid throwing a tantrum.

Dean’s phone, propped up against his thigh on the seat, tells him he has no signal. He swallows nervously. “You said slow, you piece of shit,” he mutters, and he twists the keys in the ignition one more time. Something coughs and hiccupps under the hood. The de Ville shifts to life around him.
The radio crackles the first time he switches it on, while he’s guiding the car aboveground and toward the highway. He twirls the dial until something catches, a staticky female voice. —urging consumers not to panic. Such a widespread service interruption is unusual, but not unheard of. Most wi-fi networks are still working sporadically, said the representatives for Verizon and AT&T, so in the absence of 4G connectivity—

The reception fizzes again. Dean shuts it off, his chest tight.

There’s another kind of radio he could try, but he knows he won’t get an answer. He gives it a whirl anyway, fingers drumming on the wheel. “Castiel. Hey. Hi. Hope you guys are okay. I’m mobile now and I’m looking for you. If you’ve got any juice left, just—point me in the right direction?”

His voice rings hollow in the stuffy air. Dean rolls the window down, but it doesn’t much help. He’d have to really go pedal to the metal to work up enough breeze. The sun’s huge and hot and inexorable. He can practically see the heat rising off the asphalt when he merges onto the freeway, figuring his best bet is to head toward Hastings until—

Until his phone rings.

Dean almost pops a wheelie, he swerves to the side of the road so fast. “Sam.”

The voice that comes through is so garbled it’s barely recognizable as human. He makes out the words Dean andfucked and alive.

“I can’t hear a damn thing you’re saying, kid,” he says. He pops the door open and leans out a little, like open sky will help somehow. The line screeches, then buzzes in his ear. “Sam?”

Another burst of static, then, abruptly clear: “Dean! Shit, dude. You’re alive?”


“Right—right, sorry. Cas is doing some kind of—anyway. Are you close to home?”

“Yeah. Kinda.”

“We’re still in Kansas. It’s called The Lazy Shag—yeah, Crowley’s fault. He and Rowena ditched, by the way. Said they had urgent business downstairs.” Sam’s quiet a second, and Dean thinks he hears the rumble of Cas’ voice in the background. “It’s bad. Meet us here.” He rattles off an address; Dean scrambles to excavate a pen from his bag and scribble it down across the inside of his wrist.

“See you soon,” Dean says, hoping it’s not a lie. He pulls a U-turn to stay in Kansas—easily done, since he’s only seen about three other cars on the road in the past forty minutes. The landscape doesn’t get any less bleak as he drives, the sun in his eyes and his foot heavy on the gas.

The Lazy Shag is a semi-shitty little joint, exactly halfway between a real dive and a respectable institution. Its parking lot is totally deserted except—thank you, Jesus—the Impala, so Dean doesn’t put a whole lot of effort into parking the Cadillac before he’s beelining for the front door.

Cas meets him there. Coat off, sleeves rolled up. There’s something soft and stunned about his features. A couple hours ago, Dean had those now-bare arms wrapped around him and they were saying goodbye.

“Dean,” he says.

“Dean!” That one’s Sam, tucked further into the badly-lit bowels of the place. The TV suspended over the bar’s playing a news report choked into incoherence by static. Dean can’t spot any trace of Crowley or Rowena.

Chuck looks like he got hit by eight trucks in quick succession. He blinks slowly up at Dean, then groans and drops his head again. “Dude,” Dean says, “yikes.”

Sam, who’s propping Chuck up against his shoulder, shoots Dean a baleful look. “Hi. Glad you’re not dead. I’d give you a hug, but…”

“Friedrich Nietzsche, eat your heart out.” The reference gets him a double-take from Sam, which is pettily satisfying.

“Nietzsche’s statement was a metaphor,” Cas says from over his shoulder. “This is…” He swallows, audibly. “Frighteningly literal. I don’t think he’ll last much longer.” The tremor in his voice makes Dean’s blood run cold for a disorienting second. “And when the creator goes, well.”

Chuck stirs, grasping at Sam’s arm, but it seems like his energy’s really drained, because he slumps after a moment’s struggle, breath coming quick and shallow.

“No,” Dean says firmly. “Listen, our plan didn’t work.”

Cas nods, his jaw tightening. Sam just shuts his eyes for a second.

“Amara just—sucked them all up. One big Mrs. Pac-Man chomp. But she, ah.” Dean hesitates, the tips of his ears heating. The thing between himself and Amara kind of makes him want to puke with humiliation. “She promised me time.” He jerks his chin toward the window, the heavy red sky as sunset bleeds out along the horizon. “The universe—it’s still going, but it’s not gone yet.”

Time doesn’t get them much of anywhere that night. Chuck slips away with the sun, and God, literally our fucking Father who art in Heaven, gets laid out under a polyester tartan tablecloth on two crooked tables pushed together in an abandoned bar in the American Midwest. Sam’s the one who suggests drinks so they can pour one out for the guy who really fucked them all over from the beginning.

“Hallowed be thy whatever,” Dean intones. Knockoff Macallan pools muddily on the bar top. Dean takes the next shot, which burns going down, for himself.

“He wasn’t that bad,” Sam says. The words come out flat.

Cas draws a fingertip along the row of empty shot glasses lined up in front of him. He’s quiet, the collar of his shirt turned up on one side so it brushes his earlobe. Dean wonders if Cas thought he was dead and he wonders if Cas mourned him, but he doesn’t want to ask.

The furious vroom of a motorcycle streaks by outside. That’s the only noise they’ve heard from the rest of the world so far, unless you count the pixelated reruns of The Simpsons looping on low volume over their heads.

“I loved Him,” Cas says into the subsequent silence. When he proffers an expectant palm, Dean drops the near-empty bottle into his hand without hesitation. “I loved His creation, and so I loved Him. I thought they were the same thing.”

“Yeah,” Dean says. “Been there.”
Sam huffs out a small, bitter laugh. “Got the T-shirt.” He’s nursing an IPA from the back of the bar fridge. They must’ve picked the locks while Dean was gone. The three of them haven’t made a whole lot of plans, but Dean can tell Sam doesn’t want to go back to the bunker. His shoulders got tight and his jaw clenched when Dean brought it up. Dean gets it. He’s not too keen on sitting around at home doing nothing while the world unravels above them.

Cas pours himself a shot, perfectly precise so the scotch is level with the lip of the glass, and then knocks the whole thing back. His throat moves while he swallows. “Well,” he says, “now the author really is dead. I don’t want to waste time loving His corpse.”

Dean can drink to that.

The next morning, the sound of his phone ringing again flings Dean into consciousness. Before he swipes to take the call from an unknown number, he sees that the battery indicator is flashing warning red even though his phone’s been plugged in all night.

“What,” he grunts into the receiver. The floor of The Lazy Shag isn’t the worst place he’s ever slept, but it’s not winning any prizes for comfort.

“Finally! Dean, hi. Your brother’s not picking up.”

Dean drags himself upright. “Jody.”

“You,” she says, popping the P.

“I don’t think Sam’s phone is working too well.”

“He can join the club. You seen the news lately?”

“Been trying to avoid it,” Dean admits. A couple feet away, Sam’s stirring. Jody’s laugh echoes metallically down the line. “Yeah, fair enough. Put it this way, it brings back memories. And not the good kind.”

Dean knows he’s supposed to say something reassuring here, but he’s got nothing.

An awkward hiccup of a pause goes by, then Jody says, “Listen. You boys busy? I could use some help out here.”

Dean looks at Sam, who’s scrubbing his hands through his hair. His breath’s gotta be terrible; Dean can almost smell it from here. He looks at Cas, who’s statue-still, eyes shut, his face tipped up toward the dusty ceiling of the bar. A couple yards to his left sit the remnants of their late night, as if he needed the reminder; there’s a headache nudging its way into the back of his head. The little flock of empty highball glasses and shot glasses looks smudged and cheap in the morning light.

“We could probably fit you in,” he tells Jody.

Three bowls of stale snack mix and some hasty toothpaste-on-your-finger dental hygiene later, they hit the road. Ditching the Cadillac isn’t a great financial move, but none of them really feel like splitting up.

Dean prays a little under his breath as he starts up his baby, but she jumps to life without a hitch. The familiar rumble of her engine calms his nerves.
It’s six hours to Sioux Falls, five if Dean floors it like he’s planning. The outside temperature’s already hot as hell and they make a pile of their jackets and overshirts in the back seat. Cas stretches out back there, his stocking feet braced against the door and his head pillowed on his trenchcoat and suit jacket. He looks tired. Dean sneaks glances at him in the rearview mirror until the road starts winding and he has to focus.

“Sixty-seven,” Cas announces as the Impala rolls to its final stop in Jody’s driveway.

Dean stops halfway through cracking his neck to squint back at Cas. “Huh?”

“That’s how many dead animals we passed on the road,” Cas says. He’s putting his coat back on and avoiding Dean’s eye. “Deer, mostly. Some raccoons and opossums.”

Dean doesn’t doubt he’s right. They made the drive in one go, stopping only once so Sam and Dean could hit up a rest stop bathroom. It’s too warm and stuffy inside the car, and there’s no relief when they pop the doors open—seems like South Dakota’s having a heat wave. Just like the rest of the country, Dean would bet.

“Ugh,” Sam says as he unfolds. “I should’ve taken a shower.”

It’s easy to figure the reason he’s concerned all of a sudden: the house’s door creaks open and releases Jody, who grabs Sam in an unhesitating hug. Dean hovers until he gets his own, then steps back to relish the soft surprise on Cas’ face when he’s next in line.

“Hey, you,” Jody says. In a series of efficient gestures, she smooths Cas’ collar and straightens his jacket. “Long time no meet.”

The corners of Cas’ eyes crinkle up. “Sheriff Mills. Thank you for looking after Claire.”

“She’s a good kid,” Jody says easily, then laughs. “Kinda. Okay, she’s got a good heart.”

“Speak of the squirt,” Dean says, “she around?” He eyes Cas, but Cas’ expression is unreadable. He catches Jody sneaking a curious glance at Cas before she answers, too.

“We’ll catch up with her at the station.” Jody breaks out in a weary grin. “I was gonna make you boys pile into an SUV and watch the hives break out, but my car’s on the fritz.”

Jody starts filling them in on the way, her elbows propped up on the back of the front seat so Sam and Dean can hear her over the engine. Cas watches her with a small smile; this might be the first time he’s shared the back of the Impala with someone he actually likes.

Sioux Falls, Jody tells them, hasn’t plunged into total chaos. Yet. She doesn’t have to speak her fears out loud: they pass a handful of abandoned cars, mostly Toyotas and Subarus with some Hondas sprinkled in there, every few blocks, and the streets are largely empty. The passersby they do see, as they get deeper into downtown, have their hands deep in their pockets and their shoulders squared like they’re marching to death row. Dean can only start to guess at the panic-inducing news statistics and thinkpieces that’ve gotta be flooding public consciousness around the breakdowns in technology. They’ve never had to field an end of the world this obvious to everyone around them.

The killings this morning, the ones that got Jody on the phone with them, sure as hell don’t help morale.

“Basically,” she says, “werewolves. I think. I’ve got one traumatized witness and a couple dead
bodies in the case file.”

“You think?” Sam prompts.

“I’m no expert hunter,” she says, “but did you guys see the sky last night?”

They have to admit they didn’t. Cas is the one who spills the beans that they were busy drowning their sorrows in stolen alcohol, which makes Jody guffaw—which, in turn, makes Sam duck his head to hide a giant grin.

“Fair enough, but it was—well, I know you’ve seen it today, with the sun all jacked up, too. If you’d listened to the news…” She whistles lowly. “Hard to get a signal, but the glimpses I’ve caught, well, I’d sure hate to be a meteorologist these days.”

“It’s dying,” Cas says, steady and quiet. “The sun, that is.”

Jody’s eyebrows shoot up. “Shit.” She narrows her eyes and cuffs Dean lightly on the back of the head. “You’re gonna explain this to me before you skip town, kid. All of it.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he grumbles.

“Weirdest sky I’ve ever seen last night,” Jody continues, “and I’ve been doing middle-America stargazing my whole life. I mean, you three should look for yourselves tonight. Huge moon, just—hanging there. No cloud cover, no movement that I could see until the sun came back up and drowned it out.”

“What kind of moon?” Sam asks.

“Fuller than full.” Jody shrugs, dropping back into her seat. “Turn left at the next light, by the way,” she says to Dean. “Anyway, like I said. I’m no expert at this stuff. But I see a moon like that and the next day I got a couple people dead from animal attacks and a teenaged boy insisting he’s got video proof of what happened, he’ll show it to me soon as his phone takes a charge?”

“Poor kid,” Dean says. “I bet that phone’s never gonna switch on again.” His own’s been a brick in his back pocket for the last three hours.

Cas shifts in the back. Dean catches the motion out of the corner of his eye in the rearview mirror. “The rules are degrading,” he says. “Werewolves are monsters, yes, but they’re supposed to abide by a set of rules. They change with the moon; their powers fluctuate.”

“Right,” Jody says. “And now…”

“Now,” Dean says, “all bets are off.”
Chapter 2

The witness really is just a kid. He’s pimply and gangly, jangling with piercings, and obviously scared out of his mind. Now Dean gets why Jody left Claire at the station with him; angry teenagers stick together. He’s clinging to Claire’s side like a limpet.

“Hey.” Dean offers a hand. “I’m Dean. This is my brother Sam, and… this is Cas.”

“This is Brian,” Claire says when the witness doesn’t answer, busy goggling up at them. He’s kinda shrimpy, too. “He goes to the same school as Alex.” She makes it sound like a major character flaw. “Hi, guys.” Her gaze slides to Cas, quick, and then back to Sam and Dean.

“Claire,” Cas says.

“Yeah,” she says. “Like I said, hi.” She softens for a second. “Thanks for coming out. Jody’s freaking out, not that she wants me or Alex to know it.”

“Is Alex safe?” Sam asks. He looks like he’s itching to give Claire a hug.

“Yeah.” Claire rolls her eyes. “Jody’s not stupid. There’s a whole basement with a zillion locks. She wanted me down there at first, but I said I’d be useful, and hey, look! I was right.”

Dean chuckles. “That’s my girl,” he says. “Can we talk to your pal here?”

Brian gives him a wide-eyed stare. “Um,” he says.

“Be my guest.” Claire detaches herself one arm at a time; when she’s finished, Brian staggers, and Cas steps forward to give him an elbow to clutch. He’s trying so hard to be helpful, and it makes Dean’s chest hurt watching the way he looks at Claire.

Jody escorts them into a side office full up with folding chairs they can all use. Not an interrogation room, which is fine, because Dean’s pretty sure Brian would pass out if he had to enter one of those. Whatever he saw really fucking spooked him.

The station’s a bit of a ghost town. There’s one front desk staffer and a junior cop who eyed Jody warily as they all passed by trailing after her. The phones aren’t ringing.

The kid, Brian, is really having a hard time talking, even under the influence of Sam’s best empathetic puppy faces. He curls up on himself in his chair, cradling his dead phone in his hand. “I don’t know what happened,” he keeps repeating, “but I got it on video. I swear.”

Cas pulls up a chair and sits. He holds out his hand. “Give me your phone.”

Brian turns the deer-in-the-headlights stare on Cas. “Dude.”

Cas visibly shifts gears. “May I have your phone? I think I can help.”

Once Brian hands it over, it’s a quick process. Cas taps a finger to the black screen, cocks his head to the side, and then does another gentle tap. The phone blinks awake, a series of logos displaying in succession.

“Whoa!” Brian turns animated real fast, snatching his phone back from Cas in the blink of an eye. He taps in his password and thumbs through all the screens. “Wow. Thank you, man.”
Everyone in the room leans toward Brian and his phone. Dean, though—he notices as Cas winces, touching two fingers to his temple. He’d said the rules were degrading. That can’t mean just werewolves or, hell, even just monsters. Angels play the game too.

The footage is grainy and short. You can tell Brian was fumbling for his phone during the real action. It was taken after dawn, when any wolf should have turned back to an unwitting human in the absence of the moon. Dean, on his turn to frown down at the screen as it’s passed from hand to hand, sees a flash of fur, spots the glint of sunrise off something sharp, and hears a static-warped sound that could be a growl.

“Pretty fucked up, huh?” Claire says.

“Language,” Jody says, an instinctive admonishment that makes Claire roll her eyes again.

“Yeah.” The rumble of Cas’ voice startles Dean, and he sits up straighter. “Pretty fucked up. Sheriff Mills, you said the victims were found in the same area late this morning?”

“Yep,” she confirms. “From what I’ve been reading, werewolves pick targets that mean something to them when they’re human, but this—I dunno. An elderly Hispanic woman and a middle-aged white man who didn’t know each other or live in the same neighborhoods. They were just close to the library. Seems pretty random to me.”

“They’re not supposed to be random,” Sam agrees. He grabs the phone back from Dean to play the clip again, then deposits it back in Brian’s trembling hands. “We should hit the streets and see what we can find.”

“You won’t find much.”

Except for Brian, whose attention is glued to his recharged phone, all their heads snap up at the same time.

Billie smiles like the Cheshire Cat. “Oh, hi. I’m here to help.”

“Oh.” Cas frowns a little. “Hi.”

“Yeah,” Billie says, “it’s werewolves. By the way. No big deal.”

“Uh,” Dean says. He clambers to his feet, then stops and wonders what he did that for; Billie’s not an enemy, she’s just scary. Sam is gaping next to him.

“Don’t look at me like that.” She pushes her hair back over her shoulder and winks at Cas. “Hi. See, this one was expecting me.”

Cas has a little furrow between his brows that deepens when he’s troubled. Such as now. “Not exactly. But I thought you might show up. Reapers tend to congregate at sites of chaos.”

“We can’t be the only site of chaos in the world right now,” Jody says. If the word reaper fazes her, she doesn’t show it.

“No,” Billie says, “but you’re the only site of chaos that’s also the site of three Winchesters. Not to mention one of the few former angelic vessels who still has her wits about her.” Dean can feel Claire bristling defensively a couple seats down from him. “That’s a compliment, by the way.”

Sam stands, and having his familiar bulk there makes Dean feel a little less idiotic. “Aren’t werewolves kind of above your paygrade?” Sam gestures toward their witness. Brian’s caught on
that something notable is happening and all his limbs are tucked in on himself, his beanie pulled almost totally over his eyes.

“Who cares about paygrade?” Billie answers easily. “We’re all getting laid off anyway.”

