Dirt Road Rejects

by FythyrWisp

Summary

Bobby left Dean everything he had, which came in handy when Ben needed a fresh start after his mother died. Cas lives on the same county road, and is trying to help his teenage daughter overcome her past.

Notes

Branching out onto a new platform, yay! Same username as elsewhere.

The archive warnings apply to 'past events,' but I do not want something that awful to sneak up on someone who will be effected by it. Now to find out if my formatting worked, as the preview is not being phone-friendly.

Thanks for reading! FW
"Did the PTA reschedule family movie night?" her naturally unpleasant voice drifted in from the hall. At this point, however, Cas was adjusted, and knew she meant well. Leslie just had the only case of 'resting bitch-voice' in existence.

"I haven't heard anything. Maybe check with Camille?" Cas said.

"Right... Also, your daughter called. You left your phone in the car, and she won't make it for the 3rd and 4th graders lunch, so someone has to take over for her on the ice cream line. No one else is available."

Cas nodded. "I'll take care of it." he said, tucking the last stack of paper into a folder in the filing cabinet and closing the drawer.

His apprehension was already building. Wednesdays were the worst.

Taking a deep breath, Cas looked through the glass wall into the elementary school cafeteria. Rows of tables were filled with children around eight to ten years of age, with the occasional parent, possibly a younger sibling, and high school volunteers earning community service time, like his daughter Claire often did.

He stepped through the open doorway, attempting to block out the noise, but the constant chatter continued.

It wasn't that Cas didn't like children, they simply made him uncomfortable. And in large groups, it was difficult not to draw a comparison between them and piranhas.

He looked at the clock as he moved to the front of the cafeteria. The staff on lunch duty would be calling them in two minutes, at which point, in theory, the children who had turned in their fifty cents to their teachers that morning would file past in an orderly fashion, choose their prepackaged frozen treat quickly, and file back to their seats. He would only need to open the sliding glass door on the top of the freezer, and watch for when to restock the metal trays from the boxes below.

Funny how it never worked the way it was supposed to.

Cas checked the amount of ice cream, and picked up the small tray for the inevitable 'I forgot to turn in my money/I got here late/I need one for my little sister' quarters that he would turn in at the register when he finished.

All too soon, one of his coworkers gave him the signal, and began pulling the children from the list for the class seated by the far wall. Quickly, Cas opened the freezer and stepped back, and although he had watched Claire many times, and understood how she would direct the children between herself and the freezer, making them turn and circle her to return to their seats after talking their selection, somehow instead of an orderly line, it was more like a gaggle of particularly large geese, with roughly the same manners.

He tried, he really did, to use the same words and motions he'd seen Claire use every Wednesday last semester, when he'd been on lunch room duty at the same time she was volunteering. By now, all the children should be used to it, it should be routine, but the miniaturized crowd wasn't having it today.

By the time the wave of children leaving their seats and returning to them had reached the opposite
wall of the cafeteria, the first group was already leaving the tables. The custodians cycled through, wiping the tables, and as needed, chairs, as Cas restocked the metal trays, closed the door, and finally leaned back against the wall to collect himself.

Piranhas. Bipedal, ice cream munching piranhas, with feelings, so you had to control your tone as they left the stripped carcass of an ice cream freezer in their wake.

The 4th grade classes began to enter the cafeteria, taking their usual route, through the rear door, along the wall, children with lunch boxes sitting down immediately, the rest filing through the cafe line.

Cas was still attempting to settle his nerves and prevent an oncoming migraine when he noticed someone standing at the back wall near the door. The man had been there for some time, holding a large insulated bag, obviously waiting on a child. He was about to cross the cafeteria to speak to him, make sure he had a visitor badge, and knew which class he was waiting on, but a dark haired boy stepped out of his class line, throwing his arms around the man's waist, and pointing out which row his class was expected to occupy, and Cas decided to leave it alone.

Cas was able to check in with the woman working the register in the cafe, and check on the pregnant, and post-dates Music teacher across the hall from the cafeteria before it was time for the piranha cycle to begin again. He was determined to try to keep control this time...

It didn't work. The children approached in something like a swarm, no line, lots of bumping into each other.

Cas was starting to get flustered, when he heard a rather deep voice and turned around to find someone just barely taller than himself, with similarly broad shoulders speaking to the children. "Quit crowding, and line up! You're not a bunch of headless chickens, folks."

The man had short light brown hair, and wore a plaid flannel over his grey tshirt. His jeans spoke of grease stains accumulated over time in the way only a mechanic could manage, but his work boots looked fairly new.

Miraculously, the children started to shuffle into place, and funnel through the space between Cas and the freezer, less shoving, less confusion, and less conflict.

"Here, Ben, grab me a strawberry one, I'll be there in a minute." he turned to face Cas. "Sorry, looks like you could use some help. The usual girl isn't here?"

Cas nodded as he took a dollar from one of the children, passing back two quarters from the tray. "Yes, her school schedule is changing, she might not be able to keep volunteering for this."

He motioned some children approaching to get in the end of the line rather than crowd in. "I might be able to fill in for her. Dean Winchester, I'm Ben's dad. Just moved here a few months ago."

"Really?" Cas spared a surprised look. "I heard you bought the auto shop on County Road 121... I'm Cas Novak. My daughter, Claire, usually volunteers for this..."

"Yeah, how'd you hear about that?" Dean asked, turning back to the line of children. "Hey, hurry up, before it melts!"

"Word travels fast here. And I live on 121, too, so I actually heard from someone asking about you." Cas admitted. "Should have realized if you had kids they'd be going here. I did notice the school bus stopping out at the highway last month."
"So, we're neighbors. Awesome." Dean said, watching the flow of the kids returning to their tables.

"Yes, there's a third gate at the end of the gravel road, it's for maintenance on a ranch, but they never use it. Claire and I live just past the bend." Cas responded.

"All right, well, good to meet you, Cas. You should swing by for a beer sometime."

Cas shook his proffered hand, and started to close up the ice cream freezer as Dean started back to the table to sit with Ben.

The grey Honda wasn't exactly old, or beaten up. It didn't have all the bells and whistles of a newer vehicle, but it ran well. Cas slowed down for the turn off the highway.

"I met the fellow who bought the shop," he said, pointing at the faded sign as he pulled onto the gravel road. "He has a 4th grader."

"Did you get a name to curse when the kid gets bored and starts acting like a little shit?"

Cas rolled his eyes. "Ben doesn't seem like a troublemaker. And Dean seems personable. It could be nice to have neighbors who don't have guns going off at odd hours."

"I don't know, dad. I kinda miss that nutcase prepper coot, Bobby." Claire said. "You know the last couple months he was alive, I was bringing his mail to him."

"I did notice that, yes. That was kind of you, Claire."

"Not really, I was getting ours anyway, and he'd always let me take a beer."

"Claire..." Cas gave up, ignoring Claire's smirk.

A loud noise was suddenly very close, and slid into the driver's side of the car, taking the mirror off the door as it thumped into the metal, and fell out of sight. Cas rolled the window down, and leaned out just as a helmet came into view.

"Are you hurt?" Cas asked quickly, concerned, and very startled.

Muffled by the full helmet, a small voice said "No, sir... Sorry about your mirror."

Ben pulled his dirt bike further away from the car door as Cas got out, probably expecting he'd want to look over the door. He wasn't expecting Cas to go straight for him. "Are you sure? Take off your helmet."