“I can see you,” Jody cuts in. “I shouldn’t be able to see you. I’ve done my research. I’m not on the verge of death—I mean, I sure hope not.”

Billie shrugs, but she actually looks pretty sympathetic. “Verge of death’s relative. Welcome to the new world order.”

Cas makes a soft sound, like a sigh but more pained. Dean might be the only one who hears it. “Thank you for coming,” he says.

“You and me,” Billie tells Cas, “have some stuff to talk about. As soon as I help you all out with your little situation.”

“Oh my God,” Dean hisses between his teeth, “this sucks.”

“Yeah.” Cas draws in a quick breath, steeling himself the way a human would. He grabs hold of the snarling werewolf with one hand at its scruff and the other pressed to its domed forehead. A flash of too-bright light and the monster’s still, dead on the litter-strewn pavement of the alley.

“Yeah,” Cas says again, “this really sucks. These people deserved better.”

Normally, the sky would be darkening at about this time. Sam, Dean, Cas, and Billie have been tracking down the wayward wolves most of the afternoon and early evening. Billie serves as navigation, poised and inscrutable in the back of the car, letting them know every time a werewolf is getting close to a potential victim. That means they’ve been cutting it pretty close, careening around a half-abandoned South Dakotan city in the Impala with a reaper and an angel in the back, but no other casualties so far. Dean’s gonna count it as a relatively successful day, all things considered.

Claire sulked like a champ when Jody said she couldn’t come. Dean’s never wanted to give Jody a high-five so bad in his life.

They split off into parties of two to take care of the last pair of wolves as quick as possible. The rules might be fucked, but nightfall’s always made werewolves stronger and harder to gank. Even now, wiping his hands on his jeans and rolling his shoulders until the joints crackle, Dean can see a pearlescent outline starting to emerge in the overhead space the sun is finally vacating. It gives him the creeps, and he’s glad Brian got carted off to be reunited with his family.

His phone buzzes with a text from Sam: \textit{Got it. Billie says u two are good too}, and then another: \textit{Meet u back @ the station}. On any other day, Dean’d be jealous as hell that Sam got to peel around town in a borrowed police car.

Dean lets out his breath all at once and slumps against the brick alley wall. He didn’t have enough coffee today and his head is pounding. The streets are so unnaturally quiet he can actually hear the stabs of pain at the base of his neck.

“Dean,” Cas says delicately. “We’re finished.”

“Yeah.” He scrubs his palms across his face and digs his knuckles into his eyes until he’s seeing sparks. “We sure are.”
“That’s not what I meant,” Cas says.

“I know.” Dean musters a smile for Cas, who’s frowning at him from a few inches away. Cas’ hair is one big ruffle across his head, wayward tufts of dark brown curling around his ears and neck. “Thanks for your help. Feels pretty lazy havin’ you around.”

Cas shrugs. Another human tic picked up along the way. “Sam had Billie. She’s a reaper. I’m pretty sure she did the dirty work for him, too.”

“Gee, you guys don’t even need us.”

Cas’ lips thin. “Yes,” he says, “we do.”

Something warm coils in on itself behind Dean’s sternum. The light’s going as the moon comes out, and Cas’ features are softened in the encroaching dimness. “How you doing, buddy? You get a chance to catch your breath?”

“I don’t know,” Cas answers after a beat. He fiddles with the cuff of his trenchcoat sleeve. “It’s selfish of me, but I’m very glad you’re alive.”

“Might not be for much longer,” Dean points out.

“I don’t care.” Cas’ tone seriously brooks no argument. “I wanted to be with you until the end. You know that.”

Jesus. Dean’s cheeks burn. The toes of his boots, he notices, are badly scuffed. “What about you?”

Cas cocks his head to the side. “Am I glad I’m alive? Maybe.”

“No, I meant—” Dean huffs a frustrated breath. “Never mind. I’m glad. This whole shindig would be even shittier if you weren’t around.” He hesitates. What the hell. He thinks this apocalypse might actually be permanent. “I missed you, man.”

A little bit of warmth creeps back into Cas’ expression. He touches Dean’s wrist. “And I missed you,” he says, “when I was aware of what was happening.” A frown pinches at his mouth. “I let Lucifer suppress my consciousness too easily.”

“What was happening to you was beyond crappy. I’d wanna tune out, too.”

That makes the corner of Cas’ mouth twitch back up. “I heard you trying to reach me, once. I almost—and then you were gone again.”

“I tried, Cas. I want you to know that.”

“I know.” Cas lifts a hand, maybe about to touch Dean again, and then he drops it back to his side. “I think I am glad I’m alive,” he says. It’s the kind of tone most people use to discuss whether they think it’s going to rain. “I didn’t get to see the beginning. I’d like to witness the end.”

The whole fucked-up group of them eats a dinner of Jody’s leftovers, heated over her reliable little gas stove, sitting on blankets on the floor of her basement. This concrete-swathed downstairs is cool, tucked out of sight of the disquieting sight of the overlarge orange-tinted moon taking up most of the sky.

Alex stays quiet the whole time, pale and resentful that any of this is happening to her. Her phone
must have joined the ranks of fallen soldiers, because she doesn’t hide in it to avoid joining in. She dodges the conversation the old-fashioned way, silence and sullenness. Billie watches with undisguised amusement and interest, but she eats nothing. Sam, Jody, and Claire make small talk about the unorthodox mechanics of the day’s hunt. Their voices fill the silence with mundanity, and Dean’s grateful that they’re trying.

While Sam and Dean and Claire clear the dishes and Jody makes a valiant effort to engage with Alex, Billie pulls Cas aside. They’re both too large, too infused with power, for the dusty corner of the basement where they stand facing each other as they talk.

“He wants you to like him so bad,” Dean says to Claire when she passes him the Tupperware lid he’s been looking for.

“Yeah, I’ve got eyes.” Claire tosses a look toward the open door to the basement, the stairs that descend out of sight from the kitchen.

“He doesn’t mean to be so creepy,” Dean tries.

“Well, he is,” she says tersely. A half-second later, she goes quieter and says, “I get why he cares so much. It’s not like I don’t give a shit about him. But—and I dunno if you’ve noticed—he kinda looks exactly like my dead dad.”

Dean thinks about the square shape of Cas’ face, the swooping lines that frame his eyes. “Point,” he concedes.

Sam reaches between them to slide a stack of plates into place in an overhead cupboard. Claire seizes the opportunity to catch both their eyes. Her hair’s in two braids, making her look younger than she is. “You guys are going to fix this,” she says. Not a question; not even a statement. An order. “Alex is supposed to go to college.”

Dean draws himself up straighter, feels Sam doing the same. “You got it, chief.”

“Don’t we always?” Sam says.

Claire actually snorts around the laugh she barks out. “Not even close,” she says, “but you know I’ve got a thing for rooting for the underdogs.”

“The underdogs appreciate that.” Cas, combing a cobweb out of his hair with his fingers as he climbs the stairs.

Dean’s mouth tilts into a smile without asking him first. It’s stupid hot up here, Jody’s window A/C unit banging away merrily in the background without making any difference. Billie’s a couple steps behind Cas and Dean is friggin’ dying to ask about their mysterious pow-wow, but Jody comes ambling up in turn, Alex in tow, and cheerily suggests that they play Scrabble. Like nothing weird is happening. Like the TV’s not spitting garbled nonsense from her living room.

“Yes,” says Cas. He sounds like it’s the best idea he’s heard in months.

The Scrabble board’s ancient and coated in dust. The beer Jody excavates from her too-warm fridge is flat and cheap. Dean sucks it down like it’s the first drink of water he’s had after a year in the desert.

Alex wins. Dean’s stupidly grateful to see her smile as she tucks her hair behind her ears and gloats, elbowing Claire in the ribs. Cas comes in second, but Dean’s got a feeling that’s just because Billie said it wouldn’t be fair for her to play.
It never really gets dark outside. Apparently that’s not gonna be a thing that happens anymore.

Dean shifts for the eighth time, trying to get comfortable. They’re supposed to take off in the morning—Jody insisted on putting them up for the night, not that she really has enough room. Her couch isn’t quite long enough for all of Dean, but Sam would’ve been even worse off, so he’s got the guest room while Dean wrestles with lumpy embroidered cushions. Every couple minutes, he catches the sound of Sam snoring down the hall.

He scrubs his hands through his hair, sits up, and pulls his jeans back on. It takes a couple minutes of rummaging to unearth his own boots out of the pile of them Jody’s made by her front door.

The rows of houses that make up Jody’s suburban neighborhood glow faintly orange in the moonlight, like the world’s executive producers ordered that everything be shot through an action-movie filter from now on. Dean draws in a couple lungfuls of humid air.

“The angel’s in the backseat of your car,” Billie says from a yard or so to his left.

“Dude,” Dean says, trying his damnedest to sound like his heartrate didn’t just punch its way into the stratosphere. “You been lying in wait or something?”

She laughs. Her arms are crossed over her chest. “Isn’t that what death does?” She has a point. “But no,” she continues, “just enjoying the view. I’m not keen on sleep. Pale imitation of my real art form, if you ask me.”

She’s so unapologetically creepy Dean kinda appreciates it. “So you’re into this?” he says. He jabs a thumb toward the sky in demonstration. “Whatever this is?”

“This is an unmaking,” Billie says. “Things fall apart. The center cannot hold. Et cetera. And no. Didn’t I try to help you stop this?”

“That went real well,” he says flatly.

“I underestimated the Darkness.” Billie shrugs, sliding her hands into the pockets of her jacket. “I like things to move in cycles. I’m a reaper; we collect souls, and our favorites are the ones that have lived long, full lives. If nothing gets made, before too long, no one’s dying. No souls left to find their eternal rest. No fun for us.” Her teeth flash bright white as she smiles.

“So the Cliff Notes version of that is, you’re on our side.”

“Sure.” She tilts her head back, looking at the pock-marked surface of the moon. “And I like you guys. I like your style.”

Dean grins.

“Come on.” Billie’s gaze flicks over toward the Impala. It looks almost innocuous parked in a suburban driveway. “I’m not the immortal weirdo you came out here to talk to, am I?”

Dean could say that he didn’t come looking for Cas, and it would be kind of true. But it would be kind of a lie, too. When things around him start falling apart, Dean likes to know where his family is.

“I don’t need sleep,” Cas had told Jody, heading her off at the pass as she started assigning rooms to her guests. Dean had believed him at the time, which sharpens the jolt of surprised concern when he sees the way Cas is curled up in the back of the Impala, his head at an awkward angle with his cheek
against the window and his trench balled up to form a shitty makeshift pillow under his neck.

Dean fishes the keys out of his pockets with one hand and knocks lightly on the glass with the other. As Cas starts to stir, he cracks the door and says, “Hey.”

“Dean.” Cas’ eyelashes flutter, dark smudges against his cheeks. “I wasn’t asleep,” he lies.


Cas does, grumbling indistinctly under his breath. “I was dozing. There’s a difference.”

“Come on.” The cotton of Cas’ shirt is body-warm when Dean touches his shoulder. “What’s up with you? You didn’t have any problem taking out, what, four werewolves, but you looked kinda rough after you juiced up that poor kid’s phone. And buddy, you were sleeping just now.”

Something like shame chases across Cas’ features. He rubs at his eyes with the tips of his fingers. “Those wolves were meant to die. Most of the creatures you’ve hunted your whole life are perversions of death, humans who’ve twisted the natural order to cling to life longer than they were meant to. And these—they were extremely weak, you know? Maintaining the transformation against their will took most of the fight out of them before we so much as drew near them.”

“So what?”

“So it took very little of my power to push them over the edge. Death is easy right now, Dean.” Cas looks toward the space Billie had been occupying on Jody’s doorstep, a space that’s now empty. “The cosmos wants things to end. Especially life.”

“Jesus,” Dean says.

Cas’ mouth quirks into a passing smile. He touches the backs of Dean’s fingers where Dean’s hand is still cupping his shoulder. “I didn’t mean to fall asleep here. I find this car comforting—apparently too comforting.”

“It’s not like I mind,” Dean says. He’s always liked the reassurance of knowing Cas is stowed away in his car, looking ordinary and protected against the leather, surrounded by steel.

In the weird semi-apocalyptic light, Cas’ hair is darker, close to black. The shadow of stubble on his jaw stands out, or maybe it’s just that he’s starting to need a shave. End of the world’s a crappy time to start navigating the mundane inconveniences of being human.

“Dean,” Cas says. Just his name, hanging in the warm air between their bodies. It stays there for a good long minute. “What are we going to do?”

Dean’s stomach flips over on itself. He’s been avoiding that question. They all have. “I dunno,” he says, “probably blow this popsicle stand in the morning after we explain everything to Jody and the girls, find some other place with creepy-crawlies that need taking care of. Business as usual.”

The line of Cas’ mouth hardens. “We won’t have any trouble finding towns that need our help.”

That might be acceptance of Dean’s proposal, acquiescence to the necessity of keeping their heads down and muddling along until the last string gets pulled loose and it all ends. Dean wonders whether they’ll know the end is coming before it hits.

There’s something else he’s been wondering about, too. He squeezes Cas’ shoulder and lets go, way belatedly. Warmth lingers on his palm, in the whorls of his fingerprints. “Uh.” He clears his throat.
“What did Billie wanna talk to you about?”

Cas’ eyebrows go up. He sits up straighter, squinting at Dean like the way he used to back when they first met. “She thinks,” he says carefully, “there may be something we can do.”

“We,” Dean repeats.

“All of us,” Cas says. Then he hesitates. “She and I, mostly. But—” He trails off. It’s not like him. Neither is the uncertainty that flickers across his face, his teeth digging into his lower lip. He studies Dean’s face for a moment before he finishes: “There’s a choice I have to make. According to Billie.”

A beat passes. Dean wants to ask for the rest of the explanation, but he doesn’t. His chest feels tight with a fear he can’t even start to name. “Okay.”

Cas looks at him levelly. His hands are clasped in his lap, long fingers laced together. “We have some time,” he says.

Not enough, Dean thinks. He nods. “Get some more shut-eye. We’re hitting the road in the morning.”

Before he goes back inside, he turns. Just checking. Cas catches his eye from the back seat, and he smiles. Something loosens a little in Dean’s chest, and he goes back to bed thinking about the kinds of choices Cas might have in front of him.
Chapter 3

The leftovers Jody insisted they take rattle around in the back as the Impala pulls out of Sioux Falls. The Tupperware containers are stacked in the middle of the seat between Cas and Billie, the former looking grim and the latter looking, for the most part, amused.

“Where to?” Sam asks. He’s squinting down at his phone. It’s pointless—all their phones are pretty much SOL by now. Dean’s held onto a charge for about five minutes this morning, just long enough for a string of missed calls to populate his call history before it blinked back into blankness.

“You’re not gonna get that thing to work,” Dean says, “and I dunno. I was thinkin’ southwest.”

Sam scowls. He’s been fiddling with the phone’s power button on and off since they got up. Jody had to smack his hand away from the thing during breakfast. “I’m going nuts without news, dude. Southwest like how?”

Personally, Dean’s kinda glad they can’t see the news. This morning he scooped a paper up off the lawn a few houses down from Jody’s, but it was old and the headline was about international politics, not—this. Not the heat that’s crawled its way into every crevice of Dean’s awareness, not the way the edges of the sun look like they’re bleeding red into the sky even at high noon, not the hitchhikers who try to flag them down with sunburnt cheeks and pleading expressions.

“Like New Mexico southwest,” Dean says. He steps harder on the gas, trying to get some air moving inside the Impala.

“You mean—”

“Yeah.” Dean grins. “They wanted to get out of the life, right? Least we could do for Jesse and Cesar is do the dirty work for them, keep their hands clean if we can.” He glances at Billie in the rearview mirror. “You know if there are monsters in New Mexico?”

She lifts her eyebrows. “Is the Pope Catholic? There’s monsters everywhere.” Dean also catches a glimpse of Cas’ measured frown, the way Cas’ gaze darts to Billie and then back to the window and the highway outside.

The U.S. has never felt so wide, so huge. Dean and Sam must’ve criss-crossed this country a hundred times over in their lifetimes, but they’ve always known what was going on at both ends no matter where they were. TVs, papers, smartphones, whatever. It made the country smaller. Now there’s just empty roads and people with hunched shoulders, backpacks cinched tight.
Jody had said Sioux Falls wasn’t falling apart. Not exactly. More like it was stopping. Like a machine whose cogs stop turning. Phones don’t charge, cars don’t run, TVs don’t pick up the channels they’re supposed to, outlets start going on the fritz—that’s the stuff that makes people slow down and give up. Dean’d be giving up too if he didn’t have monsters to kill. He had to pay straight cash to fill up the car in Sioux Falls. The gas station pumps were working, but their fancyass new card-reading machines weren’t.

The Impala gives a little hiccup underneath him. Like the engine coughing. Dean sits up straighter and eases off the acceleration.

“Okay,” Sam says. He shoves his phone back into his pocket, apparently giving up for now. “Sure. I could go for a taco.”

“Oh, come on,” Dean groans. “You know the rules about Mexican food.”

“Even I know the rules,” Cas says dryly from the back.

“The rules are discrimination!” Sam laughs, and Dean’s chuckling too, distracted. That’s probably why it takes him a couple seconds to notice that the engine’s gone silent and the Impala is skidding to a stop.

Dean brakes, gentle as he can, and wrenches them into the shoulder with the last of their momentum. The second they stop, the heat swarms back in through the open windows, raking its damp fingers through the hairs at the back of Dean’s neck. He turns the keys in the ignition, but nothing doing.

“Shit.”

“Hm.” Billie leans her elbows on the back of Sam’s headrest. “I was wondering when this was going to happen.”

Dean’s heart is like a fucking anchor, sinking lower and lower every second. He squeezes the gear shift like it’s a totem of luck and says, “I’m gonna fix this. Hang tight.”
As he barrels out of the car and toward the trunk for his tool box, someone takes hold of his elbow through their window. Cas’ fingers curl tight into the flannel fabric of Dean’s sleeve for a moment before he loosens his grip.

“Kinda in a hurry here,” Dean snaps.

Cas’ cheeks are pink and the curls of hair framing his ears and cheeks are a little damp, dark with sweat. His coat’s off and his sleeves are rolled up to his elbows. “I know.” He touches the inside of Dean’s arm again, lighter. “Be gentle, Dean.”

Bristling, Dean shakes him off. He sheds his button-down, grabs his tools, and marches back up to pop open the hood. The sun beats down on his back as he braces his elbows and leans in to immerse himself in the innards of the Impala.

“Baby, come on,” Dean pleads at least forty-five minutes later. Sam’s dozing, taking up the space Dean normally occupies in the front, and he lost track of Billie and Cas at least half an hour ago. The thing that’s killing him is that nothing’s wrong. Nothing he can figure out, anyway—and he’s diagnosed this car with practically every minor to major mechanical error under the sun in the time he’s owned it. He’s crashed it and rebuilt it over and over. He knows it.

He wipes the back of his hand on his cheek, feeling the smear of grease there spread. His armpits itch with sweat and his T-shirt keeps sticking to the same patch of overwarm skin between his shoulder blades.

The car remains indifferent to his pleading. Dean shuts his eyes and gives the serpentine belt an apologetic pat. He’s subjected the Impala’s guts to a whole lot of frustrated swearing.

“Here.” Cas’ voice, a rumble at Dean’s shoulder. Dean straightens, his vertebrae crackling as he does.

Dean feels like he’s emerging from a fog of humidity and frustration. He takes whatever Cas is holding without looking, then starts: it’s ice-cold, a bottle of water with the cap off and the label peeling.

“Cas,” he says, “come on. Don’t.”

Cas smiles. He touches the knob of Dean’s wrist with two fingers, a fleeting second of contact—but apparently enough to drain the exhaustion from Dean’s bones, to leech the excessive heat out of his skin. “I’m okay. You can just say thank you, you know.”

“Thank you,” Dean says automatically. He takes a swig of the water, willpower fading, and fuck it feels good, clean and icy sliding down his throat. “Seriously.”

A lone pickup trundles past. The driver’s gotta see them and their predicament, but he doesn’t slow even for a second.

Cas’ smile has staying power for once. He watches Dean take a second drink of water, and a third. “You’re welcome,” he says. “It didn’t hurt this time.” He’s still disheveled, hair sticking up in every direction and cheeks flushed. It’s kinda working on him.

Billie’s a couple feet away. The heat hasn’t touched her; she’s still in her jacket, her hair down, and she looks as good as ever. She smiles toward Dean, closing the distance with effortless strides. “Castiel and I have been doing a little work together. He’s a quick study. Still having car trouble?”
“Yeah,” he grumbles, “which you apparently saw coming, but you didn’t feel like you had to warn me. Don’t feel bad or anything.”

Billie shrugs. She and Cas trade quick glances, which is the kind of behavior that could scare the shit out of Dean if it continues. “You didn’t?”

“No, I—” Dean exhales, frustrated. Obviously this was stupid of him. Things are breaking. Their phones are bricks and they’ve passed more abandoned cars than they can count. “I figured she was immune,” he says.

“I know.” Cas touches the underside of the hood. Everything’s hot to the touch by now. “She’s held out longer than I had feared.”

“You knew too?”

Cas visibly hesitates. “I didn’t want to,” he says. It’s a better answer than Billie’s. Dean’s irritation eases. “This is far from your average car. This disintegration we’re seeing, it’s following so few predictable rules… I had wondered if your car would manage to slip through the cracks. At least for a while longer.”

“Damn right she’s not an average car.” Dean scowls. “She’s an above-average car and I can’t figure out what the fuck’s wrong with her.”

“Let me…” Cas pauses again, looking back at Billie. She shrugs and spreads her hands. Cas might be the only supernatural creature in existence Dean would so much as consider letting this close to the inner workings of his baby. He steps up next to Dean. Their elbows brush.

“I checked everything,” Dean says.

“I know.” Cas hums thoughtfully under his breath. There’s a smile still curling the edges of his mouth. “May I try anyway?”

Dean thinks about it. Sweat’s already breaking out fresh at the back of his neck and pooling in the dip of his spine. Cas’ lips are chapped and his forearms are bare and he hovers, watching Dean steadily, waiting for the go-ahead. “Yeah,” he says, “all right.”

Cas pushes his sleeves a little further up his arms. There’s a tiny scar in the crook of one elbow; maybe Jimmy gave blood once, a nice and easy charitable thing for a suburban dad to do. He touches the fill cap, then the radiator reservoir. His hands stop at the battery, fingertips of one hand resting at the negative terminal, the others at the positive terminal.

“Dean,” he says, “would you get in and see if she’s feeling better?”

Dean likes the way Cas talks about the Impala, so he does. He has to prop Sam up with some effort, ignoring the sleep-indistinct grumbles.

He turns the key, leaning hard on the brake, and the engine sputters, then dies.

“No dice,” he calls.

“Wait.” He can just hear Billie outside, and he can see as she touches Cas’ shoulder. She murmurs something in his ear, and Cas nods. Dean waits a second or two, wishing he could see the look on Cas’ face, and then he tries the ignition again. Quiet for a second, then the car comes to life under him.
Sam jerks upright. “Wha—”

Dean shushes him. He puts his hand to the dashboard. He’d know the exact hum of this engine in his sleep. Everything feels normal, the same as ever. He shuts her back off and eases his way out to come face to face with a smiling Cas whose palms are faintly smudged with grease.

“Did you just…?”

Cas’ smile is infectious, and Dean feels the corners of his own mouth twitch in response. “Did I just give you a jump with my grace?” Cas says. “Yes, I think I did.”

The heat gets drier and more searing the farther south they go. Dean wants to complain, but he wants even less to hear an *I told you so* from Sam.

It’s been a couple hours and the Impala’s running smoothly. Cas seems fine. The high of success wore off pretty quick and he’s a sober presence in the back seat, but Dean’s been keeping an eye on him, watching for any signs of a headache. Whatever a misfired grace hangover entails.

“It’s getting late,” Sam says as they pull across the border into Colorado.

Dean hadn’t even noticed. The glare of the sun washes out the clock on the dashboard, his phone’s useless, and he hasn’t looked at his watch in hours. He does now: 8:55.

They’ve pulled longer hauls. Then again, Dean’s knees are aching and his shoulders are stiff. There are dark smudges under Sam’s eyes, thrown into stark relief by the unrelenting light from above. Even Billie looks bored in the back, her chin in her hand and her elbow braced against the window.

The motel they pull into doesn’t have any lights on. The sun’s finally sliding below the horizon and the sky’s turning dimmer, bleeding into a murky orange that highlights the unlit windows of the Super 8. The sign flickers feebly like it’s saying hi to them, but it goes dark again before Dean can even find a parking space. They’re sharing the lot with a dinged-up Hyundai and a shitty little sedan so beat up Dean can’t even tell the make and model from this distance.

“I don’t think they’re open,” Sam says.

“No shit,” Dean says.

It’s an older establishment, one of those places too remote to be anywhere but not remote enough to be a destination for people who seek out isolation. That means no key cards. Stroke of luck, actually—Dean picks the lock to the unit closest to the Impala real easy, just a jimmy and a good hard shake and the door buckles open. Two queen beds should be enough for two regular humans and a couple of supernatural whatevers, he figures. The room doesn’t come with any overhead lighting, but the lamps by the beds turn on and flood the room in butter-yellow.

“Home sweet home.” Dean peels off his overshirt and chucks it toward the closer bed. The pit stains on his T-shirt are gonna be visible and he doesn’t give a shit.

“It’s ugly,” Cas says thoughtfully. He’s not wrong. “Thank you for getting us in.” He gives Dean another one of those smiles and Dean’s insides swim precariously.

“I’m so glad I don’t have to sleep,” Billie adds. “I wouldn’t take a blacklight to these beds if I were you, boys.”
Cas and Billie disappear outside together. Makes sense, Dean figures. They don’t have shit to unpack. They don’t have to fiddle with the plumbing until the faucet springs on and they can wash their faces and brush their teeth. A spray of gray-green mold creeps around the edge of the bathroom mirror and the handle on the toilet sticks so Dean has to really muscle the thing just to get it to flush.

“Oh my god.” Sam, back in the bedroom, sounds like he’s about to cry.

Dean grunts a questioning sound without taking a look.

“I got internet,” Sam says.

That draws Dean back to Sam’s side pretty damn quick, toothpaste drying at the seam of his lower lip. Sam’s curled up on the floor at the foot of a bed, his hands dwarfing the keys of his shiny new-as-of-last-month laptop as the types at the speed of light. “Dunno how long it’ll last,” he says distractedly, “but I got into the wifi coming from the office. Their password’s not secure at all.”

“Cut to the chase,” Dean urges, dropping down next to him. Sam’s opening a new tab every ten seconds, navigating to some fresh news site before they get kicked back off.

“There’s not a lot getting posted,” Sam mutters. He rakes his hair back out of his eyes and leans back, scowling at his screen. “Nothing newer than about twelve hours ago. That’s a long time on the internet.”

Dean leans in. Sam’s moving fast, but he can catch glimpses of headlines: *Global communication breakdown unresolved* and *Food banks nationwide make increasingly desperate pleas for donations* and *Has climate change come to collect sooner than we anticipated?*

“Some major reaching here.” Sam snorts out a laugh. “Liberal conspiracies, okay. Hell, I’ve even got some blogs saying it’s a hoax to hasten the singularity. Nice.”

“The what.”

“Don’t even bother.”

“Hey, check if the new Ghostbusters movie is still coming out,” Dean says, but he loses steam halfway through. The screen of Sam’s computer goes fuzzy, then black. “Fuck.”

“Saw it coming.” Sam slams the laptop shut and stows it back in his bag. “I don’t think anyone knows anything.”

“Except us,” Dean says. “You think about that? We might be the only guys on the planet who know why everything’s falling apart. Because we couldn’t get our shit together in time.”

Sam frowns at him. “It’s not over yet.”

Irritation prickles under the surface of Dean’s skin. “You people keep saying that.” He makes a gesture toward the door, toward wherever Cas and Billie have disappeared to. “Great, there’s freaking time. That’s what Amara said. It’s not a gift, it’s a damn punishment.”

“Dean,” Sam says.

“I’m serious.” Dean slumps against the side of the bed, his shoulders even with Sam’s. Ducks in a row, peas in a pod. “Wouldn’t this’ve been easier if we’d just gone poof? Amara said hey, sorry, kid—no dice. The end is now. And everything went away—that’d be simpler, right?”
He’s always hated the way Sam looks at him when he thinks Dean’s coming close to some kind of emotional precipice. His eyes get all big and shiny and his forehead wrinkles and it makes Dean want to shrug the whole thing off and down a pint or six.

“There’s gonna be a way out of this,” Sam says. He sounds bound and determined. “Come on, giving up’s not your style.”

“Sometimes it is,” Dean says shortly. “Anyway, I’m not giving up. I’m here, ain’t I?”

Sam bumps his shoulder against Dean’s, jostling him. “You think I’m not scared shitless?” He laughs a little, but the sound of it hitches for a second. “I’d probably give an arm to hit up a functioning internet café right now. I don’t wanna die.”

“I didn’t want to die either,” Dean says. He hugs his knees to his chest. There’s a water stain on the ceiling shaped kind of like Cas’ old tie. “I just thought I had to.”

“Yeah, well.” Sam’s voice is still tight. “Selfish, but I’m glad you’re not dead. If you’re still alive, you can keep fighting.”

Cas had said sort of the same thing. Dean squints at the door, at the muddy light coming through the frosted pane of glass set into its top. Cas and Billie are out there somewhere, doing—what? Tuning up Cas’ grace, maybe. Some kinda secret celestial mojo so Cas doesn’t break every time he tries to do something that’s not destructive. Dean would swear to his grave that there was nothing mechanical wrong with his car, but all Cas had to do was lay hands on her and bam. His throat had gleamed with sweat as he beamed at Dean from the back seat for the next twenty miles of their ride south.

“Okay,” Dean says. He rubs at his kneecap through a growing hole in his jeans. “I’m scared shitless too. Let’s do this thing.”

Something shifts the mattress a foot or two away from Dean. He squirms, grunts, and tucks his face firmer into the crook of his elbow.

The jolt of adrenaline follows a second later. He scrambles for the pistol tucked under his pillow, lifting himself up onto his elbow, and then stares muzzily at Cas’ dimly-lit features.

Cas looks genuinely contrite. He ducks his head but keeps his eyes on Dean’s face. “I’m sorry,” he says. So quiet that Dean can assume Sam’s still snoozing in the bed on the other side of the room.

“It’s fine,” Dean says. He drags a hand across his face to get the crusts of sleep out of his eyes. The cheapo clock on the bedside table tells him it’s a couple minutes shy of three in the morning. Robbed of their usual distractions, he and Sam had spent an hour trying to recount *Jurassic Park* from memory, cracking each other up until they’d slid into bed just before midnight. Dirty orange light’s still oozing into the room from outside; Dean’s circadian rhythm is getting more and more fucked by the night.

Cas is unbuttoning the cuffs of his dress shirt, working his arms free. The undershirt he has on is pristine white, practically factory-fresh. He undresses one step at a time, shirt and slacks and jacket in a dark pile off the foot of the bed.

“It’s fine,” Dean says again, “but… what?”

Cas looks up like he’s startled. “It’s nighttime,” he says, “in a manner of speaking, at least. You said
it yourself the other night; I was sleeping. I’m not interested in lying to myself about my capabilities.”

“I thought—” It’s like they’re back at apocalypse, round one. Dean’s always a step behind whatever’s going on with Cas these days. “I thought Billie was fixing you.”

“It’s not fixable.”

“Then what—man, come on.” Dean drops his head back to his pillow. “I got eyes.”

The corners of Cas’ eyes crinkle up with his smile. He rolls his trench coat up, tucking the ends of the waist tie in neatly, and stretches out next to Dean like that’s a pillow, like it’s normal for their bodies to curve toward each other on a bed in the night. The sideways angle makes curls of hair fall askew across his forehead. “I know,” he says. “I told you, I have to make a choice.”

“So what is it? Boxers or briefs?” They’re keeping their voices low and hushed. Sam can sleep like a log when he wants, but he’s got hunter’s instincts, never mind the undignified way he’s spread out like a huge starfish across the entire second bed.

Cas spreads the fingers of one hand against the bedspread between them. “I’m working on it.” He huffs out a small breath, gaze dropping away from Dean’s. “You were willing to die to preserve this world. I should be braver.”

“You’re brave as hell,” Dean says. “Cas, buddy, just tell me. I’ll help you figure it out.”

Cas shuts his eyes. It’s weird coming from him, the guy who never stops staring. “You’re helping already,” he says, “but I’m tired, Dean. I need to sleep.”
Chapter 4

Dean doesn’t know what he expected.

Okay, that’s not true. He expected a quaint little ranch house, some stables or whatever people with farms have, horses munching on grass, the works.

“It’s a fixer-upper,” Cesar says. He raises an eyebrow as if he’s daring Dean to say something.

It took them a little while just to track Jesse and Cesar’s property down. Once they hit New Mexico, Dean pulled into an abandoned gas station and tried for a solid forty minutes to charge his phone using an outlet in the convenience store. None of the lights worked, and the sun filtering through the front-facing windows turned the dusty rows of chocolate bars and energy drinks a jaundiced kind of yellow.

“Where the hell is Billie,” Dean had grumbled, grinding the pad of his thumb against his phone’s power button again. He’s been wanting an excuse to call up Jesse and Cesar for weeks; now he has one, and the world’s ending and his fucking phone doesn’t work?

“Gone,” Cas said. He’d crossed his legs and opened a bag of Cheez-Its, offering it to Dean. “She’s investigating some things.”

Sam and Dean raised their eyebrows at each other over Cas’ head. Sam flipped to the next page of his almost-outdated issue of National Geographic.

“Let me try something,” Cas said.

“Uh,” Dean said.

Cas had shifted closer. He’d tilted his head and considered Dean. Dean’s pulse had drummed away in his ears and Cas had reached close, touching a hand to his chest above his heart. The edge of panic dulled.

“All right,” Cas had said, “let’s get in the car. I’ll give you directions.”

Dean’s practically desperate to know how he did that. Almost as desperate as he is scared to hear the answer.

“All right,” Cas had said, “let’s get in the car. I’ll give you directions.”

Dean’s practically desperate to know how he did that. Almost as desperate as he is scared to hear the answer.

“Little more fixer than upper,” he says now.

Cesar snorts around a laugh. “Things were supposed to be different.” He says it like a joke, but Dean can hear the truth of his disappointment. How they were supposed to settle into their land and it with their hands and determination into a home.

Instead, they got—this. A ramshackle old house with stained carpeting and a gaping hole over the kitchen counter where a microwave never got installed. Whole acres of arid land ready to be landscaped and molded into a farm if not for the sudden and persistent drought. Jesse’s mouth is tight, his features drawn, as he offers them a couple beers from the back of the fridge. Dean gets the gesture for what it is; these are among the last of their luxuries, and they’re offering them to Dean and Sam and Cas.

“Thanks,” he says sincerely. He savors his first sip. It’s a little flat, tastes a little bit like road dust, but it wets his throat and it still fizzes as it goes down.
“No offense, but I hoped we wouldn’t see you two again.” Cesar inclines his head toward Cas, too. “Not to leave out your friend here.”

“My name is Castiel,” Cas says. He’s contemplating the neck of his beer bottle, bubbles popping half-heartedly inside the glass. “I’ve been out of commission lately.”

Catching them up would involve a whole lot of backstory. They’re hunters, yeah, but there’s a shitload they don’t know, and Dean hesitates. He’s not sure it’s his place to burden these nice guys with knowledge of what’s out there, of how many times everything’s come close to ending, of how sure he is that this is the time when they’re not gonna figure out how to pull out a win.

Something coarse catches in Dean’s throat watching Cesar flash Cas a smile and Jesse settling into the seat next to Sam. Their kitchen window is smeared with dust and fingerprints, all highlighted by the sickly blood orange of the sun that should, by all rights, be setting right about now.

“Nice to meet you, Cas,” Jesse says. He gives Dean a slanted little smile over the mouth of his beer bottle. “Wish it could’ve been under better circumstances. We can give you the tour where we talk about all the stuff we were planning to build.”

“I bet it was going to be gorgeous,” Sam says loyally.

That makes Cesar chuckle. “Yeah. It was. I was ready, you know? I wanted to forget everything I knew about hunting, on purpose, and fill up the empty spaces in my head with new things.”

Dean doesn’t look at Sam and he definitely doesn’t look at Cas. He takes another pull of room-temperature beer.

“Yeah,” Sam says.