Ben obediently removed his helmet, and Cas took a close look at the top right side of his head, and then at his eyes. "Sir? I'm okay, really."

Cas turned the helmet to show Ben a large white scrape in the plastic. "This is clearly new, since it's not covered in dirt like the rest. That means you hit your head. Is your father here?"

Ben nodded.

"Leave your bike where it is, it'll be fine, and go straight home and tell him. I'll be over to speak to him shortly, if he isn't busy taking you straight to a doctor."

Cas was sure there was another 'sir' in there somewhere as Ben started straight for the driveway of the house behind the repair yard, cutting across the bare dirt that connected the two on the same plot
of land.

He leaned into the car, rolling up the window. "I'm going to speak to Mr. Winchester, I'll move the car up to the house once he's seen it. I want to make sure he understands I wasn't running over his son."

"Okay." Claire said, grabbing her things and starting up the for their front gate.

"And stay out of the liquor cabinet!" Cas called after her, only half joking.

Making his way along the same path he'd seen Ben go, he found himself at the back of the main building of the repair shop, facing a very full open bay. Dean, one less flannel, fairly stained with engine grease, stood in front of a workbench, where Ben, still in his protective gear, was sitting. Dean had a small flashlight out, and was checking his pupils.

"Nah, you're okay... But you're done for today, I'll get your bike, you're going in the house, and keep track of how your neck feels. Anything weird, I want to hear about it right away." Dean lifted Ben down, as the thought crossed Cas' mind that Ben wasn't physically much smaller than Claire.

"Hey, Cas. Told me he slipped coming around that tree where the gravel's kind of deep, took out your mirror."

Cas nodded. "He came out of nowhere, I'm very sorry about this. If you'd like to have the sheriff's department come out and look things over, I haven't moved my car."

"For what?" Dean asked, starting for the road.

"Usually when a child is struck by a vehicle, even on a private road-"

Dean started chuckling. "You didn't hit Ben, Ben hit you. You can't run over a kid with the side of your car."

Watching as Dean crouched next to the Honda, examining the door, Cas shifted nervously.

"I'm gonna guess you're at least five years out of warranty on this thing, am I right?" Cas gave a shrugging nod. "I can fix this, it's my fault anyway, letting my kid tear around on a dirt bike like that."

Cas was about to say something, but was abruptly cut off by Claire's surprisingly good vocal projection from Cas' front porch. "DAAAD! Mr Garrison's on the phone! Says if I make another South Park joke, he's gonna make me repeat the 5th grade!"

Cas shook his head, slowly starting for the house. "That's my boss, sorry. If you can handle the mirror so it's safe to drive, I'd appreciate it. I'm really just glad your son is okay."

"Yeah, yeah, no problem. I'll let you know if I have one sitting around, otherwise I'll put in an order." Dean said, picking up the dirt bike by the handlebars and starting for his own yard.

Cas climbed the steps, taking the cordless phone from Claire as he went through the screen door.

Dean pulled the dirt bike into the shed near the house, and checked it for any obvious damage before going into the house. "Ben, you get your homework done?"

From somewhere in the depths of the upstairs came the answer, "I didn't have any."
"Read a book."

"Can I finish this level?"

"You got five minutes."

Dean went through his usual pre-dinner routine, taking off several layers of grime with hand-cleaner before washing them with regular soap, and headed for the kitchen.

After the usual morning scuffle, Cas finally made his way out the door, only to find the driveway empty. At his puzzled look, Claire pointed to the bend in the road back to the highway.

"Right." Cas said, changing direction.

"You forgot to come back out and move it, huh?" Claire said, adjusting her backpack. "After you ran over that kid."

"I didn't run him over." Cas said quietly.

Claire piled into the passenger side, pulling the door shut. Cas found the rear view mirror on the driver door had been replaced by an exact match, with a yellow sticky-note covering the glass. 'Sorry, again.'

Cas took a look towards Dean's house before getting in the car, adjusting the mirror, and pulling forward, using his own driveway to turn around.

"Hey, do you think when the subdivision gets built, they'll pave it?" Claire asked, as they got closer to the highway.

"If they build it, they would have to buy out the ranch, first." Cas replied. "That's not too likely."

"Well they must think they've got a chance if they keep bugging you to sell your parcel." Claire said, looking out the window.

"Our parcel, Claire, it's family land. You're old enough, I wouldn't make that decision without your input." Cas said quietly.

Claire only shrugged in response.

"Well, I suppose we'll find out in time. You'll probably be in college before anything changes."

"Cas, Joan is out sick, we're swamped at the front desk, and we just had to pull a student from the cafeteria for fighting. Can you take over?"

Cas looked up from several stacks of paper on his desk to see one of the newer front desk workers in his office doorway. "I can try."

"Okay." she turned to a child in the hall. "Go have a seat and talk to Mr. Novak, and try to calm down."

Ben walked in, silent, but red faced and shaking slightly. She pulled the door shut as Ben entered the room.

"Ben... sit down." Cas watched as the boy, clearly seething, sat down in front of the desk. "I have to
admit, I'm surprised to see you in here. Do you want to explain what happened?"

"No, sir, I don't." Ben answered stifly.

"Maybe this would be easier if we get your mother on the phone?" Ben's fists clenched. "I'm sure
she'd be very disappointed... what do you think she would say?"

Ben swallowed hard, and Cas could see tears welling in his downcast eyes. Cas got up and circled
the desk, crouching next to Ben's chair, putting a hand on the boy's shoulder, and giving him a
squeeze.

"Ben, you have to be able to get along with the other students, you see them every day. If you're
having trouble making friends, try sitting with a different group. There's really only so much I can
say unless you want to talk."

Ben wiped angrily at one cheek before shaking his head. Cas wasn't sure, but even the small motion
seemed to carry the echo of another superfluous 'sir.'

"The counselor will be in on Monday, I'll leave a note on her desk, she'll be pulling you out of class
for a talk. Along with that, you'll have an incident report to take home to your parents, I'll need it
turned in immediately Monday morning. For today, you'll be doing your work at a desk in the back
hall. Did you get enough to eat at lunch before this happened?"

Ben shook his head. "No, sir, I'd just sat down."

Cas nodded. "You can eat at the desk."

Cas stood up, and led Ben to the hallway, leading further away from the front office, to some
permanent cubicles in the wall.

He left Ben to sit down, and soon brought him a tray from the cafeteria, and a few basic assignments
from his teachers before retreating to his office.
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains mentions of death, drug use, and a small panic attack.

Thanks for reading!

"Dad...?"

Dean kept working the wrench as he called out from under the car in the bay, "Yeah, I'm in here, what's up?"

"I finished my homework... I got a form you need to sign, I have to turn it in Monday." Ben said, slowly rounding the car, picking his way through the parts and tools in Dean's reach.

"Oh, field trip?" Dean asked, rolling his mechanic dolly out from under the car. He sat up reaching for the tool box, but stopped when he saw Ben's face.

"No... I, um... I got in trouble today."

Dean wiped his forehead on his arm. "Okay... why? What happened?"

Dean, wearing more engine grease on his sweat drenched tshirt than usual, even for him, had the wrench still in one hand and the incident report in the other when he knocked on Cas' door.

The front door swung open slowly, and Claire stood in the small opening, looking fairly suspicious.