Cas hums a sound of acknowledgment. The toe of his boot is a few inches away from Dean’s under the unvarnished kitchen table, and Dean could easily move enough to touch him. He could easily write it off as an accident.

They finish their beers and eat Kraft mac and cheese in relative silence. They were supposed to spend hours hearing all about Cesar and Jesse’s awesome new domestic life; without it, there’s just quiet, the scrape of fork tines against cheap ceramic, Dean’s leg bouncing until it’s thunking against the underside of the table.

Jesse and Cesar don’t have a guest room. Jesse explains in an undertone that their blueprints for their dream ranch house had more than enough bedrooms to contain as many guests as they could imagine, but for now, Sam and Dean and Cas are gonna have to make do with the two couches in the living room. Cas demurs, claiming he doesn’t need to sleep, but when Cesar asks why, he doesn’t have an answer ready. That’s how Dean wins the silent argument: Cas gets a couch, Sam gets a couch, and Dean gets the floor plus a blanket out of the back of Cesar’s pickup truck.

He’s half-asleep, drifting in and out of consciousness while the bristly fabric tickles his chin, when the screen door slams open and wakes him up. That’s how the monster gets in: it comes in through the front goddamned door.

“Oh my god,” Dean says, “I’m gonna throw up.”

“It’s not that bad,” Sam says.
It’s that bad. The thing that shuffled into Cesar and Jesse’s house in the night isn’t like any kind of monster Dean’s ever seen. It was easy to take down because it moves like molasses, slow and halting.

It’s like something out of one of Dean’s Hell nightmares. Maybe it was human, once—all the souls down in the pit were, too. The elbows bend the wrong way; the skin of the face is peeling off in uneven strips; those sunken pits are probably where eyes are supposed to go, except there are way too many of them.

Cas is the one who sprang into action fastest, spikes of hair sticking up in every direction as he pushed up off the couch and put the creature in a headlock. “Dean,” he’d barked, catching Dean’s eye until Dean had scrambled up and fumbled for the pair of handcuffs buried too deep in his duffel bag.

“Never leave home without ’em,” he’d said under his breath as he cuffed the thing to Cesar and Jesse’s closest kitchen chair.

It stares at them, now. Or at least Dean thinks that’s staring. There’s a kind of beady glint from somewhere in the misshapen mass of face that might be an eye.

Jesse’s voice is a little shaky. “What the hell is that,” he says. His hand is entwined so tightly with Cesar’s that Dean can see his knuckles going white.

Cesar turns to Sam and Dean, like they’re gonna have the answers.

“Um,” Sam says. “Ugly?"

“Real, real ugly,” Dean agrees.

Cas clears his throat. He’s hovering over the creature’s shoulders, pressing it back into its chair every time it thrashes and tries to break free. It has no clear trajectory or game plan, just purposeless twitching, struggling. The aimlessness of its movements is making Dean’s skin crawl.

“It’s a shapeshifter,” Cas says. He tugs the monster’s head back by its shock of white hair. “Technically.”

“All right,” Cesar says, “I may’ve seen less in my time than you folks, but I know what a shifter looks like. That’s not it.”

“Technically,” Cas repeats. He drops its head back and its chin bounces off its sternum. The sound of bone striking bone is artless and chilling. “Something’s gone badly wrong, obviously.”

Dean steps in before their hosts can start asking how exactly Cas knows for sure what their captive is. “What, it got stuck? Like those wolves but—"

“But worse,” Sam finishes. “I mean, we’ve seen the messes shifters leave behind, their used skin. I guess this guy… started shedding, or changing, and didn’t finish.”

The shifter shudders and makes a low noise like a dying animal. Apparently its vocal cords didn’t make it through the botched transition intact. Now that Dean knows what it is, or what it used to be, he can see it: tattered remnants of a T-shirt clinging to its torso; there’s a belt hanging loosely around the sharp, exposed peaks of its hipbones. He’s met shifters. He knows their heads basically function like human heads, just—warped by the shit they’ve been through. Sometimes warped so bad they can’t keep pretending to be normal people.
“Kill it, Cas.”

Cas gives him a startled look. “Dean?”

Sam’s staring at him, too. Probably thinks Dean’s coming unhinged, that he’s forgetting the difference between monster and irredeemable again.

“I’m serious,” he says. “Do you hear that?”

They go quiet, all five of them. Cesar and Jesse’s grip on each other hasn’t loosened at all. They’re way out in the country, and the sand dunes and fields are all quiet like tombs at this time of late night, early morning.

The shifter groans again. It’s a reedy sound, shaky and evocative, and under it there’s the dying wisp of an English word: Please.

“Fuck,” Jesse breathes out.

“Please,” it says again. The word’s clearer now that they know it’s there for them to hear.

“Come on.” Dean watches Cas’ lips thin, the flinty understanding flooding his expression. “It’d be a mercy killing.”

Cesar’s frowning as he asks, “What do you need? Silver?”

Every second watching this thing squirm in what has to be pain is making Dean’s chest feel tight. Like the handful of times his cat allergy got bad enough to knock him into an asthma attack and breath wouldn’t fit inside his lungs no matter how hard he tried. “No.” He nods at Cas. “Just go for it.”

Cas’ eyebrows quirk up, but he returns Dean’s nod.

It’s quick, as ever. Cas pulls the shifter’s head back again, gentler now. He covers its forehead with his palm, exchanges one last confirming glance with Dean, and then there’s white heat burning its way through the shifter’s body. Cas’ grace is probably leaping at the chance to destroy something—it sparks hot in the air around the monster’s mangled body. Dean can almost feel its energy before it dies back down and all that’s left is Cas, poised over a dead deformity in boxers and a white undershirt.

Cesar whistles lowly. “Dios mio.”

Digging graves is common ground for every hunter in America. You don’t need to have been possessed by the Devil or sent to Hell for forty years to pick up a shovel and break ground. Of course, usually they’re taking a body out of the ground instead of putting one in.

Dean and Cas carry the corpse, which smells like fresh meat. Dean’s stomach churns the whole time, but the body’s light, at least. He can’t wait to wipe the blood and viscera off his hands. He’d kill a man for a long, hot shower.

There’s plenty of land. Wide open tracts of red-yellow dirt only partially barricaded by rotting fences the previous owners never bothered to maintain. A half mile or so from the house, they come across a tool shed covered in cracked blue paint. “Here.” Jesse unbolts the door and the smell of mildew spills out. The early-morning sun, relentlessly bright, hits a whole array of rusty farm tools.
That’s where they do their talking with Jesse and Cesar, getting them up to speed on what Cas is. On what the thing that’s killing the world is.

“I think I’ve lost the ability to feel surprise.” Jesse leans his elbows on the handle of his shovel, wiping sweat from his forehead. It doesn’t cool off much at night here anymore, but the temperature cranks up even higher during the day.

“Winchesters,” Cesar says. Quieter, more serious. He keeps eyeing Cas with an interest that borders on academic. “I guess they do say you guys are always at the center of something big and bad.”

Shame tightens in Dean’s gut. He flings up another shovelful of dirt. The inside of his mouth tastes like dust and sand. Blood and dirt are caked under his fingernails.

“It’s not usually on purpose.” Sam’s hair hangs in his eyes. He tosses Dean a wet rag; the cold water feels amazing on Dean’s forehead.

“We try.” Cas, who’s the only one of them who hasn’t taken a break from digging the whole time. The hair at the back of his neck is sweat-soaked and curling around his ears and Dean can see the shapes of his shoulder blades through the thin cotton of his undershirt. His jeans, swiped from Dean’s duffel, are a little too tight around his hips and thighs. Maybe they can raid an abandoned Wal-Mart on their way to—

To wherever.

“We try,” Cas says again, “and sometimes—just often enough—we succeed.”

The sun’s turning Cas’ cheeks pink. Dean licks his lips. “What he said.” Sam laughs somewhere in the background, somewhere beyond the curve of Cas’ spine where his shirt sticks to every third or fourth vertebra.

When he meets Cesar’s eyes, he gets a fleeting little smile. With Dean still looking, Cesar settles his gaze on the tired slump of Jesse’s shoulders and something in his posture tightens like a decision. He picks up his shovel and steps back into the hollowed-out dirt that’s almost grave enough to bury the stinking corpse.

The rest of the day would remind Dean of summer camp if Dean had ever gotten to go to summer camp. He wanted to, once, but Dad axed the whole idea pretty quick. Anyway, it’s not like he could’ve left Sammy alone for that long; Dad probably would’ve accidentally killed him by feeding him nothing but beer and Fritos.

But here he is with four other dudes in the blistering southwestern sun singing off-key camp songs and fixing shit up. There’s a lot of projects Dean can’t tackle with the electricity working only thirty percent of the time and half the tools on the property falling apart for no reason, but he’s determined to try. He’s the guy who failed to stop the Darkness. That makes him the guy who’ve kept Jesse and Cesar from their crops and their nice house and their horses or whatever the fuck else they wanted to do with their domestic retirement. And that makes him the guy who’s gonna do everything he can for them before he and his brothers hop back in their car and disappear over the horizon.

He’s folded up under their kitchen sink to fiddle with the plumbing, breathing in the smell of wet mold and hoping it’s not crawling into his lungs, when a hand settles at his calf.

Dean sits up so fast and sudden that his head thunks against the inside of the cabinet. “Fuck!”
“Oh.” Cas sounds taken aback and abruptly awkward. “I’m sorry, Dean.”

“Ugh.” He worms his way out from under the sink, pressing the heel of his palm to the fresh tender spot on his temple. “Weathered worse. Don’t sweat it.”

Cas’ lip curls. He looks down at himself with apparent disgust. “I’ve been sweating everything lately,” he says. He plucks his shirt away from his chest between two fingertips and frowns.

“Ha,” Dean says flatly. “You’re a regular comedian. You need something?”

Jesse and Cesar are out of the house for now, braving the long trek into town to see if they can raid a store for supplies. Sam’s rummaging through the remnants of their hunters’ lore books—turns out even when you retire, you stay a paranoid asshole and you keep all your reference stuff around.

Cas pats Dean’s ankle. His fingers brush bare skin where Dean’s jeans are riding up; it’s so hot Dean can’t bring himself to put on shoes or socks. “I wondered if you needed help.”

Dean snorts around a laugh. “That ship has sailed, don’cha think?”

Cas indulges him with a smile. “With the sink,” he says, “but no, it hasn’t. Not with you.”

The crooked tilt of Cas’ mouth has Dean sitting up straighter, easing himself a little closer. “You finally ready to spill the beans?”

“He claimed I should keep this a secret,” Cas says, “but I’m tired of secrets, aren’t you?”

A knot loosens somewhere in Dean’s chest. He doesn’t shift out from under the weight of Cas’ hand on his leg. “Yeah. I think reapers just like to mess with us anyway. I mean, what happens after you die is supposed to be the biggest secret ever, right?”

Cas chuckles. Dean gets a little zing of triumph in his belly every time he makes Cas laugh. “Right.” He hesitates.

Dean nudges Cas’ knee with his calf.

“I’m, ah—special. Apparently.” Cas actually looks embarrassed, which is fun and new.

“Duh,” Dean says with a grin. “Tell me something I don’t know.”

If Dean didn’t know better, he’d think Cas was about to blush. “Not like that.” His expression clears, goes serious. “According to Billie—and this is her area of expertise—I have something no other angel she’s seen has.”

“A heart,” Dean suggests.

“A soul.”

“A—what.” Not the most tactful reaction. Dean stares for a second, then clears his throat. “Like… the thing humans have. Like the thing Amara puts on her Wheaties.”

He earns a second laugh from Cas, who ducks his head. “Sort of. Well, yes, actually. Like the thing humans have.”

“I thought that was the point of you having grace.”

Cas spreads his hands. “I have that, too, but I haven’t always. You’ve seen that for yourself.”
Yeah, point. Cas, rumpled and exhausted, taking spontaneous naps in the back of the Impala while the world tried to end around them. Cas in a blue vest and a slightly wrinkled white shirt, taking steady hands to an endless series of mundane tasks. Cas, sick on the fumes of rotting, stolen grace, going out of his way to take care of Dean like always.

“So—what, you grew a soul to compensate?”

“Something like that.”

“C’mon.”

Cas laces his fingers together in his lap. There’s dirt caked into the seams of his borrowed jeans. “I don’t completely understand it. A soul shouldn’t have the ability to spring into existence in an angel—they’re creations of our Father. You’ve seen how powerful they are.” He lets out a small breath. “But in the absence of my grace, and in the… increasing presence of my attraction to humanity, well.”

Dean feels the corners of his mouth twitching upward. “You like us,” he says.

He’ll never totally get used to the way Cas looks right into him sometimes, dead-on and solemn. “I love this world. I love the living works of art that inhabit it.”

A shiver crawls up alongside Dean’s spine. “Okay, so—awesome. You have a soul.”

“The beginnings of one, at least.”

“What’s the upshot?”

A couple rooms away, Sam’s muttering just loud enough for Dean to hear. Cas readjusts the way his fingers are tangled up, and Dean spots dried blood under one of his fingernails. He doesn’t point it out.

“I’m—unique,” Cas says, “in the strictest sense of that word. There’s never, not that I can remember and not that Billie can remember, been a living creature in simultaneous possession of both grace and a soul.”

“Well, shit,” Dean says.

“Agreed.” Cas’ jaw is set. “You’ve seen how easy it is for me to channel my grace into destruction right now. Acts of creation and renewal are… more difficult. I’ve had to draw on this fledgling soul of mine for that power.

“Billie seems to think I can coax my soul, half-formed as it is, into completing its genesis. And that if I do, using its power to fuel my grace can help us reopen the gates of Heaven and enlist the help of the angels to reverse what Amara has done to creation.”

Dean really hates angels, but he hates apocalypses more. “Sold,” he says. “How do we do that? How do you do that?”

Cas rubs at a smear of unidentified grime tucked under his jawline. He seems nervous, almost human with his fidgeting. “I’ve tried various approaches,” he says, “but there’s only one that’s worked consistently. It’s what I did when I convinced the Impala to keep running.” He hesitates, but not long enough for Dean to jump in, and then: “I’m trying to come to terms with the fact that I’m in love with you.”
“No,” Dean says, the word riding out of his mouth on the wave of terror rising in his gut, “you’re not.”

It’s been a while since Cas looked at him like that. Like he’s a bug one wrong move away from getting squashed. “I am.” He pushes himself to his feet, and Dean’s staring up at him, the shadow of stubble on the underside of his jaw and the sheen of drying sweat gilding the hollow of his throat. “I have been for a long time.”

Dean scrambles up. His limbs feel too heavy. “You can’t—Cas, come on.”

“I can,” Cas says. His voice is like steel. “Do me the courtesy of believing me, please.”

There’s another version of this scene playing out somewhere in the multiverse. He’s doing everything right; he’s smiling and he’s palming the solid angle of Cas’ hipbone where it pokes out above denim and he’s pulling Cas in for their first kiss, long-awaited and salty and sweet.

He’s not that Dean Winchester. He’s the one who wore the Mark of Cain until it twisted him into a monster. He’s the one who wanted to say yes, please, take me every time Amara offered him the peace of oblivion. He’s the one who fucked up so thoroughly that the whole world is fading into nonexistence while he watches from the sidelines.

Yeah, he’s not the Dean who gets to go along with it when Cas thinks he loves him. He’s the asshole who laughs and says, “Well, then you’ve got real crappy taste.”

The raw look on Cas’ face is like a brewing storm. “A long time,” he repeats. “Years. Since I first touched you in Hell, and after that. I’ve fallen in love with you anew more times than I can count.”

There’s no air left in Dean’s lungs. “Please don’t.”

“Don’t you think I’ve tried not to—”

“Hey,” Sam says, leaning against the kitchen doorframe, “I think I found some cool early lore about the Mark of Cain hidden in all this stuff. You wanna check it out, Cas?”

Cas stares helplessly at Dean. He stares back.

“Guys?”

“Good talk,” Dean says.

They leave the next morning. If you can call it morning when there’s no sunrise anymore. Jesse and Cesar look a little less beaten down than they did on their arrival. Things are still crappy, and Dean’s apparently too emotionally fucked to do whatever it takes to make them better, but he’s not gonna tell them that. The weary smile on Cesar’s face wipes the words clean off his tongue. You’re a coward, Dean tells himself as he shakes Jesse’s hand, their calluses bristling against each other.

Dean can’t look at Cas; even thinking about the soft hurt shaping Cas’ expression the day before feels like knifing himself in the gut.

Cas loves him. Okay, no: Cas is in love with him. He’s apparently trying to come to terms with it. He
apparently needs that to finish growing a soul.

Dean’s trying real hard to avoid thinking about what that’s supposed to mean. Whether all the times Cas rewarded him with a smile, or their hands brushed, or Cas did something stupid on his behalf, if that was all nurturing the stirring beginnings of a totally new soul. He doesn’t think loving him should be an act capable of that kind of raw creation.

Jesse says he heard tell in town of storms out east, so that’s where the Impala’s headed. They could all do with a break from the heat; even the leather of the car’s seats takes hours to cool off all the way after they hit the road.

They pass their first corpse on their way out of New Mexico. Okay, not their first corpse—Dean saw his first corpse when he was four years old. But the first corpse of this apocalypse. Just some guy propped up against the side of a Jeep pulled crookedly over into the shoulder. The dead man’s feet almost stick out into the road, but not quite. It’s still hot as Hades, and the cloud of flies buzzing around the guy’s head disperse only for a split-second as they tear past in the Impala. Almost immediately, they’re back, enveloping him in shimmering black.

Dean’s stomach churns. This is one man, dead along one back-country highway in a neglected corner of the United States. There’ve gotta be more. The heat, the disappearance of resources, the inability to communicate with any kind of reliability.

When he checks the rearview, Cas isn’t looking at him. He’s watching the scenery rush by out the window, his cheek to the glass.

He can’t get Cas’ hands out of his head. The weight of Cas’ fingers on his ankle, just curling around his leg. The sureness of his hands as they touched the Impala’s innards and brought her back to life. The nervous little twitches they’d made as he told Dean I’m in love with you.

They’re hauling ass somewhere around the northern part of Texas, their tank of gas running low but still in business, when the Impala gives up the ghost. Again.

Dean doesn’t spare a glance for Cas as he rolls up his sleeves and marches to pop open the hood. He doesn’t want to know what he’d see there. His chest hurts remembering the icy fury that’d crept onto Cas’ features, wiping out the naked hope of his confession a minute or two before.

It’s not like it comes as a surprise when there’s nothing wrong that he can find. The engine’s still warm and he can’t linger, can’t really bury himself in the car’s guts like he usually would—but he knows this piece of machinery better than he knows his own mind. Dean’s a skeptic, sure, but he’s a skeptic who knows that monsters and angels are real, and he knows that he can tell with a touch when there’s something mechanical wrong with his car and when it’s something deeper than that.

He slumps under the hood. Even when she can’t run, the Impala gives him a little shade against the blistering heat, and he’s grateful.

“Dean.”

Shame flickers weakly in Dean’s gut. He’s too used to that feeling. “Hi, Cas.”

Cas is wearing a T-shirt Jesse gave him, plain white with the NASA logo faded almost to nothingness where it stretches across his chest. A bead of sweat clings to the side of his nose. He doesn’t look angry anymore. He just looks tired. “I don’t think you can fix her,” he says.

“That’s fucked,” Dean spits. “I can always fix her. This is my car, Cas.”
“And much more than that,” Cas agrees. He reaches up and taps his fingertips to the steel of the hood where it arches over their heads. Dean catches a glimpse of dark hair at his underarm, sweat gathered thinly there too. “It’s not a failing on your part.”

“I get that.” A headache’s starting to gather at the base of Dean’s neck. “I mean. Things are just dying.”

Cas nods. “From what I can feel, the newer things fell faster. Cell phones, computers. Televisions. But the universe is incredibly old.” He squints away into the glaring sunlight for a second. “This car is brand new by most standards. It shouldn’t function at all, but of course you know it’s not just a car.”

Dean’s a selfish asshole, so he asks, “Can you fix it?”

Cas’ gaze drops to the asphalt. The hint of a sunburn colors the rises of his cheekbones. “Theoretically.”

“Theoretically? The hell does that mean?”

Cas’ hands twitch into fists at his sides. “Don’t act stupid, Dean.”

There’s the shame again, unfurling wider, digging its claws in behind Dean’s sternum. He should apologize. Hell, he should get down on his knees and grovel, he thinks.

The words stick in his throat, too dry and too humiliating to make it into the air. He swallows them down, hard. “Okay.”

There’s a click and a distant mumble of irritation that must signify Sam getting out of the car as the sun heats her up beyond what’s comfortable even for Sam, who always wants the A/C turned lower. He doesn’t show up to hover, at least; he’s not dumb. He must have figured out something’s broken even worse than usual between Dean and Cas.

Cas lifts an eyebrow. “Dean?”

Dean wants to reach down and touch Cas’ hands. He wants to draw the taut tension out of his arms. He takes a quick deep breath instead. “If you—uh.”

Cas is too quick on the draw, the way he always is when Dean wishes he wouldn’t be. “If I love you,” he says. “Which I do.” His mouth twitches for a moment. “No matter how angry you’re making me. Which is very.”

The tips of Dean’s ears burn with embarrassment. He coughs. “Right, if you—love me. How does that, uh. What does that have to do with…”

Cas softens, at least a little. The corner of his mouth twitches again, but it comes close to a smile. “Souls are human. What’s more human than love?”

“War,” Dean offers. “Greed. Fast food.”

“Sure,” Cas says. “Those are human, too. But not like this.” The edges of his voice are hoarse. It hits Dean that he’s never seen Cas cry, never even seen him come close. “Not like this—completely irrational need for you. Not like the way I want you.”

“Jesus.”
“Not a bad example, actually.”

Dean snorts out a laugh. “That makes it more confusing. Word on the street is that guy was all about love.”

“Yes,” Cas says. “And he was human.” He lets out a long breath, his hands uncurling. “This isn’t—the love I was taught was so lofty, it was hardly more than theoretical. We were asked to love creation for itself, but not too much. To admire our father’s work without losing our sense of duty in the process.”

If there was ever an angel who lost his sense of duty… shit. “You do love creation,” Dean says, “but.”

“But,” Cas agrees, “not like this.” He touches the crook of Dean’s elbow. His hand is cool against Dean’s skin, which is overheated in the pounding sun. “Yes, I think humanity is beautiful. No—I don’t think it. I know it. But,” he repeats. He swallows, and the movement of his throat makes Dean’s skin prickle. “But I think you, in particular, are beautiful. I think you’re a miracle. And I know I’m in love with you in the most selfish, stupid, human way possible.”

“Oh, fuck,” Dean says.

Cas smiles. He walks his fingertips up the sweat-slick slope of Dean’s arm, over his shoulder. He touches Dean’s cheek, and his thumb brushes the corner of Dean’s mouth. “I told you so.”

There’s a bead of sweat sliding down the angle of Cas’ jaw. Dean’s dizzy watching it track its way through thickening stubble. His chest hurts. “You’re an asshole,” he says, and it comes out like I don’t deserve you.

Cas’ smile broadens. He leans his hip against the Impala’s bumper, and she shudders. The engine catches and comes to life. “See?” Cas says. “Love.”

The moment stretches on between them while the car purrs. Dean thinks about pushing back the single curl of damp hair that’s going all Clark Kent on Cas’ forehead.

“Holy shit!” Sam finally shows up. He’s given up in the onslaught of gross stickiness and tied his hair back, which Dean’ll never tell him actually looks kinda good on him. “You guys coming back in or what? I’ll drive.”

Dean lets him. His whole nervous system is buzzing and he doesn’t trust himself behind the wheel.

They find Billie again at a Wal-Mart in Missouri. It’s one of the huge ones that used to be open twenty-four hours; you could walk in and ruin the day of any one of a handful of dead-eyed part-time wage slaves. Dean’s been to one of these in every damn state in the continental U.S.

The parking lot’s a wasteland. It gives Dean the creeps, but they’re all three thirsty as hell and hoping against hope that the remote location of this place means there might be some bottled water left kicking around. Dean doesn’t mention it, but he’d kill for a beer, too.

It should be like all of the big box stores they’ve hit up on their way through the half-dead country. Barren and mostly deserted, the shelves picked clean by the desperation that turns taxpayers into thieves. No lights, no employees, just the smell of rotting Lean Cuisine, the electronics department with its piles of useless equipment the only section of the store still intact.
This one’s a little different. They shoulder open the sliding doors that aren’t motion-activated anymore, their hands sticky with grime and dried sweat, and a cool rush of air-conditioning that shouldn’t exist anymore blasts them right in the face. Dean hears a bank of freezers and fridges humming tunelessly a couple yards away.

“What?” Sam says stupidly.

“Oh, there you are.” Billie smiles at them. She’s unruffled, not a hair out of place. The way she’s stationed right next to the door makes Dean want to ask her to help him find something.

“Ah,” says Linda Tran from half a foot to Billie’s left, a glint in her eye and her hand outstretched like she was a politician in a previous life, “there you three are. I was starting to think you’d never get here.”

She looks good. Better than any of them do. Her hair’s clean, her clothes aren’t torn or stained, and she’s actually rocking the combat boots and cargo pants like she was born for it. Dean’s not surprised.

Cas is the first one to recover. “We had to make a detour,” he says.

Billie looks between them as if she can see everything that’s gone twisted and weird at a glance. She probably can. Her mouth curls into another smile. “Things are pretty hairy down in New Mexico, eh?”

“Things are hairy everywhere,” Sam says. He turns in a slow circle, his chin tipped back so he can take in the fluorescent lighting. The cylindrical bulbs flicker a little every few seconds, but they’re on, and it’s a sight Dean’s seen about a million times in his life, but right now it feels like a minor miracle. “How the hell?”

Linda’s smile is so smug it would be obnoxious if she hadn’t totally earned it. “You just have to get creative. Electricity isn’t the only way to get power.”

Billie’s smile slants into a smirk directed right at Cas. “Ain’t that the truth,” she says.

Something softens just a little around Linda’s eyes. Dean thinks she might be happy to see them. “You look like shit,” she says.

“Gee, thanks,” Sam says.

The crinkles around her eyes deepen some more as she smiles. “I can help with that.”

Linda’s more than happy to give them the tour. As they walk through the aisles, Billie trailing at their heels like the ghost of apocalypse past, more people come out of the woodworks. All kinds: teenagers, elderly women, guys who look like they used to be businessmen and who handle the guns that’ve fallen into their hands with so much trepidation it makes Dean bite back laughter. The building’s huge, big enough for a football field and a half, and every other aisle’s hiding someone napping or reading a mass-market Nicholas Sparks book or polishing a gun.

“This is amazing,” Sam tells her.

“I used to think,” Linda says, “when Kevin was small, about what—well, I was going insane, you know. Trapped in the house with this baby. I thought, what if all the things he’s going to fear come true? What if the monsters come? What will I do?”

Her expression is steely as they round the corner to the home improvement section. A middle-aged
“Well, I was right.” Linda laughs, or something close to it. “And all the endless hours of thinking, ah, I’ll colonize the twenty-four-hour Wal-Mart, I’ll barricade it like this and ration food supplies like that—they weren’t completely pointless fantasy after all, were they? When he was almost grown, and he vanished, it all came back to me. And then again, when he died—and again, now.”

Something itchy catches in Dean’s throat. He coughs. “Is Kevin… you know?”

Her eyebrows go up. “No. He was fading anyway.” She clears her throat. “He did good things before he went. He was proud of himself.”

Dean drags in a slow breath.

“We’re proud of him, too,” Sam says.

Linda doesn’t smile, but the iron set of her shoulders melts into something looser. “Damn right you are.” She inclines her head toward the plumbing section. “Go take a shower.”

“He’s taking kind of a long time in there.”

Dean grunts his acknowledgment as he drops Sam’s duffel bag down next to him. Even the five-minute trip to the parking lot has him feeling kinda grimy all over again. “Cas likes showers,” he says. “Guess he needs ’em now more than he used to.”

Sam’s whole expression perks up a little. “This whole setup is amazing. I’m actually not sure how they’re getting hot water.”

He’s not wrong. It ain’t the Ritz, but it’s a damn sight nicer than the hunched-over sponge baths they’ve been taking by the side of the road. Linda’s people have repurposed the sample shower and bath units, strung up plastic curtains for some privacy, and routed actual, genuine hot water into them. It’s like a patchwork version of a gym shower, but they’ve got the whole toiletries section on lock and all bets are off. Dean swiped the fanciest shampoo he could find off the shelf; he’s gonna smell like coconuts for a few days running, if he has any say in it.

“Some kinda magic?” Dean suggests. He doesn’t exactly want to think about it, but he knows Linda.

“Well, duh.” Sam tucks his hair—freshly washed and loose—behind his ears. He’s curled up with his back against a ratty purple boyfriend pillow, and he’s already starting to sprawl, his belongings spread out in a loose ring around himself. Phone chargers, half-filled notebooks. Dean doesn’t even know how Sam accumulates all this crap. “I just want to know what kind.”

Dean slides down next to him. The edge of a shelf digs in under his shoulder blade. “Don’t suppose there’s wi-fi here.”

“Guess magic doesn’t go that far.”

“Aw, chin up.” Dean kicks Sam’s thigh across the linoleum floor of the aisle. The lighting flickers hard overheard.

“I’m trying.” Sam fixes Dean with a hard look, one that says, So you better do the same. “You know, I keep wanting to…”
There’s a million ways Sam could end that sentence. Dean knows how he’d end it: *Get my shit together or call Charlie or give the fuck up and wrap the Impala around a tree.* It gives him a cold feeling in his gut that he doesn’t know what Sam’s getting at. He’s supposed to know Sam better than this.

They’re hurtling toward the edge again, one more time on the most fucked-up merry-go-round in creation, and he doesn’t even know what it is that Sam’s holding onto other than him. It can’t be just him—Dean’s not digging in hard enough to keep himself there, much less anyone else.

“Yeah,” he says. “Me too.”

Sam, arms hooked around his knees, gives Dean a split-second’s smile. “You guys are gonna be okay,” he says, “though you might wanna hurry it up.”

It takes Dean a second to figure out that Sam’s talking about Cas. Hell, about him and Cas. Like Sam’s offering him an out, saying, *Hey, you might not get me and maybe you never will, but don’t forget about the other guy, the one who’s in love with you.* He’d say something—he’d probably protest, argue that there’s nothing there that needs fixing—but by then Cas is there, wearing University of Missouri sweatpants, green flip-flops, and a towel around his neck.

He doesn’t greet them. That’s a human thing, announcing your arrival, and Cas never picked it up. Or maybe just hasn’t picked it up yet. His face is flushed pink, his hair is damp, and his chest is bare.

“It’s benevolent, mostly,” Cas says. He grabs one end of his towel and scrubs at a droplet of water that’s been clinging to the bridge of his nose. “Mrs. Tran has done her research and she’s trained these people well.”

“Jesus.” Dean laughs a little, slumping so the shelf pokes into the nape of his neck instead of his shoulders. “Linda and her army of witches.”

Sam’s turn to laugh. “I think if Rowena was here, she’d remind you that the *proper* word is coven.”

The corner of Cas’ mouth twitches upward. “I’m sure she would. Whatever it is, it’s not dark magic as far as I can sense it.”

“And you can sense it?” Dean asks.

Cas hesitates a moment, but Dean thinks it’s a fair question. The nature of Cas’ power is changing faster than Dean can keep track. “Yeah,” Cas says, “I can. I don’t think it will last forever, but I’m sure Mrs. Tran is aware of that.”

“This is incredible either way.” Sam nestles back further into the confines of his pilfered pillow. “Wish we could give Jesse and Cesar a call. Hell, Jody and the girls too.”

“Yeah.” Dean can think of dozens of people he’d call here if he could. Maybe they’d all die anyway, hunkered down in a cheaply-constructed corporate hellscape, but they’d die together.

In the resulting silence, Cas’ stomach rumbles. He blinks and touches a hand to his belly, long fingers pressed to naked skin. “Oh,” he says. “I guess I’m capable of hunger right now.”

“There’s food,” Sam says. He points, indicating a section all the way across the store. “Linda said they used up what was left of the perishable stuff when they got here, but it’s a giant location. There’s gotta be some beans and rice and Spaghetti-Os left.”

Dean drags himself to his feet. There’s a crick in his back. He’s exhausted down to the marrow of his
bones, but restlessness prickles all up and down his spine. Sam’s right: he and Cas have unfinished business, and they don’t have all the time in the world. They barely have any time at all.

“Come on,” he tells Cas. “Put on a shirt and I’ll make you dinner.”

“You got a preference?”

Asking Cas this stuff this late in the game feels stupid. Dean knows the guy, knows his mannerisms and his principles, but he doesn’t know what toppings he’d prefer on his frozen pizza. Better late than never, maybe.

Cas rubs at his chin with one hand. He’s got a major five o’clock shadow; Dean wonders if he should point it out. He wonders if he should offer to give Cas a hand with shaving it off, or let him keep it. It doesn’t look too bad. “I don’t know if I do,” Cas says finally. He gives Dean a sidelong look. “Your brother likes pineapple on his pizza.”

Dean doesn’t ask how Cas knows that, but he does pull an exaggerated face of disgust. “Yeah, ’cause Sammy’s got the shittiest taste in pizza this side of a Papa John’s.”

“Of course.” Cas yanks open the freezer door, blasting them both in the face with cold air. “Meat lover’s? That sounds like it’s to your taste.”

Heat creeps into Dean’s cheeks for no good reason. “Sure. This place got a microwave?”

Cas smiles, a crooked thing Dean almost wants to classify as smug. “Yes,” he says. He balances the cardboard container on the palm of his hand. “But you don’t need one.” The sizzling noise that follows is audible, and Dean actually laughs.

“You goddamn showoff.”

“True.” Cas sits, cross-legged, like he’s not holding a steaming-hot pizza in his hands. He slides it out and sets the whole thing on top of its box. Grease drips through the cracks between the slices, down the sides of the box onto the floor. “It’s easy around you.”

Dean’s whole body is heavy. He sits across from Cas and snags a slice of pizza for something to do with his hands. “How—?”

“Like I said.” Cas contemplates the pie between them. He picks a piece of pepperoni off the top and pops it in his mouth. “You make it easy. Even when you’re being stubborn. I look at you.”

An awkward pause hangs in the air between them. “And?” Dean tries.

“Like I said.” Cas contemplates the pie between them. He picks a piece of pepperoni off the top and pops it in his mouth. “You make it easy. Even when you’re being stubborn. I look at you.”

Dean takes another bite of pizza. He was hungry, he knows he was, but he doesn’t much register the taste. Just the shine of grease on Cas’ lower lip and the shapes of Cas’ eyelids. “And that’s easy?”

Cas chuckles. “No,” he says, “that’s not the easy part.” He takes a bite for himself. His throat moves when he swallows. “It’s effortless, but not easy. What’s easy is—now that Billie has taught me to see it, sensing the way my soul responds to the feeling.”
“Dude, you can feel your own soul?”

“Sort of.” Cas looks a little rueful. “I couldn’t if I didn’t have my grace as well. I can see the way it blossoms and grows when I—well, I love you and when I realize that I do.” He keeps his attention on the slice of pizza that’s disappearing into his mouth.

Dean tries to pick up a second piece of pizza, but his hands are shaking. His heart’s pounding a hollow rhythm in his ears. “Cas—”

Cas speaks quietly. “Do me the courtesy of believing me, Dean.”

The thump of Dean’s pulse almost drowns out the atonal buzz of the fridges and the lights overhead. The air smells like cheap reheated pizza and the fluorescent glare bouncing off the endless glass casings draws dark circles under Cas’ eyes.

With his grace still intact, Cas could hotwire a car and fuck off anytime. He could go wait out the end in Vegas, or at the Grand Canyon, or playing skee-ball on the boardwalk.

But he’s here. He’s hunched over a crappy meal in the frozen foods aisle of a Wal-Mart in the middle of the United States, college football sweatpants clinging to his thighs and stubble growing in thick along the line of his jaw. He’s here, one human body housing an ancient grace and a newborn soul, and Dean is such a piece of shit.

“Hey,” Dean says.

Cas’ chin lifts. His hair’s starting to dry, curling a little off his forehead.

Dean tips forward and kisses him.

Cas’ mouth tastes like pizza and like toothpaste, just a little, and like human most of all. It feels like any other kiss, except those are Cas’ hands, broad and sure and trembling when he cups Dean’s face. He kisses Dean like he’s starving for it, his tongue curling behind Dean’s teeth and his pinky fingers curling under Dean’s jaw.