"I need talk to your dad, is he home?" Dean asked with a gruff voice. He realized too late that he was probably past intimidating at this point.

"Yeah, hang on a second." Claire answered quietly, and swung the door most of the way shut.

From inside, he could hear Cas' voice growing louder as he approached the door before it opened. "...our neighbor, you could at least let him in. Hello, Dean."

"What the hell did you say to my kid today?" Dean snapped.

"That would be why." Claire called from another room.

Cas pulled the door shut as he stepped out onto the porch. "I don't think I said anything out of line, but if there's something specific you have a concern about-"

"Did you tell my son his mother would be disappointed in him?" Dean asked harshly, cutting him off. "You know what? Some people just shouldn't be around children!"

"I offered to call her. Ben struck another student, mothers are generally disappointed in that type of behavior. I was trying to get him to consider his actions."

Dean's expression changed immediately.
"Great. That's great. Next time, you pull his file and try to call her, okay? Because you'll see a note on there, right next to my number, that his mom died of cancer last year. Worse, he's the one who found her, and it took me fifteen minutes to get home when he called, and he was there by himself, alone with her the whole time... And you wanna know why he hit that little shit in the cafeteria? The kid was quoting The Exorcist, and doing it to mess with Ben directly, he's been giving Ben a hard time since he started at the school." Dean said, wrench hand swinging a little more than he intended.

"I don't... I've never seen that movie." Cas said quietly.

"Look it up. Because what Ben told me, that was flat out harassment, and the teachers did nothing to stop it." Dean looked at the paper in his hand again. "And he has to talk to the counselor, huh?... Great. Why don't I just write down the number for the counselor he's already seeing, and they can hash it out?"

"I'm sorry. I didn't know, and I did try to get Ben to talk. If he had explained a little better, I might have been able to do more with this. As it is, you'll probably want to speak to Uri Garrison, the principal, and get Ben to say something if this continues. If you don't mind, I'd like to apologize to Ben personally, at a more appropriate time." Cas said softly.

"Yeah... Yeah, okay. That's fine." Dean said, clearly trying to calm down, but still agitated.

"If it helps any, Ben was very polite, and didn't complain about being in the office for the remainder of the day." Cas offered. "He doesn't strike me as a troublemaker, far from it."

"No, he's a good kid, he's just been through too much shit." Dean mumbled, looking at the paper again.

"If you come in to speak with Uri, I'm happy to relate Ben's reaction in my office today."

Dean nodded, and tapped the wrench on the paper, starting to walk off. "All right, I have to go, gotta fix my kid some dinner."

Cas watched him walk briskly out of the yard before shaking himself to awareness and going back inside. Moving slowly, trying to wrap his mind around the conversation he'd just had, he barely noticed as he passed the back of the couch facing into the living room that Claire had muted the television. Her voice came out in a gravelly hiss. "Your mother sucks cocks in Hell, Karras, you faithless slime!"

"What?" Cas asked in a startled voice.

"That's the line from the movie. And yeah, that's pretty messed up... Especially after he just got ran over by his neighbor last week."

"Claire, please." Cas said, continuing to the kitchen.

Claire shifted to lean on the back of the sofa. "Hey, you're not gonna let that other kid keep picking on this one, are you?"

Cas began taking a few things out of the fridge, calling back over his shoulder. "No, the teachers will hear about it, and they'll handle it."

Claire was about to turn on the sound on the television on again, but instead turned it off and headed towards the kitchen, "I need to get an outfit for prom."

Cas nearly dropped the package of pork chops he was holding. "Prom?"
“Yeah, um, junior prom. It's coming up in about a month.” Claire said, leaning on the fridge.

“Right... I'm sorry, I don't usually keep track of these things. What would your mother do?” Cas asked, getting out a large pan.

“Tell her boyfriend she needed money for a dress, spend it on drugs, shoot up on the couch, and my friends would find me a loaner.” Claire snorted.

Cas stopped abruptly to stare at her, his hand still on the knob of the stove.

“You asked.”

Cas shook his head. "All right, we've been down that road, and every time I've asked questions, you've given me many repetitions of 'I don't want to talk about it,' so let's try that again... what are your friend's parents doing for this?”

Claire reached into the fridge for a can of soda, as the pork chops started to sizzle. "Well, Miranda's mom is making her dress, because that's what they can afford, but the stuff she makes is really nice. Katie, her family is really well off, her mom is taking her to the city to some designer shop to get an overpriced piece of crap, and you know she's not wearing it next year. And Abigail, she's getting hers from the bridal shop in town, because they do bridesmaid and prom dresses too, and one of her moms does hair and makeup, and offered to let us get ready at her house, so if anyone burns someone's hair off with a curling iron, she can fix it."

"I don't have much of a budget for this, Claire, I still have to get the roof repaired. Of course you'll get a dress, but if you can find a part time job, you'll have more options." Cas said. "I know you need to focus on school, college is just around the corner, but if you can make the time for it, it would certainly show initiative."

Cas noticed Claire looked anxious. "Maybe check some of the local websites, see if anyone has ads posted for babysitters, tutors, or even help with housework? I think one of the kindergarten teachers has a mother who could use the help."

"Yeah, no, I'll find something." Claire said, heading back to the living room.

"You know," Cas called after her, "If you find something you can do through the summer, you might be able to get your own car."

"Yeah, but I'll still use yours for drag racing." Claire through back over her shoulder.

Cas looked up from the porch swing and saw Dean coming up the front walk quickly, letting the gate clatter, wrench in his hand.

"I need to talk to you." He growled.

Trying desperately to keep his breathing at a normal pace, Cas tried to avoid looking at the way Dean's shirt stretched across his chest, and gave the barest hint of his abs where it clung near his narrow hips, to say nothing of the way his snug jeans clung to his muscular frame.

"What is it?” Cas asked, getting up.

Dean set the wrench down roughly on the porch railing, and reached for Cas, pulling him in for a frantic, greedy kiss. He knew, from the state of Dean's hands, covered in dark smears from whatever machine he'd been repairing, his shirt would be a complete mess... but that didn't mean he wanted
Saturday afternoon, Cas walked down the gravel road and approached the Winchester home with what he knew was likely more trepidation than he should have felt.

He took a deep breath before walking up the stairs of the front porch and knocking on the door firmly.

Footsteps echoed at a fast pace before the door cracked open. "Hello, Ben."

"Hi Mr. Novak. I'll get my dad." Ben turned to call for Dean, but Cas stopped him.

"Actually, I'm here to speak to you, but if you want your father present, of course that's not a problem."

Surprised, Ben only nodded.

"We had something of a misunderstanding yesterday, Ben, I didn't know your mother had passed away. It would have been helpful to know, and I really wish you had spoken up, and that you had told me what had happened in the cafeteria, but what I said to you was out of line. I'm very sorry I said it, and I'm sure it was painful for you to hear, which was not my intention." Cas could hear heavier footsteps approaching as he spoke, and wasn't surprised at all when Dean came into view. "I hope you can accept my apology."

"Yes, sir."

"Ben, you need to get your legos off the coffee table." Dean said quietly, waiting for Ben to make for the living room before slipping through the door, closing it behind him. He ran a hand across the back of his neck anxiously before bringing himself to look Cas in the eyes. "That, um... it takes a lot of guts to apologize to a kid. And... I owe you an apology, too. I kind of flew off the handle yesterday, pretty sure I scared your daughter, and saying you shouldn't be around kids, that was a dick move. Sorry."