Oh, Dean thinks distantly. Oh, fuck. He drags Cas into a second kiss the moment the first has stopped. The nape of Cas’ neck is still just slightly damp under Dean’s palm and so warm; when his hand slides below Cas’ collar, Cas’ spine rises up even and solid like a cobblestone road under the pads of his fingers.

Cas is saying his name, he realizes.

“Yeah,” Dean says. He doesn’t get how Cas can look this good under lighting this shitty.

“Tell me,” Cas says. There’s a raw edge to his voice. “Tell me you believe me.”

Dean’s chest and throat are tight. “I believe you.”

“Dean.” It’s a warning, but not a threat.

It shouldn’t feel like such an impossible gamble. Dean knows it; he’s heard Cas say it more than once in the past couple days. In total honesty, he’s known it for way longer than that.

Cas strokes the hair behind Dean’s ears with his fingertips, and Dean’s breath comes quicker. “You love me,” he says. It’s a sorry excuse for a confession, but it makes Cas smile and like magic, it closes the distance between them again. Dizzy with the fact that Cas is kissing him, Dean wonders if
he could get close enough to feel the unfurling growth of Cas’ soul. If he could push their kisses so wide and open and long that he tastes it.

Cas’ mouth is hot and more insistent now. He cradles the back of Dean’s head, long fingers cupping his skull. He kisses with his whole body, all of him caught up in it: he uses his knee to shove the food away and then he’s on Dean, kneeling over him so their thighs touch and the heat of his chest bleeds through the thin fabric of their T-shirts.

“Dean,” he says. Nothing close to a warning this time. Cas says his name like it’s an endearment in and of itself, like it’s a fresh revelation every time he presses it to the hollow under Dean’s ear. He noses at Dean’s throat, mouths at the slope where his neck meets his shoulder, and Dean’s grabbing at him like a fumbling teenager in the back of a movie theater. It’s embarrassing, or it will be later: he shoves his hand up Cas’ shirt, following the path of his vertebrae, petting the fine, soft hairs at the small of his back.

Overhead, the lights blaze dazzlingly bright for a solid thirty seconds or so. Dean blinks, seeing kaleidoscope shapes behind his eyelids, and Cas huffs out a laughing breath, kissing Dean’s ear. “Oops,” Cas says. “Can you feel it?”

“Feel what?”

Cas’ eyes gleam, rings of blue around dilated black. “It’s working. Isn’t it incredible?”

The pit of Dean’s stomach curdles. His lips feel bruised with the force of Cas’ kisses. “It’s… working?”

Cas wets his lips with his tongue. Dean recognizes it as a gesture of his own, something Cas probably picked up from watching him, and he feels sick. “We need to stop what Amara’s done,” Cas says.

For a handful of syrupy moments, Dean had forgotten about that. “Yeah.” He wipes his mouth on the back of his hand and doesn’t watch the shift in Cas’ expression as he climbs to his feet. He’s cold for the first time in weeks. “Yeah, we do.”
“Okay,” Dean says. “Show me.”

Sam’s still looking at him warily. “Dean, you hate witches.”

“Mrs. Tran’s not a witch,” Dean points out. “It’s fine.”

Linda watches them bemusedly, her hand on her hip. “I’m not an experienced witch,” she says, “but that’s neither here nor there. I can’t rely on the internet to outsource my need for magical power anymore, so here we are.” She pushes the door open with her shoulder.

*Here* is the Wal-Mart break room, its Employees Only sign crudely altered with a permanent marker to read Magic Users Only instead. It doesn’t look like much, just a couple of crappy plastic folding tables and chairs shoved together at the edge of the room under the circuit board, whose door has been wrenched off the hinges and propped against the wall. The tables are home to an assembly of herbs, incense sticks, half-melted candles, and symbols that Dean recognizes immediately as an altar.

“This?” he says stupidly.

Linda rolls her eyes. “It’s working, isn’t it?”

“Can’t argue with that,” Sam says. They really can’t: all three of them took showers again this morning, just because they could. All the phones, tablets, and computers in the electronics department are still pretty useless—apparently magic can only go so far—but Dean spent a while after breakfast dicking around with a vacuum cleaner for the fun of it. He likes the *whoosh* and the satisfaction as dust bunnies disappear.

“Okay, so how does it work?”

A smug look creeps onto Linda’s face. “I figured if everything else was failing, I’d harness what we do have. We don’t have to be in its presence for the witchcraft to draw on the power of the sun. Which we have in spades, obviously.”

“Understatement.” Sam rubs at the back of his neck, the spot where Dean knows he’s been nursing the beginnings of a sunburn. “This is really—this is amazing, Mrs. Tran. How did you find these people, anyway?”

She shrugs, mouth quirked into a wry smile. “Strays. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but anyone with the resources has been on the move. People pass through.”

Dean can still see that first dead body, baking on the side of the road halfway through an escape attempt. Except there’s nowhere to escape. “How hard is it to maintain all this?”

“Right now, not very. Anyone can do witchcraft if they know how to follow instructions.”

Sam leans in, hovering what Dean would consider uncomfortably close to the ring of candles at the center of the altar. “So… could you go bigger?”

“It’s not gonna work,” Billie says from the doorway. The light streaming in from behind her makes her look bigger than she is, like she’s looming over them until she steps inside. “Nice thinking, though.”
Linda frowns. Dean has the idea that the two women have been getting along pretty well up until now, but Linda looks genuinely offended. “You don’t know that,” she says.

“I didn’t say you couldn’t go bigger than what you have now,” Billie says. She crosses her arms, her attention obviously raking up along Linda’s whole body. “I just happen to know what Sammy here was getting at. And I also happen to know it’s not going to work.”

“Come on,” Sam says, sounding faintly insulted.

“What he said.” Linda always has great posture, but you could use her spine as a ruler right about now.

“You can’t stop Amara with witchcraft.” Billie shrugs, a half-assed apology of a gesture.

“She’s right,” Cas says over Billie’s shoulder. He doesn’t look at Dean, and Dean feels about two pathetic inches tall. He’s clean-shaven, so apparently he didn’t need Dean’s help with that after all. “This is extremely clever,” he acknowledges, and Linda shoots Billie a little smile, “but it’s not going to work forever. It only works now because witchcraft is such an ancient practice.”

“Ugh,” Linda says, enunciating the word until it’s about three full syllables. “Two immortals at the same time is too many.”

“You ain’t seen nothin’,” Dean grumbles. At least the humans still outnumber the all-knowing bullshit-spouters in the room.

“No one’s immortal anymore.” Billie grasps Linda’s elbow. “I’m just trying to keep you people from getting your hopes up.”

“Right.” Dean scrubs at his face with the heel of his palm. He didn’t sleep too hot last night. There’s a tiny blood-hot bruise under his left ear, a reminder of the fervor of Cas’ affections before the thing they had going hopped on the bandwagon with the rest of the world and fell apart. “Wouldn’t want any hope around here.”

Billie holds her hands up as if wrongly accused. “I’ve been helping you people.”

She’s not wrong. Dean sneaks a glance at Cas, who looks even more exhausted than he did last night. The new bareness of his jaw just makes him seem younger. “Well, it’s not working.”

Sam and Linda’s heads both snap up. Sam’s eyes narrow. “What’s not working?” he asks.

Billie chuckles. “I can’t believe the fate of the universe has come down to Dean Winchester being an idiot.” She pauses, then hums under her breath and adds, “Actually, I can.”

“Not even remotely surprising,” Linda says flatly. She raises an eyebrow at Dean. “What are you doing this time?”

Dean draws in a quick, steadying breath. “I don’t know,” he lies.

“Dean,” Sam says. He’s doing that thing where he pulls his eyebrows together and his forehead wrinkles and Dean wants to do whatever it takes to make it okay for him, because that’s what Dean does.

“Dean.” That one’s Cas. Quiet and low. He used to like the way Cas says his name, the way it rolls out of Cas’ throat letter by letter like it’s something important. “We don’t have many options here.”
Dean Winchester’s no coward. He faces his shit head-on. He hacks and slashes and shoots his way through it. But God, the hesitation on Cas’ face. The earnest inquiry on Sam’s. Linda and Billie’s twin gazes burning holes in his chest.

He turns tail and runs.

The Impala starts for him, thank fuck. She comes through when he needs her. The leather’s inferno-hot and the engine sounds like it’s running through a couple layers of sweat and molasses, but she starts, and she peels out of the Wal-Mart parking lot with barely any fuss.

He’s not going anywhere. East, maybe. The abandoned cars scattered by the sides of the road don’t gleam in the sun anymore; the rust is setting in fast, faster than is natural. Dean doesn’t look too close at any of them. He doesn’t want to see what might still be sitting behind their steering wheels.

Tepid air scrapes his cheeks and ruffles his hair through his rolled-down window. It doesn’t get cold no matter how hard he leans on the gas pedal.

He passes at least a baker’s dozen of rusted-out wrecks before he swerves into the closest rest stop. There’s no one there, nothing but a couple empty Doritos bags knocking around sluggishly in what passes for a breeze these days. The second he turns the Impala off, sweat starts prickling under his armpits and at the back of his neck again.

The vending machines are empty, the glass long broken. Dean peels off his button-down, drops to the crackling yellow grass next to the single provided picnic table, and presses his forehead into his knees so hard that it starts to hurt. The insides of his eyelids feel cracked and bruised, like he hasn’t slept in a decade. The base of his spine hurts. He’s scared as hell that he’s never gonna get to kiss Cas again, and even more terrified of what’ll happen if he does.

If things were normal, Dean would give Sam a call right about now. The way things are, he hasn’t touched the lump that used to be his phone in about a week. It’s rattling around somewhere in the bottom of a duffel bag that’s stuffed onto an empty metal shelf back at the Wal-Mart.

Jesus, they went from living in a Men of Letters bunker rich with history to camping out in the aisles of a Wal-Mart that was probably built in a matter of months.

Dean licks his lips. He can’t taste anything but the Hostess cupcake he had for breakfast, but he can remember the way Cas tasted. The weight of Cas’ hands on his shoulders and the solidity of Cas’ thighs bearing down on his own.

He should have kissed Cas years ago. Should have confessed himself when Cas was Emmanuel and so soft and approachable in his fucking sweater. He should have taken the chance every time he wanted to find out how Cas’ beard would feel against his cheeks in Purgatory.

“Fine,” he tells the tattered, empty Skittles bag that’s rattling around where it’s half-trapped under the leg of the picnic bench. “You’re right. Asshole.”

The Impala’s muggy inside, stupidly humid. Dean wipes some sweat off his forehead and turns the key in the ignition. She sputters, then the sound dies.

“Fuck,” he says to the empty car. It doesn’t have an answer for him. Instinctively, he pats at his pocket for his phone, which still isn’t there. “Fuck,” he says again, “I’m an idiot.”
Three long hours pass. The sun rolls slowly across the sky, and Dean stretches out under the picnic table to doze. His throat’s dry, parched, but after the first bottle of water he drains, there’s nothing left to quench his thirst.

That’s how Cas finds him: head pillowed on his bare arms, fresh sweat breaking out every time the last crop dries. Heat-dazed and sheepish, Dean stares at Cas’ boots for too long before he figures out that he’s getting another rescue he doesn’t deserve.

“Shit.” Dean knuckles at his eyes. “Hi.”

Cas’ mouth twitches. Dean hopes it’s because he’s thinking about smiling, but he’s not optimistic. “You’re an idiot,” he says.

“I know.” Dean stumbles as he drags himself upright, and Cas catches him with a hand at his elbow. “Jesus, did you walk?”

Cas’ eyebrows quirk up. “How else would I have gotten here? It was only a few miles.”

“Shit.” Dean’s vision swims for a second. He shuts his eyes, but it doesn’t help; without Cas’ face to look at, all he can focus on is the points of contact where Cas’ fingers press to the skin at the inside of his elbow.

“Dean.” Cas’ voice drops and softens. His grip on Dean’s arm tightens. “Your brother and I talked. I explained to him that a lot is riding on something that should have been left as it was, a problem for me alone.”

“No, that’s not—” Dean coughs, his throat scratchy. He opens his eyes to Cas’ concerned squint and then two fingers to his forehead, a flow of cool relief down the center of him. His head clears. “It’s not just a problem for you.”

Some little muscle in Cas’ jaw jumps. “You seem to think it is.”

Dean licks his lips. Cas’ T-shirt is almost translucent with sweat. It should be gross. “It’s a problem because I should have gotten my shit together before we had this looming over our sorry asses in the first place, okay?” He curls two fingers through one of Cas’ belt loops.

“Your shit.” Cas says it like a question.

“Yeah, the shit where I’ve been hung up on you for so long I don’t remember what it feels like not to want you closer.” Dean tugs at Cas until he steps closer, his eyes wide. He smells like a guy who’s been walking for an hour, plus fading Wal-Mart shampoo. “The shit where I think about you all the time and where I’m such a jackass that I’ve been too scared out of my mind of fucking it up to start it in the first place.”

“Oh,” Cas says, “that shit.”

Dean’s laugh comes out a little like a sob. He touches Cas’ sun-reddened face, pushes his fingers into the damp curls at the back of Cas’ neck. He kisses Cas and tastes salt.

Cas comes alive against him like Dean’s flipped a switch. He’s all hands: palming at Dean’s hips, touching the small of his back, pushing up under Dean’s T-shirt to find bare skin. It shouldn’t feel good in this heat, but it does. Cas kisses him with his eyes closed and his mouth open and Dean sinks into it, into the slide of Cas’ tongue and the small noises he makes as they kiss.

Dean’s never been too good at apologies, so this is gonna have to do. He lets Cas nudge at him until
the backs of his knees hit the picnic bench seat, and a moment later he has a lapful of Cas, one thigh between Dean’s legs and the weight of him enough to make Dean groan and buck his hips up. His dick is already hard in his jeans, and when Cas jostles in closer, the press of shifting muscle draws a broken little moan out of the back of Dean’s throat.

“Dean.” Cas’ mouth moves against the hinge of Dean’s jaw. “You scared me, you know.”

“I scared myself,” Dean admits. Shivery heat floods him when Cas bears down on him and he feels the shape of Cas’ erection through his jeans.

“I need you,” Cas says, a raw rasp of a confession into the skin just under Dean’s ear, “to stay with us. To stay with me. Okay?”

“Okay.” With fumbling hands, Dean tips Cas’ face up to kiss him, whining into Cas’ open mouth as they realign one more time and their erections make a slow drag of friction against each other.

They throw caution to the wind. At least it’s the end of the world. No one’s here to see when Dean urges Cas out of his shirt, when Cas’ hand works into the front of Dean’s jeans, when Dean falls back with his elbows on the table, gasping as they move against each other. The Impala and a row of empty vending machines are the only witnesses to the frantic curl of Dean’s hands around the edge of the picnic bench, his aborted shudder as humid air brushes the leaking head of his erection.

Cas’ fingers are long and deft and cool against Dean’s overheated dick. He mouths at Cas’ throat and shifts restlessly, little twitches of his hips into Cas’ palm, until Cas pops the button of his fly and works his jeans down to his thighs and wraps his hand around them both. It’s big enough for that, big and broad enough to squeeze Dean tight and make them both whimper. He kisses Cas just to taste the shape of Cas’ moan.

“Please,” Dean says.

“Dean,” Cas says. He touches his forehead to Dean’s. Their noses bump, and they kiss again because it’s easy, because they can. “Yes.”
It feels so stupidly good, and Dean’s waited so stupidly long for this. He thrusts up into every twist and glide of Cas’ hand, panting into the wet heat of Cas’ mouth. They don’t talk, but they’re not quiet. Cas makes this gorgeous shocked noise every time their dicks catch just right against each other, and the raw sharpness of it sends sparks spiraling down Dean’s spine every damn time.

When Dean comes, his head falls back and his fingers dig into Cas’ bicep and Cas is ready; Cas pets his hair and murmurs in his ear and keeps jacking him through it, long and easy until he’s right there with Dean. Dean didn’t know how bad he wanted to see the pleasure-slack lines of Cas’ face mid-orgasm until this moment, and now he’s never gonna want to see anything else.

After, they’re still. Dean’s head is exquisitely blank. All he can think about is the rhythm of Cas’ fingers stroking the short hairs at the back of his neck. It’s too hot, but it’s always too hot, and he wants Cas right here.

A cool breeze stirs past, ruffling Cas’ hair.

Dean’s head snaps up. “Wait,” he says. “Was that—”

Cas looks as startled as he does. He looks down at himself, his sweat-shining bare chest and his softening dick hastily tucked back into his boxers. God, he’s beautiful. “I… don’t know. Maybe. Yes.”

There’s a hiccupping noise, and then the Impala roars to life a couple yards away.

“Uh,” Dean says. “Thank God she’s in park.”

Cas tucks his face into the side of Dean’s neck and laughs.

It’s a quick drive back to the Wal-Mart. They don’t talk. This thing, for all its supposed power and inevitability, feels like it could break apart at any second. But Cas holds Dean’s hand the whole time.
Chapter 7

Dean doesn’t want to look Sam in the eye. Sam has caught him mid-coitus, mid-jerkoff session, mid-every embarrassing act under the sun. And now here he is, looking at Dean, knowing something about the way Cas feels about him, and the tips of Dean’s ears burn.

“Sorry about that,” he says.

Sam met them right inside the sliding doors, his relief palpable. He’d glanced back and forth between Dean and Cas like he’d been looking for something.

“Don’t be sorry,” Sam says now. He hands Dean a bottle of Minute Maid with the cap already twisted off. “Just don’t do it again.”

Humiliation flickers in the pit of Dean’s stomach. He steals a look at Cas out of the corner of his eye while he slurps down some OJ. “I hear the cat’s out of the bag. About Cas’ whole… thing.”

“There were a couple cats in that bag,” Sam says. “Most of them got out a long time ago.”

“You didn’t say that earlier,” Cas says, apparently surprised.

Sam shrugs. “I’m not stupid. I’m actually pretty smart. It wasn’t my business, you know?”

Dean loves his smartass little brother. He lets his elbow bump Cas’ hip the next time he takes a drink. “Well, I’m, uh.” The skin at the back of his neck pricks with an oncoming sunburn. “I’m onboard with whatever we have to do. You can jump into the Pit to save the world, I guess I can deal with some nerd being, um. You know, I can handle this guy loving me.”

Cas gives him a sideways smile. Beads of sweat still dot the line of his jaw. “That’s very brave of you,” he says dryly.

Sam huffs out a laugh. “Let’s round up the reaper,” he says.

It’s only a short walk across an abandoned Wal-Mart and through the electronics department, previously a ghost town, but Cas is changing. Dean finishes his orange juice and he takes Cas’ hand, and Cas’ shoulders square. His spine straightens. The too-much-sun flush leaves his cheeks and the sweat evaporates from his shirt.

He looks damn good. Dean rubs his thumb against the side of Cas’ palm, feeling daring, and as a smile pulls at Cas’ mouth, a whole row of dead laptops flickers to life one computer screen at a time.

They still need to talk about a lot of things, but the warmth of Cas’ fingers between Dean’s feels uncomplicated and good.

“Ah,” Billie says when she sees them, looking up from her pow-wow with Linda. “That’s nice, isn’t it?”

Cas exhales. “Yes,” he says. “It’s almost done, right?”

Linda and Sam watch while Billie unfolds herself and presses her palm to Cas’ chest. Her eyes lose focus and darken and there’s a split-second impression of something skeletal, a creature Dean recognizes after his encounters with Tessa, superimposed over her human form.
Then she smiles and tosses her hair over her shoulder. “Very close,” she says. “We should move tomorrow.”

Dean tightens his grip on Cas. “Do we have that much time? Amara wasn’t really clear about—anything, actually.”

“I can see what’s happening,” Billie says. “The unraveling has sped up, but it’s not even close to finished. I’d just be glad we’re not in Europe right now. Their little reenactment of the Black Death has gotten nasty.”

All three humans shudder in unison. “God bless Wal-Mart,” Linda says.

“Never thought I’d agree,” Sam says, “but…”


Another smile creeps broadly across Billie’s face. “I’ll guide you,” she assures him. “Just be sure your soul is ready.” She gives Dean a hard look. “He’s going to need your cooperation, Winchester.”

Dean swallows. “I’m here, aren’t I? Listen,” he adds, then pauses, feeling stupid. “What’s—actually going to happen? To Cas?”

He can feel Cas’ startled gaze, but he doesn’t look away from Billie. He wants this answer.

Billie hums thoughtfully. “Fair question.” She taps Cas’ chest one more time, then rocks back on her heels and steps away from him. “Castiel is going to be very powerful. He’ll put the last archangels who walked the earth to shame, I think. And he’s going to use some of that power to open Heaven, and he’s going to offer them use of the rest.”

“And I’m going to ask for help,” Cas finishes. “I’m not well-loved up there, but if I make a case on behalf of our creator—on behalf of what he created us for, to defend and preserve his creation—well. I’ll try.”

It’s not any crappier than their average plan. Dean just doesn’t like it. He bites back his instinct to object. “Okay,” he says. “And we think they can actually undo all this? Fix the world?”

“Undo may not be the right word,” Billie says. “The dead will stay dead. But Heaven has a considerable stockpile of celestial machinery at its disposal, and they have the means to effect that kind of change upon the course of the universe. They just need a power source.” She cocks her head toward Cas. “And voila.”

“Tomorrow,” Sam says. He looks almost as dubious as Dean feels. “You’re sure?”

Billie favors Dean with one more look, the kind that strips you bare and pins you in place. “This angel loves this human,” she says, “so much that he no longer needs God to synthesize the act of creation within himself. Yes, I’m sure.”

Dean’s whole body feels hollow. He hangs onto Cas and doesn’t look at Sam or Linda or anything but the place where his fingertips rest against the sides of Cas’ knuckles. His hands are clammy and he needs a shower. “Okay.” He clears his throat. “Tomorrow.”

They throw together the closest they can get to a feast that night. You can do a lot with a little creativity and a half-full frozen foods section. The rest of Linda’s little militarized coven creeps out of
the shadows to join them, and the place actually smells kind of appetizing as they spread out in little
groups to occupy the aisles with their ill-gotten gains.

“He’s gonna be all right,” Sam says lowly to Dean as they jostle into an aisle of camping goods.

Dean ducks his head. He takes a bite of a pastry puff. “That’s what we always say.”

“And hey.” Sam spreads his hands, one of them laden with a plate of food. “We’re all still here and
alive.”

For now, at least, it’s just him and Sam over here. It’s kind of a comforting little throwback. Dean
uses the closest shelf to pop the cap off his slightly flat beer and take a swig. “Thought you’d be
making a lot more fun of me.”

Sam shoots him a sidelong look while he nibbles at his quiche. “I dunno, I wasn’t planning on
making fun of you over Cas’ feelings.”

God. Dean coughs a little and shoves another pastry into his mouth. “They’re not just, um.”

Sam’s eyebrows lift. “You never said anything. I was trying to take you at your word.”

Dean’s face heats. He needs about five more beers. “I don’t want…” He tries to stand up straighter.
He’d like to stop being such a dick before the conclusion of this apocalypse. “I hate thinking that if
this hadn’t happened, Cas wouldn’t ever have told me.”

Sam looks skeptical. “You wouldn’t have told him yourself?”

They’d have been living in the bunker. Cas would have been there. He would have been eating
Dean’s breakfasts and stealing his coffee and helping them with research. Dean would have picked
up his dirty socks and nagged him into taking out the garbage and asked for his help in the bunker’s
slowly-growing garden.

“Shit,” Dean says.

Sam chuckles. He looks tired and his hair is back in a low ponytail again. “Actually pretty smart,
remember?”

Yeah, Dean can buy that. He’s gonna be proud of the kid once he stops feeling like such a tool.
“What about you? You gonna be okay?”

A rueful flicker crosses Sam’s face. “You know I got a letter from Jody while you two were gone?
She sent it by a freaking messenger like we’re in *Lord of the Rings*. Told this guy who was going
east already to keep an eye out for a black muscle car.”

“So she’s alive.” Dean seizes on the thought. “And she’s okay. I can’t believe that actually worked,”
he adds. “Fuckin’ Pony Express.”

“She was alive and okay as of a week and a half ago.” Sam thumbs at something in his pocket,
something Dean can see now is a folded-up square of printer paper. “I just want her to stay that way.
I want *everyone* to stay that way. Are you gonna get your head out of your ass and make it so?”

Dean doesn’t have the stomach for the rest of his dinner. He stows the paper plate on the closest
shelf, next to a Coleman cooler. “Sure thing, Captain Picard.”

Sam’s laughing at him as he walks away.
“Holding down the fort?”

The firelight of the altar does good things for Cas’ features. They sharpen and then soften again with every time the light dances again. “I don’t need to eat,” he says.

Dean doesn’t argue, though he wants to. “Have a beer, then,” he says. He passes one to Cas, one of the few that came out of a real fridge so the open mouth of the bottle huffs a wisp of cold air as Cas twists the top off with his bare hand.

“Thank you.” Cas nurses a slow sip. He’s in his slacks and button-down again, like dressing closer to the quintessential version of himself will lend him some courage on this last night. In the morning, if Dean gets his cowardly shit together, Cas is gonna go off and ask for help from a bunch of feathery dicks who hate him, and Dean resents just how scared that makes him.

At the edges of his awareness, he still feels the press of Cas’ body against his own. It’d been hot out, but Cas’ hands on him had been hotter. It went by so quick, and Dean was raised to be thrifty, but he’s feeling a little greedy tonight. “Come here,” he says.

Cas’ mouth makes a faint pop around the glass of his beer bottle. “Dean?” He eyes the space between them warily.

His heart in his throat, Dean steps forward. He wraps Cas’ tie around two fingers and pulls until Cas has to stumble forward, until their foreheads have to knock against each other and Cas’ breath is warm on Dean’s cheek and his mouth.

“I said come here,” Dean says, sounding petulant even to himself.

With the hand that’s not holding his beer, Cas touches Dean’s hip. He wets his lips with his tongue.

“Why are you hiding back here?” Dean asks. “It’s a party.”

“Sorry excuse for one,” Cas says. His breath smells like beer. “I’m willing to do what needs to be done, but—I’m ashamed to admit this, but I’m afraid. I’m afraid of what I’ll encounter from my brothers and sisters when I’m up there.”

“They’re not gonna be able to touch you,” Dean says. “Right?”

Cas’ gaze shifts sideways. He doesn’t meet Dean’s eyes. “That’s the idea. I’m not sure they’ll take so kindly to that, either. I—all I can do is throw myself on their mercy. I won’t intimidate them into cooperation.”

“Awesome.” Dean rubs the pad of his thumb against the silk of Cas’ tie. It slips easily along his skin. “So all we have to do is trust a bunch of disgruntled angels to look deep within themselves and decide they actually love humanity after all, and we’re totally worth saving.”

An abrupt ferocity lights Cas’ expression. His chin tips up. “You are worth saving.” He pauses, then goes on: “We’re worth saving. Maybe I count as human now, if I have a soul.”

“You count,” Dean tells him.

The very corners of Cas’ eyes crinkle up, so slight Dean wouldn’t catch it if the distance between them wasn’t so small. “I don’t know if my siblings will consider that meaningful,” he says, “but I do.”
Dean needs to say a lot of things to Cas, but he can’t force them out around the knot rising in his throat. He needs to make sure Cas understands him; he needs to know that if this fails, if Cas burns out or the angels kill him and they never see each other again, they’re gonna have something to remember each other by in the last seconds of existence.

He pulls Cas in and kisses him with his mouth open and his pulse knocking frantically away in his throat and wrists. There’s a clattering noise and the smell of spilled alcohol, but Dean ignores it in favor of Cas’ hands curling around the back of his neck. Cas makes a soft sound and closes the remaining gap between them. He’s warm and solid and Dean drinks him in, kisses him wider and deeper until the taste of beer is gone and it’s nothing but Cas, clean and almost human as they grasp for each other.

“Thank you,” Cas breathes into the corner of Dean’s mouth.

“What?” Dean’s world tilts a little. Cas’ mouth is moving against his own.

“For…” Cas lets out another small noise, his fingers curling tighter around the nape of Dean’s neck. “You know the way I feel. This is kind of you.”

Jesus. Dean can’t stand it. He touches the tiny vee of exposed skin at Cas’ throat, feels the wild flutter where Cas’ blood is pumping through his carotid. “Didn’t I make it clear enough at that fucking rest stop? The way I feel about you?”

Cas hesitates. “I know this is hard for you,” he begins.

The pang in Dean’s chest hits so hard he almost can’t turn it into words. He’s clutching Cas’ tie and his knuckles are white. “Remember when I said I’ve been scared to start it?”

“It,” Cas says. His eyebrows quirk up and he glances down to where their legs are pressed together, Dean’s thigh half-wedged between his own.

Dean hauls in a quick deep breath and lets it out. “You and me,” he says. “I don’t wanna just wish for it anymore. If all we get is tonight, fine.”

Cas narrows his eyes, like he doesn’t believe Dean. “You said you were afraid of fucking it up.”

“Yeah.” Dean laughs, strained. “I’m practically shitting myself.”

The edges of Cas’ features go soft. “I’m going to be good to you,” he says.

“I know.” Dean swallows back his protest, the fear that he won’t be good for Cas. “I can’t believe you love me.”

Cas’ mouth looks pinker in the next flicker of candlelight. He smiles, stroking the bristling hairs at the back of Dean’s head with the tips of his fingers. “I can’t believe you think I could love anything else the way I love you.”

It’s a damn blessing they’re alone so no one but Cas can see as Dean scrubs at his eyes with the sleeve of his henley. Maybe it’s a delayed effect of all the heat, but he’s unsteady on his feet; he has to hang onto Cas’ elbows to stay upright. “You’re fuckin’ ridiculous.”

“Mmhmm.” Cas’ smile stays as he angles Dean’s head down and fits them together for another kiss.

This one is easier. Cas licks into Dean’s mouth like he’s been doing it for months, like they’ve had all the time they deserve to learn each other. Dean hangs onto him and kisses him back, opening for
him each time Cas kisses him again and asks for more, more heat, deeper, longer.

It’s a small room. They stumble a couple times and then Dean’s back is to the wall, Cas kissing him with such precision that he’s grateful for something to offset the weakness in his knees. Cas’ hands are deft where they touch Dean’s chest, throat, hips, thighs. Dean whimpers a little, completely pathetic, and tugs clumsily at Cas’ tie until it slides loose with a muffled hiss.

“Oh.” Cas’ voice is low and apparently startled where his lips move at the hinge of Dean’s jaw. “Dean, if you want—”

Cas’ hands feel huge as they slip under the hem of Dean’s shirt. He spreads his fingers and Dean shudders. There’s a pause, and Dean’s so off his game it takes him a full second to realize Cas is waiting for permission.

“Yes,” he says, kissing Cas’ mouth because it’s right there and it’s shining in the firelight. “Yeah.”

Cas must be pretty juiced up. The air crackles, Cas kisses him again, and their shirts are gone, the stitches unraveling so quick all Dean feels is a flicker of movement alongside his skin.

“Damn,” he says.

Cas chuckles distractedly. He noses at the hollow of Dean’s throat and Dean shivers. “They’re not destroyed,” he assures Dean, “just elsewhere. Folded, even.”

“So Billie wasn’t bullshitting.”

“Not at all.” Cas tucks a smile into the curve of Dean’s shoulder, his breath hot. Enthralled by the arch of Cas’ spine, Dean walks his fingertips down the path of his vertebrae. “My soul, it’s—” Cas’ teeth catch on Dean’s collarbone and Dean’s breath hitches in answer. Cas straightens again and gives him another smile. “It’s blooming. It feels… good.”

Dean shifts and realigns, and there it is, Cas’ dick hard and hot and pushing against the angle of Dean’s hip. “What does it feel like?”

The rumble of Cas’ voice curls all the way down Dean’s body to his own erection, an insistent throb in his tattered jeans. “Warm,” Cas says. He draws his thumb along the center of Dean’s chest, palms at his belly. “It feels like renewal and sunlight.” He cups the ache between Dean’s legs, a split-second of gorgeous friction that tugs a stupid whine out of the back of Dean’s throat. “It feels like holding your soul in my hands and watching it mend itself, like the first time I was awed at your resilience and righteousness.”

“Cas,” Dean says helplessly.

Cas kisses him, a slow and careful kind of thing. “Yours is the soul I know the most intimately,” he says. “It’s my best point of reference.”

“I can’t believe,” Dean starts, then falters. He was going for a repeat of I can’t believe you love me, but terrified as he is, he is starting to believe that one. It’s the way Cas looks at him. He settles on combing his fingers through the unruly curls of Cas’ hair and saying, “I can’t believe you.”

“You don’t need to believe me.” Cas looks the closest to giddy Dean’s ever seen him. He’s still smiling, his expression alight with excitement, and that’s what convinces Dean this whole thing is real. Cas is about to power up in a major way, all because he had to go falling in love. And he had to have the shitty taste for the guy in question to be Dean Winchester.
Dean’s chest hurts a little. The candles to his right gutter for a moment, casting long shadows across the tiny break room. Some disaffected rural kids used to sit around in here, probably texting their friends about their weekend plans, and now it’s the home to at least two of humanity’s last-ditch efforts to keep darkness at bay. Dean swallows, nearly dizzy.

“Dean.” Cas turns solemn, his palm to Dean’s bare chest. “Stay with me.”

“Come here,” Dean says. It feels closer to a plea than an easy request.

Cas does without hesitation. He tucks his arms around Dean’s middle and draws him in until Dean’s face is buried in the side of Cas’ neck. Dean’s hands, shaking, settle at Cas’ sides, and he breathes in deep. Shampoo, sweat, something like fraying electrical cables. “I’m here,” Cas says, so close his voice is a gravelly rasp in the remaining space between them.

Dean can feel the steady thump of Cas’ heart echoing through his own ribcage. He shuts his eyes. There’s a stirring soul somewhere in the body he’s clutching so tight. He can’t feel it—he’s no angel—but he knows it’s there. He thinks he can see it in the tilt of Cas’ head and the slant of his smile lately. It’s been a long time coming.

They’re still like that for the space of a couple dozen breaths, skin to skin so Dean’s chest rises and falls in answer to every one of Cas’. They even out and sync up, and the buzz of panic in Dean’s ears ebbs away.

Cas drops a kiss to Dean’s temple, another to the side of his neck.

Dean wants to thank Cas, but he’s done that. It wasn’t enough at the time and it won’t be enough now.

He turns instead, slotting their mouths together again. They fit at the first try now; there come the quiet, slick noises of one kiss turning into several, loud against the occasional hiss of fire from the candles. With his terror at bay, Dean can focus on the curl of Cas’ tongue in his mouth and the minute flex of the muscles in Cas’ arms as he readjusts his hold on Dean. They lean back and then into each other again; Dean hooks an ankle around Cas’ calf, hauls him in, kisses him until they’re both breathless and panting into each other’s slack, open mouths.

“I’m with you,” Dean says. He kisses the swell of Cas’ lower lip.

“Good,” Cas says, and he drops to his knees.

Something in Dean wants to protest. He should be doing that; Cas earned it, didn’t he? But Cas flicks a glance up at him like he knows what Dean is thinking, and he draws the zipper of Dean’s jeans down. And then there’s his mouth. He’s eager, a little sloppy to start, nuzzling at Dean’s dick through his boxers with his breath so warm it sends currents of pleasure in every damn direction in Dean’s body. Dean spreads a hand back against the cheap corkboard of the wall, fingers slipping until he gains purchase.

Cas hums under his breath. Dean can feel it, and he groans. He can’t figure out how to ask for more. He’s trying not to be selfish.

Cas doesn’t give him the chance. He presses his thumbs into Dean’s inner thighs, coaxing him to widen his stance, to spread his legs, and he hooks two fingers through the waistband of Dean’s boxers to drag it down, and he slides the whole of Dean’s erection, hard and almost twitching for want of attention, into the waiting heat of his mouth.

Dean whimpers. He lets his hips buck up. He can’t stop looking at the broad spread of Cas’
shoulders, his dark head bowed over Dean, his mouth gleaming where it stretches around the weight of Dean himself. God, it feels so good. Cas is unselfconscious and fearless: he licks his way up, sucks at the head of Dean’s dick until Dean’s making this pathetic little whining noise he can’t control, and then he laughs and swallows Dean down again. He uses the soft-skinned pad of his thumb to stroke Dean’s balls, his knuckles bumping the skin at the insides of Dean’s thighs that no one else ever touches.

If Dean wasn’t such an asshole, he could say it, right now. He could fit his fingers around the perfect jut of Cas’ jaw and tell him, Hey, I fucking love you, by the way.