"I understand, given the circumstances."

Dean nodded, and looked through the glass pane at where Ben was back to building his legos instead of putting them away, before turning back to Cas. "Listen, uh, is your daughter busy tonight?"

"Excuse me?" Cas blinked.

"Sorry, that's not-, that really came out wrong... babysitting. If she's not busy, if she could watch Ben for me, I'd like to hit the bar in town, buy you a beer. I don't have a sitter yet, so I don't get out much, and aside from customers and one jackass kid who works for me, I don't know anyone here yet." Dean explained.

"Oh." Cas nodded. "Yeah, I don't think she mentioned any plans. I don't have any either, I'll speak to her about it."

"Great, yeah, if she's up for it, just send her over around seven, I'll make sure I've got some cash for
her, and for pizza, and write down my number, show her where the first aid kit is, all of that.”

Cas knocked on Claire's bedroom door at 6:45, knowing he was cutting it close, but he had lost track of time.

"Yeah?" came the usual answer as her music was being turned down.

"Claire, get ready to leave, please. Mr. Winchester has some work for you.” Cas turned to head down the stairs, but noticed a distinct silence.

The door flew open, and Claire seemed a little out of breath. "What?"

"Mr. Winchester asked me to send you over at seven." Cas said, one foot on the second stair.

"Why?"

"We're going to a bar, and Ben isn't old enough to stay at home by himself."

"So, he wants me to take care of his kid, and that's it?" Claire asked.

Cas looked confused. "That's generally how babysitting works. Although he does want to make sure you know where the first aid kit is before he leaves you alone with his child."

Claire still looked rattled, which Cas chalked up to seeing Dean somewhat enraged at their door the day before. "Yeah, okay, I guess I can watch his kid."

"Good, he's expecting you. I have to get the recycling sorted." Cas said, finally heading down the stairs.

While considering Claire's odd behavior, it crossed his mind briefly that it could be possible Claire had a crush on Dean, but the look on Dean's face after he misspoke regarding Claire's plans for the evening gave him the distinct impression that would not be an issue.

As for himself, he wasn't sure. The dream hadn't been entirely unwelcome, and while he hadn't consciously considered the sight of Dean on his front porch the day before, tight shirt, well worn jeans sitting just a little too low, and he had been watching as Dean walked out of the yard...

It wasn't a date. Obviously. Dean was clearly looking to make friends with his neighbor. He was new to town, didn't know anyone, and probably felt fairly isolated living outside of a suburb.

Cas heard the front door close, and tried to focus on the things he needed to finish before leaving.

Dean pulled the door open as Claire came up the walk. "C'mon in... Ben! Come down stairs... Claire, right?"

Claire nodded. "Yeah."

"Ben's not going to give you any trouble, we've got a bunch of movies, order a pizza, there's a small first aid kit in the upstairs bathroom, and also..." she followed him into the kitchen, "One in here, left of the sink, see?... Couple of things, I get you're a teenager, but if you drink, smoke, or have anyone over tonight, Ben will rat you out, and not only will you not be watching him again, I'll have to tell your dad. Whatever you do the rest of the time is your business, got it?"

"Yeah. Got it. Don't worry." Claire said, giving him plenty of space as he moved back into the living
room. "My number is on the fridge, call or text if you need to, okay?"

Ben thumped his way down the stairs. Claire gave him a small wave.

"Ben, this is Claire, she's watching you tonight. Behave yourself." At Ben's nod, Dean pointed vaguely at the fridge, the location of the first aid supplies and the money he'd left for pizza, ticking off the items in his head. "Okay, I was thinking thirty bucks, not counting the pizza and if course whatever snacks and drinks are in the fridge, that sound fair?"

"Sure. But, any weird medical stuff, allergies, or mental issues I'm not supposed to talk about?" Claire asked.

"No, he's fine." Dean replied.

"Okay, then I guess we're good."

"Okay." Dean shrugged, heading for the door, before pointing back to Ben on the stairs. "Ten o'clock, unless Claire says you can stay up, then it's 10:30."

After the door closed, Claire turned to Ben, raising an eyebrow. "What do you want on your pizza?"

"Just pepperoni."

"Hmm... I thought for sure you were an anchovies and pineapple kid." Claire said, reaching for her phone.

"No. But if you want them, the pizza place can put them on your half."

Claire put her phone to her ear, "I was testing you. If you asked for gross stuff, I was going to make sure you got it. Go find a board game or something."

"Yes ma'am."

"Don't ever call me ma'am."

"Um, okay." Ben scrambled up the stairs as the pizza chain picked up on the other end.

Dean pulled his sleek, black, classic Impala out onto the gravel road, backing up around the bend, coming to a stop as Cas was locking his front door. He turned around, keys still in his hand, and stopped abruptly, getting a look at the car, as he walked to the passenger side.

"You know, I would have thought you'd drive a truck, for some reason." Cas said, buckling in.

"Well, I have one, but I wasn't planning on towing anyone. Kind of be weird to drive that to a bar." Dean remarked, starting for the highway. "So, what kind of music do they have there? I tried their website, but it was pretty crazy."

"Well, being the only bar in town, they try to accommodate everyone, but they do have theme nights. While bikers could be there any time, they normally go on Thursday nights, karaoke on Wednesday, although a restaurant also does karaoke all week, the first Monday of the month is usually a drag review, and Fridays are country western." Cas explained.

"A drag show?" Dean asked. "In a small town like this?"

"I know that's not exactly expected, with a plethora of churches in this town, but actually some of the
usual bikers were asked to handle security at the first show, and were happy to help. My understanding is that while they no longer worry about security, the bikers had such a good time they now regularly show up for it anyway."

Dean flashed him a surprised look. "Well, I guess that's good. Everybody getting along."

"Yes, we have a fairly tolerant community. Of course the town did build up around something close to a hippie commune, so that might be part of it." Cas said, watching through the windshield.

Ben leaned across the board to move his game piece as Claire pulled a second slice of pizza from the box. They sat on the floor on opposite sides of the coffee table.

"Okay, so, this exactly like every other time I've played this game. Even you can't be this boring, what else can we do?"

"Laser tag in the junkyard?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Are you serious? That sounds like a whole lot of tetanus waiting to happen." Claire said, picking at a slice of pepperoni.

"My dad climbed up on the biggest stack last time, waited until I turned around, I never saw how he got up there. It was great." Ben said. "He wouldn't tell me, either. I did figure out how to get on the roof, though."

"Why would you want to get on the roof?" Claire raised her eyebrows.

"You can see the whole town, it's pretty cool. It's hard to tell, but we're on a hill. There's a lot of trees in the way, but they're low that way," Ben said, pointing to the east side of the house. "Before we moved here, we lived on the fourth floor. I miss the balcony."

"What if you fall off the roof, though? You'll break something or die."

"Maybe. But I might not, I might die from cancer like my mom did. So, I'm not scared." Ben explained. "Where's your mom?"

"I ditched her when I came to live with my dad."

"...and she looks over at me, and she said 'Dean, he's your kid, of course he tried to fix it!' She stopped trying, though. I don't think she bought another lamp after that."

"Smart lady." Cas said as his laughter calmed.

"Yes, she was." Dean answered from across the table, taking a swig from his beer. "How about your family? Just you and Claire?"