He doesn’t, though. He cups the back of Cas’ head and moans when Cas hollows his cheeks, and everything scatters. All he can feel is heat and sparking pleasure and Cas’ hands, stupid giant beautiful hands, on his hips and his ass and making up for what Cas’ mouth can’t reach and Dean’s pretty sure he’ll break apart if he comes like this, gasping into the empty space above Cas’ head.

“Stop,” he says.

Cas’ eyes are wide and dark. There’s a wet sound that practically echoes as Dean’s dick slides out of his bruised-red mouth. “Isn’t this good?” he asks, sounding so raw that Dean’s toes curl in his wool socks.

“Buddy, it’s fantastic.” Dean’s laugh comes out shaky. “Just. Come back.”

Maybe he’s testing something. Seeing if Cas will stay.

Cas rises. He doesn’t leave Dean hanging long, just curls his hand around Dean’s spit-slick erection and kisses Dean fast enough to taste Dean’s startled moan. He’s good at this, like he’s thought about it, strategized. Like Cas has had a map in his head this whole time of the way he would touch Dean if he ever got the chance. Dean would believe it. Cas jacks him with precision, fast and just rough enough, and it’s all Dean can do to hang on, gasping his approval into Cas’ throat where it bristles thickest with stubble.

“I’m still here,” Cas says. Dean sucks a bruise into the slope of Cas’ shoulder just to muffle the humiliating noise he makes when he comes into the palm of Cas’ hand. It knocks him off-balance, wrenches its way through his bones, and he doesn’t want to come up for air.

Cas stays through it. He strokes Dean through to softness, leaves open-mouthed kisses on his forehead and the bridge of his nose. Something in the air tingles, and Dean is clean.

“Fuck me.” Dean breathes out, slow.

Cas laughs, a quiet rumble of noise, but gives Dean a pass on the obvious joke. “Fantastic, hm?”

“Yeah,” Dean says.

Cas’ mouth crooks into a smile. He looks tired and he looks happy. Hell, he looks good. He always looks good, yeah, but Dean’s pretty sure this is new. Cas’ eyes are bright, his features smooth and just this side of glowing. The candles flare bright out of the corner of Dean’s eye, illuminating the lines and arches of Cas’ face, and Dean’s heart twists. He’s so, so into Cas.

“Here,” he says. He fumbles with Cas’ fly for a second, and then Cas must help him out, because there’s a zing like static electricity and Cas’ slacks slip down until the meat of his thighs catches them in place.

Cas is hard, and it shouldn’t come as a surprise, but Dean’s pulse kicks up anyway. He fits right into
Dean’s hand, the thick shape of him through his plain white boxers. Cas sucks in a breath, his eyelashes fluttering, his whole body swaying toward Dean.

“I’ve got you,” Dean tells him. He lets Cas take his free hand, lets Cas’ fingers lace into the spaces between his own. He works his hand under the waistband of Cas’ underwear and drags his thumbnail along the long line of Cas’ erection. It jumps a little like it’s been waiting for his touch, and Cas moans. He’s unabashed, his mouth slack with pleasure. Dean loves the simple weight of Cas in the curl of his fingers, the ease of how he fits into Dean’s grip.

Dean knows how to do this, the steady rhythm that’ll have Cas clutching at him and breathing fast. Like that, there, the way Cas’ eyelids drop to half-mast and he says Dean’s name, practically slurs it, and here he is, Castiel, the angel with a whole newborn human soul at his disposal, trembling under Dean’s touch.

“That feels,” Cas says, his nose bumps Dean’s until his mouth finds Dean’s lower lip and he takes it between his teeth, sucks at it and murmurs there, “incredible, Dean.”

“Nothin’ special,” Dean says. True, technically.

Cas huffs out half an indignant moan and kisses him. It’s messy, languid, and Cas keeps interrupting himself to say Dean’s name, arching into Dean, closer. Dean can’t let himself think this is really the last time, because there’s a million more things he wants. Cas in his mouth, Cas in him, and he’d reach for that if he could bring himself to. But Cas is kissing him like there’s nothing else in creation, and Dean’s afraid to topple even one damn domino here. So he lets Cas fuck his fist and lets Cas breathe quick into his mouth, and he loves the shudder and whine that come with Cas’ orgasm, how it stills him and gets him squeezing Dean’s hand so tight it hurts.

In the aftermath, Cas cleans them up again. It seems like it comes easy to him now, and Dean feels stunned, the fear rising in the back of his mind once more. He keeps his hand in Cas’ the whole time, glad for the slide and shift of muscle and sinew where he can still feel it. Cas is corporeal for now.

“It’s done, isn’t it?” Dean draws the tips of his fingers across Cas’ chest. He just skims Cas’ nipple, which stiffens in the wake of his touch. “You’re legit now.”

Cas catches Dean’s wrist in his hand. His own thumb presses to Dean’s pulse. “Yes, it’s done. That must have been one of the most human things I’ve ever done.”

Dean laughs, catching himself by surprise. “Yeah,” he says, “not much more human than sex.”

Cas traces the knob of Dean’s wrist. “Not the sex,” he says, “not exactly. The irrationality. The closeness. Doing something because we wanted it, even though we were—what did you say?” He lifts an eyebrow. “Scared shitless.”

“Right.” Dean licks his lips. He’s tired. “Point taken.”

The rest of the night is wide open before them. Linda’s ragtag army gives them a wide berth as they pick their way out of the break room hand in hand. They stop to say goodnight to Sam, who’s engaged in some gesticulation-heavy conversation with Linda and Billie. They collect their sleeping bags, their assortment of pillows filled with knockoff down, and Dean leads Cas to the farthest corner of the store.

He thinks this used to be the optometry department, but it’s dark back here; the emergency lighting doesn’t reach. It’s quiet and empty, the buzz of neon and fluorescence out of earshot.

“Goodnight,” Cas says, his fingers twined loosely through Dean’s. They face each other, sleeping
bags half-unzipped so they can share body heat. It’s not cold, but Dean wants Cas’ warmth anyway.

Dean doesn’t close his eyes. He doesn’t sleep. He can’t make out anything but the straight line of Cas’ nose and the half-moons of his eyelids, and he can’t stop looking. If this, these inexorable minutes of waiting to say goodbye, are what Amara meant by the gift of time, Dean’ll take it and run.
The morning brings a long drive. Sam in shotgun, Cas and Billie in the back. Dean worries the Impala’s on her last leg, but Cas sits right behind him, reaches around the seat and strokes the first two knobs of his spine through his T-shirt, and she runs smooth as butter.

“Here,” Billie says flatly.

Dean puts on the brakes, eyeing the stretch of road ahead of them. They’re nowhere special, edging close to the border with Illinois, maybe. There’s no rest stop here, nothing but what could be another abandoned truck winking in the distant sun and a sign telling them they’re about to hit a long stretch with no gas stations. Thing is, the gas gauge hasn’t moved since the Impala started moving under Cas’ power.

“Here?” he says, skeptical.

“Yep.” Billie sounds completely sure.

Dean pulls onto the shoulder, coasting to a gentle stop. Without the sound of the engine, there’s only silence so oppressive it rivals the heat. “What’s so special about this place?”

Billie laughs, like that was a stupid question. “Nothing,” she says. “I just wanted us far enough from any other living creatures to avoid burning them out completely if we screw this up.”

“Oh,” Sam says, “awesome. Great. And I’m here because?”

“Were you really going to stay behind?” she counters.

A beat, then Sam chuckles. “I guess you’re right,” he says.

Cas pops the door next to him and clambers out, stretching. It’s a human kind of gesture, and it pulls his muscles tight under the cotton of his T-shirt. He’s back to dressing like a hunter, cheap Wal-Mart plaid thrown over a plain white tee. Dean lets the thought he looks hot like that roll around in his head, savoring the novelty of the acknowledgment.

“I’m ready,” Cas says. It works like a summons, and they all get out at once, the humans squinting in the glare of the sun.

The land’s flatter than a pancake out here, no forests or hills to be seen. Climbing over the guardrail’s easy enough, and they trek a few dozen yards into the cornfield going brown and crispy off to the side of the highway. No one’s worked this farm in a couple weeks, and it’s been baking. A ramshackle little barn’s the only thing closer than the horizon, its dusty blue paint peeling in long strips. No animals left here, no more salvageable crops. Just dust and dry manure and a garden hose cracking in the heat.

“So,” Billie says, “I’m going to reap you, Castiel.”

“No.” It spits out of Dean’s mouth too fast for him to catch it.

Cas gives him this look, eyebrows drawn together, that Dean can’t interpret. “It’s okay, Dean.”


“Heaven’s closure is meant to be permanent this time. God is dead. They’re closing up shop, you
know?” Billie cracks a rueful smile. “We need a lot of power to get through to those angels. You
know how they are.”

Dean and Sam exchange yeah, do we ever glances.

Billie takes Cas by the elbow and draws him closer to her. “Human souls—well, I don’t need to tell
you three what kind of power they hold. You’ve seen it.”

“Didn’t work with Amara,” Dean says. “What makes you so sure about this?”

“I’m not sure about anything,” Billie answers easily, “but I know Castiel’s intentions. We couldn’t
predict Amara. I didn’t think she would dare ingest that much power at once—but she did. This is
one soul, handmade, homegrown, individually packaged by this guy right here.” She pats Cas’ chest.
He looks distantly bemused in response. “And I’m going to help him pull it out and filter it through
his grace. It’s a kind of reaping, technically.”

“Jesus,” Dean hisses, “you about gave me a heart attack.”

Billie laughs. “Then I guess I’d better stand by to reap you, too.”

Cas reaches for Dean, and Dean reaches back without thinking. He could get used to the way their
fingers fit together, to Cas’ fingers curled against his knuckles. “I’ll be fine. I’ve held thousands of
souls before.”

“Well,” Sam says, “uh.”

“That didn’t go so great,” Dean translates.

“One soul,” Billie repeats, “and he made it himself.” She actually gets dimples when she smiles at
Dean this time, which wigs him right the fuck out. “With a little help from his friends.”

“I’ll be fine,” Cas says again, insistent. “I have faith in my siblings.”

Dean doesn’t, but he and Sam share another look. They’re on the same page. If they have faith in
anything here, it’s Castiel himself. He’s a reckless asshole with a stubborn streak a mile wide.
They’ve both always liked that about him, when he wasn’t using it against them.

“Fine,” Dean says.

“How does this work?” Sam asks.

“Stand back,” Billie drawls, “I’m a professional.”

It’s obvious Dean is supposed to let Cas go. Billie’s eyebrows quirk expectantly; Sam crosses his
arms over his chest and takes a step back. Something’s about to happen.

Dean’s stomach churns. He can’t make his grip unlock. “Cas,” he says.

Cas pets the back of Dean’s hand with his thumb. He’s serene. He crackles a little at his outline if
Dean doesn’t focus his gaze. “I’m not going to kiss you goodbye,” he says, “okay?”

“Cas—”

“I’m coming back, and then I’m going to kiss you hello.”

Before Dean can answer—not that he knows what he’d say to a line like that—Cas ducks his head,
kisses his knuckles, and lets him go. He faces Billie with the ghost of a smile and his shoulders square.

“Cover your eyes,” she advises the Winchesters.

Dean obeys, mostly. He leaves his fingers spread enough to catch glimpses. Cas shutting his eyes, the flare of his wings. Billie’s human hand stretched out and the overlay of bone, rotting flesh, a dark suit that sets off a million alarms of familiarity in the back of Dean’s head. Cas’ wings and eyes blaze, brighter than anything, brighter than the dying sun, and that’s when Dean’s vision whites out and he has to drop to the ground, his forehead pressed to his knees.

Cas and Billie are both gone when they stumble to their feet, Sam scrubbing an inexplicable soot mark off the bridge of his nose.

“Jesus,” Dean says.

The corn, what’s left of it, is leveled for maybe half a mile around. “This seems too specific to be the origin of crop circles,” Sam says, “but would you look at that.”

Dean squints at the broad, flat circle of field surrounding them. Then he turns his gaze to the sky, to the sun hanging so low you could almost reach out and grab it like a red rubber ball. “Everything looks the same,” he points out. His insides feel like lead.

“Cas is gonna need time to talk them around,” Sam says. He sounds almost convinced. “It could be a while.”

Time’s different up in Heaven. They don’t even know if Cas managed to get in. Maybe he bounced right off the gates and got flung, who knows, somewhere. Dean doesn’t know. He doesn’t say any of that, doesn’t even want to let himself think it.

They back in the Impala, and she holds out just long enough to take them back to the Wal-Mart. She sputters and dies before he can pull into a parking space, but it doesn’t matter. There’s more than enough space for her, it’s so damn empty here. Not for the first time, Dean misses the bunker so bad it’s a physical pang.

Down to nothing but humans, no reapers or angels in sight, they’ve got nothing to do but wait. Linda keeps the store running, and the people are good at filling their days with the small tasks that requires. But everyone knows all they’re doing is killing time.

Dean does a lot of worrying. He’s good at that, honed the skill over the years. Every time he had to leave Sam alone in a seedy motel, every time they ran out of cash and he had to smile and lie to Sam about where his next meal was gonna come from. He’s good at spinning out worst-case scenarios in his own head, grieving people he loves before they’re even gone so it won’t hurt as bad when the end inevitably comes.

While Dean putters around the store, tidying the shelves and checking on the plumbing, he pictures all the ways things could’ve gone wrong for Cas. He knows how much the angels hate Cas and how little they trust him. Hell, he’s seen Cas defy them to their faces and, God knows why, choose Dean over them. He’s seen it more times than he ever earned.

The second day, Linda finds him tucked into the home and office department, swearing over a water heater that doesn’t want to cooperate.
“That may be a lost cause,” she says, sounding too calm. “Billie did tell me the magic won’t hold forever. It’s part of the fabric of this universe, and when those threads snap, well. That’s the end of that.”

Dean groans. “You’re not even gonna try?”

Linda scoffs. “You don’t call all of this trying? What I’m not going to do is make a fool of myself fighting something that’s inevitable.”

Bitterness rises in Dean’s throat. He wipes the sweat from his forehead on the back of his hand and gives up, dropping his wrench. “You think Cas is dead.”

Her eyes narrow. “I never said that. I don’t think anything. You’re afraid Castiel is dead, and you want someone to tell you otherwise.”

“I’m,” Dean starts, then stops. Linda’s right like always. “You haven’t heard anything from Billie?”

That gets a reaction, at least: an annoyed little twist of Linda’s mouth. “Radio silence,” she says. “Maybe it’s good news. Maybe no reaper is a good thing, mm?”

“Maybe,” Dean says.

Dean worries. About everyone. All his people scattered across the country, unreachable and probably scared. Sam doesn’t hear from Jody again, though he acts like he wasn’t holding his breath on it anyway.

As the air gets hotter and drier and hotter and drier still, Dean thinks of Jesse and Cesar. God, he hopes they’re okay. They’re supposed to swing by one day, Cas in jeans and the weight off Sam’s shoulders, and they’re supposed to share a beer and tour the brand spanking new farm those two have built from the ground up.

He’d call, but his phone won’t hold a charge. He’d write, but the paper would dry up, turn crisp in the heat. There’s nothing left but biding his time and remembering that prayer doesn’t do shit.

There’s no point to working on the Impala, but if it’s the end of days, there’s no point to anything. Dean might as well go out doing what he loves.

It’s always scorching hot in the parking lot, the asphalt soaking up the heat and rolling it back out in waves against Dean’s shoulder blades where he sprawls under the car. He’s doing nothing useful, just rooting around in her guts, tracing the familiar contours so when he blinks out of existence he’ll be rooted in something. He tries every morning to start her up, and every morning she gives him nothing. He can’t get too mad, after everything she did for him over thirty-seven years of tireless service.

A shadow falls across his stomach.

His heart abruptly beating somewhere around his trachea, Dean scrambles to yank himself out from under the Impala. His hands slip on steel, but there’s no mistaking it. When he shades his eyes with his hand and looks up, he can see the barest wisp of a cloud gliding across the sun.

“You?” he says. He’s hoarse, has to slap himself on the chest a couple times before he can try again:
“Castiel? That you?”

The cloud evaporates, scattering into the blood-red of the sun, the scorched-earth yellow of what’s left of the sky. Dean’s bad at hope and worse at faith, but there’s something like the phantom of a breeze ruffling his hair, and he’s about ready to go inside and pray.

He’s halfway to the front door, ready to find Sam and try to explain that he’s pretty sure he’s not going crazy, when he hears it. The hiss, the pitter-patter, the distant thrum.

“Holy fuck, Cas,” Dean breathes. He turns on his heel, and it feels like an honest-to-fuck miracle. Rain, sheets of it, pouring down, hitting the asphalt. Steam rises in the air a few inches from his nose, each drop sizzling faintly as it splatters on the overheated ground.

The Wal-Mart has a tin roof, and it’s gotta be making a mighty ruckus in there. It takes only a matter of seconds for the occupants to pour out, and Dean knows for a fact there are umbrellas in there, but no one brings them. All two dozen of Linda’s pseudo-soldiers run full tilt into the rain, tipping their heads back and laughing, maybe crying—hard to tell—as it soaks through their clothes and drips through their hair.

Dean watches, stunned. Rain ricochets off the pavement, wetting his ankles and pooling around his feet, but the awning over the store’s front door keeps the rest of him dry. He’s trying to gather the courage to take the plunge when Sam appears at his elbow, looming thoughtfully.

“You think this is a good thing?” Sam asks lowly.

The alternative hadn’t occurred to Dean. Call him nuts, but he has a good feeling. That doesn’t happen a lot, and he wants to hang onto it.

“Sammy,” he says, “do you want to give something a try with me?”

Sam slings him a sidelong smile. He’s always been the expert at hope in their family.

Dean fishes the car keys out of their home in his back pocket. They swing from the keyring around his index finger as they walk, as Dean unlocks the car and leans over to let Sam in, as they take up their rightful positions.

“You seem pretty sure about this,” Sam says.

Dean slides the key in. “Yeah,” he says, “well, Cas owes me.”

He turns the key, and the Impala purrs underneath them. “Whoa,” Sam says. “I missed that noise.”

Dean grins. He touches two fingertips to his mouth, wondering when he’s gonna get to cash in.

A weight settles at the back of his neck, familiar long fingers curling into the sweat- and rain-soaked collar of his shirt. “Hello, Dean.”

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!