"Yeah, well, her mother and I weren't together very long. I was... I was different then. We had split up before Claire was born, I had some things to work out anyway, and she wanted to move to California. Only saw Claire a couple of times before she moved. I figured she was right, a child should be with her mother, right? That's how it is in nature. So I said I wouldn't push for contact, just to send me pictures. That's all I asked for, pictures. Claire would talk to me on the phone sometimes, Christmas, birthdays, and then when she was about nine, I guess..." Cas took a deep breath, "I don't know, just... nothing."
"But she's your kid. You had to have somewhere to send the support checks, right?" Dean asked.

"Since we weren't married, the hospital she was born in required a DNA test to put me on the birth certificate as her father, but aside from that, we never had any formal agreement, visitation, support, none of it, I'd send money, of course course, and she'd send pictures, but then, checks started coming back undeliverable. So, just... dropped off the face of the earth."

Dean's eyebrows nearly met. "God, that must have been horrible. How'd you get back in contact?"

"Oddly enough, she found me. On Facebook." Cas started to chuckle. "She didn't send me a message, just a friend request. No explanation. I accepted it right away, and I went straight into her pictures, and I just started printing them up. It was the middle of the night, I'm printing selfies of some thirteen year old girl, and..."

Dean started chuckling along as Cas' laughter was building again, to the point where he could barely breathe.

"For... for some reason, she had saved this picture of the grumpy cat, you know that one?" Cas gasped through his laughter.

"Yeah, yeah. That's the cat that's like 'No.'" Dean said, upending his bottle.

"That's the one! And she had saved it, and I wasn't paying attention, and my boyfriend wakes up, must have thought I had completely lost my mind, and I'm digging for frames in this box in my office closet, and he's cracking closet jokes, sees all these pictures on my desk of Claire and tells me I'm a creep and he's not going blond. I was so out of it, I grabbed the first picture off the printer, and tell him this is my daughter!...but... It was the cat!"

Dean shook with laughter, picturing it in his mind's eye, fairly certain they were getting a little too loud.

Cas struggled to his feet, "I'm getting another drink, what do you want?"

"Just grab me a water. I'm driving, remember?"

Cas shook his finger in Dean's direction twice in acknowledgement, "Right!... and that is such a nice car, too!"

Cas was soon back at the table with Dean's water, a shot of something clear, and a can of soda.

"Thanks... So, how'd she wind up living with you?"

Cas set down the suddenly empty shot glass and popped open the can of soda. "That... I'm still not really sure how that happened."

"What?"

"Yeah. Just, out of the blue one day, like maybe a year, year and a half later, we had been talking again, and she says she wants to go to college here, said her mom had picked up a bad drug habit, and she wanted out. And well, what was I supposed to do?" Cas shrugged.

"That's your kid, man. You step up." Dean agreed over the music.

"Exactly! You step up. That's my baby. I still have..." Cas reached for his wallet. "I still keep this..." Cas pulled out a thoroughly worn baby picture of Claire, with ragged edges. Dean leaned forward,
reaching to steady it. "Oh, now that is sweet."

"Yeah, so, I drove... I drove all night, I get there, my ex is on the floor, the track marks were right there, there's no way Claire wasn't seeing this, so I told her to get anything she wanted to take, and I brought her home with me."

"How did your, um.. your boyfriend take it?" Dean asked.

"Oh, god, no. He was never a fan of children, he was gone before I got back. Seemed like a short term thing to start with, you know?" Cas continued at Dean's nod, "So we get back, it's three in the morning, and I take her straight to the guest room, tell her it's her room now, and we can paint it, she can put up posters or whatever, and she starts crying, and she hugs me. You know, I hadn't seen her since she was a newborn, and I just... froze."

"Ouch."

"Not my best moment, no."

"But you got her out. She wanted out."

Cas put his soda down, seemingly punctuating every word. "She- she got herself out. Next day, I told her that. I tried, I don't think it came out right. But I told her she was right, it wasn't good for her to be there, and she was very brave to ask for help."

"What did she say?"

"She rolled her eyes at me."

Dean burst with laughter. "Oh, man, that's girls, huh? Glad I've got Ben... I, uh... did I scare her yesterday, or is she always that jittery?"

"You noticed that?" Cas asked quietly. "Yeah, she, um... I don't know if it's anxiety, I tried to ask her about that once... No, so many times... She doesn't like to talk about anything before she got here. And if I push her to talk about it... the last time I asked, she started throwing things, so I let it go. Whatever happened, I don't know, men make her uncomfortable... Kind of makes things difficult for me, but that's my daughter. Her needs come first."

"You're a good man, Cas. Really. I mean that." Dean said.

"Heh.. no." Cas said quietly, shaking his head. "If that were true, I would have been more involved, actually insisted on seeing her. Maybe got her here sooner, I don't know."

"You do what you can with what you got. I stand by what I said." Dean said, downing the last of his water.

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Dean shut the door quietly, and turned around to see minimal junk food wrappers, soda cans, a pizza box, and a neat stack of games on the coffee table. Claire was dozed off on the couch on her side with a paperback still open in one hand.

Dean stepped closer to the back of the couch and tapped her shoulder. "Hey..."

Claire's eyes snapped open, and in catching sight of Dean, her entire body gave a jolt.

Dean yanked his hand away, bringing them both up in front of him, "Sorry! Just, did you want to crash here, or head home? I can get you a blanket."
Claire sat up, still a little shaky. "No, I'm gonna go."

"Okay. Um, your dad is a little toasted, so, uh, go easy on him, okay?" Dean said.

"Yeah, sure." Claire answered, shoving her book into her purse and making a beeline for the door.

"Hang on," Dean said, reaching for the table near the door, "You forgot something."

Claire turned around, her hand on the knob, and a far too apprehensive look on her face. Dean was holding a couple of twenty dollar bills to her at arm's length.

"I really appreciate you watching Ben for me, and not trashing the house. His last sitter was just awful about it."

"Yeah, no problem." Claire said quietly, taking the money.

"Listen, it's late, and it's dark, so do me a favor and shut off your front porch light when you get there so I know you got home okay, I can see it from Ben's window." Dean said, shifting slightly. "You want a flashlight?"

"Nah, got one on my phone." Claire answered, stepping through the door. "See ya."

Dean closed it behind her.

Feeling hyper aware, Claire pulled her phone out of her pocket and turned on the camera flash light, making her way out of the gate. She was certain Dean had nearly offered to walk her home. She made it to the crunch of the gravel road before her breath quickened and the shaking started.

Step by step she tried to walk through her panic attack, but wound up leaning on one of the thicker posts holding up the barbed wire of the ranch.

As she began to calm down, Claire's anger built. Holding the top of the post with one hand, holding her purse back with she other, she kicked furiously at the bottom of the post, until the foot holding her weight slipped, and she landed on her hip, scratching the palm of her hand as it slipped from the post.

Carefully, Claire got to her feet, and continued to head for her home, brushing the dirt off her jeans with the back of her hand. She brushed at her face with her sleeve, mostly out of habit, and was almost surprised to find her cheeks dry.

Her steps automatic, she climbed the stairs to the front door, and barely remembered to hit the light switch on the way in. The only thing that kept her focused enough to manage it was the thought of Dean coming over in the middle of the night to check if she had gotten home.

Most of the house was dark, but a light came down the stairs.

Passing the doorway en route to her room, Claire found Cas in his office, sitting in his desk chair, holding a framed picture he'd taken down from the wall, but staring at a few close to the ceiling.

Claire usually avoided the office, finding the plethora of her own face on one wall slightly unnerving, but despite the evening she'd had, she was curious to see what Dean considered 'toasted.'

"Uh, I'm back. I locked up."

Cas turned to look at her. She couldn't make out which picture he was holding, but the wall he was
facing was so covered in frames, the empty nail was glaringly obvious. "Good... that's good. You're a good kid, Claire."

"So, what's that?" she gestured to the frame he was holding.

Cas looked down at it, and for a moment Claire wondered if he had forgotten he took it down from the wall. "This... this is my favorite."

Claire stepped closer as he turned the frame to show her, a smile spreading across his face. "Your mother said it was a costume contest at a Halloween festival. You were seven."

"Right. Cinderella. She had my hair pinned so tight, the shoes didn't fit, I was miserable, but she was hoping I'd get the two hundred bucks for first place. I got third."

Cas' face fell. "I'm sorry..."

"No, it's okay. I'm just glad it makes somebody happy." Claire watched as Cas put the picture face down on the desk. "I'm sorry, I didn't mean to ruin it for you... Why is it your favorite?"

Cas wobbled slightly as he shifted in his chair, looking over the wall full of photographs. "When I got that in the mail, I just... I don't know, it just... you had this look in your eyes... like you were a real princess. And when I came to see you in the hospital, and the nurse brought you out, and put you in my arms, the first time I saw you, that's what she said, she said 'here's your princess.'"

"Okay..." Claire said softly, drawing out the word. "So you're having one of those emotional parent moments."

"I don't... I don't know what this is. I think... I messed up. I wasn't a good father to you, I wasn't involved until you had to tell me, flat out, to come get you." Cas said, standing up. "I let you down, and I'm sorry."

"Drunken emotional parent moment." Claire said with a nod.

Cas carefully pulled Claire into a tense hug. "I'm trying."

"Yeah, well, you were a better parent than mom just by showing up when I told you. So, don't worry about it." Claire said, muffled by Cas' upper arm.

Cas, at a loss for words, squeezed her tighter, then made his way out of the room. Claire waited until she heard his bedroom door close before stepping to the desk, and picking up the picture.

The girl staring up at her from the frame had big, clear blue eyes, held her head high, and had a look of hidden defiance behind her fake smile. That child had shouldered one too many loads, and had learned to deal with it.

Fifty dollars for mom instead of trick or treating with friends had been the outcome of that evening, just one of many disappointments in her life.

Claire moved to the wall, and put the picture back on it's nail before heading for her own room.
"Claaaaaaire beaaaaaar..."

"What, Kevin?" Claire asked, irritated.

Kevin dropped into the seat next to her. "Jeez, calm down. Did Abigail get a date for prom?"

"Yeah, she's going with Jim." Claire said, closing her book and stuffing another tater tot in her mouth.

"Darn. I'm down to four." Kevin muttered.

"Four what?"

Will sat down across the table from her. "Dates. He doesn't have a girlfriend, so, in the spirit of charity, he's offered up himself to all the single ladies."

"What does that even mean?" Claire asked, shaking her head.

"I'm making sure no girl skips prom for lack of a date." Kevin grinned. "Just tweeted asking out every girl in our grade last week, and said I was cool with it if they had a date already. Got a bunch of responses, actually."

"Yeah, he's taking on the rejects, and bringing polygamy into our school." Will said, throwing a fry at Kevin.

"It's only polygamy if you marry them." Kevin dipped the fry in his mustard and threw it back, making sure it landed in the rest of the fries.

"Gross... on both counts." Will replied. "So, Carter's dad is getting us a limo, but we're not picking you up on that crap road, right?"

"No, we're all getting ready at Abigail's." Claire answered.

"Good... I hate that road." Will said.

"Yeah, you've said that a bunch of times, like when you started dropping me off at the mailboxes." Claire responded.

"You do that? Dude!" Kevin shook his head. "Not smooth."

"Yeah, you'd think his big freaking truck could handle it." Claire muttered.
"Oh, the truck can handle it, I just got tired of your dad looking at me like I was some kind of ex con." Will shrugged.

"Wow... Claire, seriously, dump his ass. I'll set you up with Sandman." Kevin said, nudging her shoulder.

"Who?"

"He was a senior, dropped out last month, lives across the street from me. He's got a Harley, and he carries in my mom's groceries when I'm not home." Kevin explained.

"So, you want to fix him up with Claire to get him away from your mom?" Will said. "Good plan."

"He's a great guy. And if that doesn't work, you can go with me." Kevin said, flashing a big grin.

"Right. Because blanket invitation." Claire said.

Kevin shrugged, "Hey, if you bring a blanket, I'm sure we can find a use for it."

"Yeah, put it in the floor of the dog kennel for the rest of your dates." Will snorted.

"Why do you that? Tear people down like that?" Kevin asked, leaning over the table slightly.

"What? I like hot chicks. Is that so bad?" Will said, vaguely waving a hand toward Claire, who was opening her book again.

"No, Claire's a total babe, you are, Claire, quit shaking your head, but she could do better. I'm just thinking maybe your mom dropped you on your head or something."

Will looked past them, "There's Chaz, I gotta run. Claire, you want to meet up at six?"

Claire didn't bother to look up as she gave him a thumbs up before he took off, scooping up his tray.

"Seriously?... That's how he asks you out?" Kevin said, before mocking Will in a deeper voice.

"Claire, wait at the mailboxes, I'll be over when I feel like it."

Claire smiled slightly, but didn't answer.

"Oh my god! He picks you up at the mailboxes? How far do you have to walk?"

"It's not-"

"Oh my god. Claire... Don't. Just... God, he sucks! I know a bunch of great guys, I can fix you up. Seriously!"

Claire shook the her head slightly, continuing to stare at the page.

"Okay, fine. But he's still an asshole, so when he messes up, you call me, I'll figure out your rebound, okay? And bodyguards, if you need them." Kevin patted her shoulder as he got up from the table.

Cas jumped when the front door slammed shut. Hurrying down the stairs, contract for the next school fundraiser still in his hand, he met Claire on the bottom step. "What is it? What's wrong?"

Claire was shaking, avoiding his gaze, and tried to duck around him. One of her cheeks was redder
than the other, and slightly swollen.

"Claire!" Cas blocked her. "What happened?"

Claire shook her head, "I don't want to talk about it."

"No, that's not going to work this time, this isn't something from years ago, this is now. What happened?"

Claire attempted to duck under his arm. Cas grabbed her shoulder, causing her to stop immediately where she was.

"Who hit you?... Claire, who hit you?"

Claire's eyes fixed to empty space. Cas turned her to face him, and reached for her head to turn it to the light to get a better look at the side of her face. As his hand made contact with her hair, her eyes blinked a couple of times, quickly, and she shoved him away.

Cas caught himself on the wall, steadying himself, but Claire's fist flew out of nowhere, catching him in the face. In a few brief seconds before he wrapped her in a bear hug from behind, pinning her fists to her chest with his arms, he lost track of how many punches she had landed.

"Let go! Let go of me! Don't touch me! Stop it!" Claire shrieked.

Cas pulled her further away from the stairs, into the closest open area on the floor before the growing dizziness and pressure in his sinuses made him drop to his knees. Still struggling, Claire went silent as she sat down hard.

"Claire, I'm going to let go. I'm going to get some air while you calm down." Cas said, in what he hoped was a soothing manner.

Claire was still shaking, harder now, and her voice came in a quiet whine. "You're bleeding on my arm."

"I know. You hit me pretty hard." Cas took a deep breath, finding it rattling slightly. "I'm going to let go, and I'm going outside. I'll come back in a little while, we will need to talk about this."

Cas let go carefully, backing away quickly and going out the front door. He waited on the porch, listening, unsure what to do next. When he didn't hear anything being thrown, or the sound of crying, he went to his car, getting a few leftover take-out napkins from the center console, using them to clean up and staunch the blood coming from his nose.

Leaning back on his car, bloody napkins still held to his face, Cas could see through the curtains of the living room window that Claire hadn't moved from the spot where he left her. She had curled into a slumped cross-legged position, possibly hyperventilating.

Dean dropped into the porch chair with his beer, enjoying the night air, and clear sky full of stars. He had shut off the yard lights, and they were far enough out of town the city glow wasn't too overpowering.

Taking a drink from his beer, he considered a call he'd gotten from his brother. It had been awkward, to be sure, not having heard from him in a few years, other than Christmas cards and Lisa's funeral. Somehow, in the move from the city, his engagement announcement had gotten lost in the mail.
A quiet sound of someone walking on the gravel road caught his attention. Cas was walking home from the mailboxes, a sale ad and white envelope in his hand.

"Hey Cas!" Dean called. He didn't have to raise his voice much to be heard, in the heavy stillness. "Come have a beer."

With a shrug that carried the weight of the world, Cas changed course, and made for the porch. Coming up the steps, however...

"Holy crap, what happened to your face?" Dean said, stunned.

"I, um... Claire."

"Claire did that?"

Cas nodded. "She came home with a bruise on her face, wouldn't talk to me, I tried to stop her from going upstairs because she just shuts down when she does, and when I tried to see how bad it was, well..."

"Baby girl can throw a punch, huh?... If that's what she did to you, what happened to the person who hit her?" Dean asked, getting up, heading for the door. "You need to get some ice on that, c'mon."

Cas shrugged again and followed him inside. "She wouldn't tell me who hit her, but she did have a date tonight... I don't trust that kid she's seeing."

"She came home with a bruise on her face and wouldn't talk about it, hell, I don't trust them either." Dean pulled a tray of ice from the freezer, setting it on the counter with a dish towel. "I've got some guns, if one turned up missing, you know, I can keep my mouth shut."

Cas looked up, and for a moment Dean couldn't tell if he was amused or horrified. "I'd be lying if I said that didn't sound like a good idea."

Dean dumped several pieces of ice into the dish towel and passed it to Cas, before turning back to the fridge, pulling out another beer, popping the top off quickly and setting it down in front of Cas. "How long does it usually take for her to calm down?"

"I don't know. She's never gotten this violent before, just threw things." Cas said, ice pack in one hand, picking up the beer with the other.

"That's not good." Dean said, shaking his head.

Cas nodded. "I told her she was going to have to talk about it when I came back, but if I go too soon, I don't know how she'll react."

"I can go see if she's calmed down, if you want to wait here." Dean offered, getting a small nod in response.

Dean went slowly up the steps of the porch, taking a quick look in through the glass of the door. Claire was sitting with her back to the wall, her legs out straight, and a telephone table upended next to her.

She seemed calm, and Dean was about to slip away again, when she looked up, catching his eyes. Caught, Dean cracked the door slowly. Claire was staring at her shoes.
He moved inside quietly, closing the door. "So, your dad's face is pretty torn up."

"I bet."

"What about you, are you okay?"

"Yeah."

Dean sighed. "That's real convincing."

"Yeah, well..."

Dean sat down on the floor, closer to the door than to Claire. "Did your dad hit you?"

Claire looked up, shocked, giving Dean a better look at the bruise. "No."

"Right, he wouldn't, would he?" Dean shook his head.

"It was just an argument. Unless you want to tell me you never got into it with your dad." Claire said, scoffing.

"Yeah, I did. But he was the one throwing the punches... It wasn't right for him to do that to me then, and it's not right for you to do that to Cas now."

Dean watched as Claire hung her head. He waited, trying to give her time in case she had anything to say, but her silence was clear.

"Your dad's coming back over here. He figures it's your date that hit you... Is he right?"

Claire gave the slightest nod.

"And that person, you hit them back?"

Claire's eyes went toward the back of the house.

"Right... You let loose on Cas because he won't hit you. Well, at least you feel safe at home, huh?" Dean waited, but getting no response, got to his feet, righted the telephone table, intentionally ignoring Claire's flinch as he set it down next to her, and left.

Claire raised her head when the door swung open again. Cas' eyes were loaded with a pain that wasn't physical.

"Claire..."

"It was Will. Happy now?" Claire asked, getting up from the floor.

"No!" Claire jerked, as his voice came louder than he intended.

"No, I'm not 'happy now,' did you look in the mirror? Did you see what he did to your face?" Cas' voice went quieter, "...Is that all he did?"

Claire turned toward the stairs. "I'm fine. I can take a slap to the face without bugging the neighbors."

"Bugging the neighbors?" Cas shifted where he stood. "What is that supposed to mean?"
Claire slowly started up the stairs.

"You're not seeing Will anymore, Claire. I won't allow it." Cas called after her.

Claire froze. "Great, you want to ground me from the prom, too? Go ahead, because then I won't have a date anyway. Saves you some money on the damn dress."

Cas shrugged helplessly. "You're not grounded from the prom. Just find someone else to go with, and stay away from people who hit you."

"Yeah, maybe take your own advice on that." Claire muttered, continuing up the stairs.

Grateful for the three day weekend, Cas had called in sick on Tuesday to let the bruises fade a little more.

Late Wednesday morning, there was a knock at his door. He had been hoping to hole up in his office, avoiding his coworkers as much as possible, under the pretense of backed up paperwork.

"Yes?"

Leslie poked her head in. "We had a issue on the playground, Ben Winchester asked if he could talk to you instead of the counselor."

"That's fine." Cas nodded.

Leslie pushed the door further open, and made her way back to the front desk as Ben came in and sat down.

After a few moments of silence, Cas spoke up. "You know I'm not trained to counsel children, Ben. You really should talk to the counselor."

"Her office smells weird." Ben said, his voice barely a whisper.

Cas nodded. "It's supposed to help. But I agree, it does smell weird."

Ben looked around the room. It was fairly average, only a couple framed photos of Claire on the filing cabinet in the corner marked it as Cas'. Turning back to the desk, Ben bit his lower lip. "I didn't hit him this time, he just said I did."

Cas nodded slightly. "Did anyone see it that can verify that?"

Ben shrugged. "There were a bunch of other kids, but when he told Ms. Parks, none of them said anything."

Cas took a deep breath. "I wasn't there, Ben, so of course I don't know whether that is true or not, but if it's true that you kept yourself under control, then you're making progress. Unfortunately unless we hear from a third party, you'll be at a desk in the hall again."

"My dad is coming to help with ice cream at lunch, can you tell him?" Ben asked softly.

"Of course." Cas answered with a nod, just as Uri Garrison appeared in the doorway.

"Cas, did you review the contract for the fundraiser? Leslie needs to know whether to call them back." Uri said over his neon green clipboard.
"Yes, I went over it yesterday, it looks like exactly what we need." Cas answered.

Uri took a moment longer, clearly noticing Ben's presence in the room before nodding and moving back into the hall.

"I'll have your father bring you your lunch, in the meantime, I'll be collecting some work from your teachers and I'll ask if any of the adults outside saw what happened. Are you in the same class?"

Ben nodded.

"There are only a few months left, I'll make sure you're not in the same class next year, but moving either of you to a different class now would be a last resort."

Cas stood, and moved to stand next to Ben, putting a hand on the back of his shoulders. "It's going to be all right, Ben. You just have to be patient and do what you can to stay out of trouble until we get this sorted out. Of course any time you need to talk, my door is always open."

Cas turned to see him out to the hallway, only to find Uri walking past with an unexpectedly pointed look.

"Keep it moving, but don't crowd." Dean told the children in the front of the line, collecting their ice cream.

Cas walked up to stand next to him, watching the flow of the children at the freezer. "Ben is in the office again. He says he didn't hit the other child, but officially, I can't take sides. It would be all right if you want to eat with him there."

Dean heaved a sigh. "Yeah, okay... When he said that, did he, uh, kind of flinch his cheek up a little?"

"I don't think so. Why?"

"He does that when he's lying. It's real obvious, you would have noticed it." Dean explained.

"I have to speak to the teachers who were on the playground and bring him some worksheets." Cas said quietly.

Dean nodded, "Yeah, I'll bring his lunch in after I'm done here. He won't mind waiting a bit. Thanks for telling me."

Claire sat at her usual table, across from Will and Kevin. Chaz joined and Katie joined them a moment later.

"It's crap, and you know it's crap. You just need to show him you're not going to take it, babe." Will said.

"Whatever." Claire muttered.

Kevin shook his head. "But you punched your dad? Punched him? Is that normal at your house?"

Chaz looked up from his sandwich. "Yeah, well, her dad probably doesn't have your bitchy mom's sweet Kung Fu moves."

"Sorry," Kevin answered him, "All I heard in my bubble of positivity over here is that you said my
mom is sweet. Which she is. So shut up... Claire, seriously, what the hell?"

"I lost my temper. Besides, he's a lot bigger than me, not like it could have hurt that bad." Claire said, rubbing the side of her face.

"Did he take your phone?" Katie asked. "My folks take my phone any chance they get."

"No." Claire answered. "Actually, he's never taken my phone."

"Shit, you could get away with anything," Will chuckled. "The guy sounds like a complete pushover. I'll pick you up tonight."

Claire shook her head. "School night, not gonna work."

"Yeah, sneak out. He'll never know you were gone."

"I've got a test tomorrow, and unlike you, I need the grade for a scholarship. I'll text you, though." Claire said, getting up.

Dean set the insulated tote down on the desk and pulled up a second chair from another empty cubicle.

"Sorry, dad." Ben whispered.

"Did you do something wrong?" Dean asked, looking Ben in the eyes.

"No, sir."

"Then don't apologize." Dean turned, opening the bag, and putting a reusable container in front of his son. "If you apologize for something you didn't do, that's lying. Remember that."

Ben opened the lid, accepting a plastic fork from Dean, who continued to take things out of the bag. "Mr. Novak said he's going to try to help."

"Yeah, well, Mr. Novak seems like a good guy." Dean said. "Did you talk to the counselor again?"

"No, I asked if I could talk to Mr. Novak instead, and they said it was okay."

Dean nodded thoughtfully. "That's not his job, you know? You're supposed to talk to the counselor, that's her job."

Ben shrugged uncomfortably.

"You don't like the counselor?" Dean guessed, taking a bite of his food.

Ben looked past him down the hall to check for other people before shaking his head.

Dean nodded again. "Okay."

After a space of fairly comfortable silence, Dean spoke again. "So, you wanna tell me what he did this time?"

Ben looked down. "He said something about mom."

"Cheap shot." Dean said quietly.
"If I don't have any homework, can I help in the shop after school?" Ben asked.

"I don't know, Ben, I'm getting behind with Alfie stuck working the desk. I need to get things done fast, not be worrying about whether you're in a safe spot." Dean said with a twinge of heartache watching Ben's face fall. "Hey, if I can catch up, we'll go do something fun this weekend, okay?"

Ben nodded and reached for his drink as footsteps came down the hallway. Dean turned slightly in his chair to see Cas approaching.

"Well, we had three adults outside when it happened, but none of them saw it. Unfortunately since the issue in the cafeteria, it's assumed to be a repeat. I'm sorry." Cas said. "The teachers know there's an issue, the other student is going to be pulled for a long discussion with the counselor, and they're going to try to keep them separated as much as possible."

Dean shrugged. "I could call the boy's parents."

"I can't release their information, or recommend that you do. This is one area where parental involvement tends to make things worse."

Dean nodded. "Okay. But if this kid is going to keep saying this stuff, and Ben is going to wind up in here whether he hits him or not, you're not giving Ben much reason to hold back."

"It's unfortunate, I understand. But steps are being taken to remedy this." Cas said.

Dean nodded slowly. "Ben, you know the rules here, you do what you can, okay? And if you can't, you go by my rules, you understand?"

Ben nodded, and continued to eat, as Dean stood, taking Ben's far shoulder, and giving him a squeeze against his side. "I gotta get back to work, I'll see you when you get off the bus."

Dean picked up the empty reusable containers, leaving Ben with a few things in disposable packaging and his water bottle.

Cas followed Dean down the hall to the front office. Finally out of range of Ben, Cas hissed to Dean, "What does that mean?... Dean, please tell me what that was about."

Dean signed out on the visitor/volunteer paper, looking up at the wall clock to mark the time. "Cas, you have some time to make the school make this right. Ben's got a pretty long fuse, so more time than you'd think. But after that, you're going to want plausible deniability. Okay?"

Cas followed him through the doors to the parking lot as he spoke, "Dean, the other student in this situation-

"Is a kid. And making stupid decisions, probably to make himself feel better about something awful. Trust me, I know." Dean said, not slowing as he made for his Impala, sorting out his keys. "That used to be me. My dad would knock me on my ass as soon as look at me, and I'd go to school banged up and do the same thing to whoever was handy, until high school, when I snapped, put a kid in the hospital, and got expelled. Luckily I had a good boss, pushed me to get my G.E.D., and let me crash in a spare room he had over his office when my dad kicked me out."

"Dean, please, what did you tell Ben?" Cas asked insistently.

"You know what else? He told me once, a real man doesn't use his fists to get his point across. Now, Ben lost it the other day in the cafeteria, but if he wants to stay out of trouble at home, he's not going to get violent, not unless someone else starts it, and only enough to protect himself." Dean put one
hand on the roof of the car as he unlocked the door. "If he starts acting like he can't take any more, and you have a chance to shut him down, you tell him you're only asking him for one more mile. It'll help him get through it."

Cas looked around the parking lot helplessly and frustrated as Dean got inside, slamming the door, then headed back into the school.
Claire picked up her cell phone from its spot next to her book. "Yeah, not doing that."

She put it back down on her desk, and continued to study.

It buzzed. Again, she checked the screen and rolled her eyes. Quickly, she pulled a saved picture from her gallery, of a small mother dog laying on her back, and sent it, with the words 'Only nipples you're gonna get'

"Claire? Dinner." she heard Cas call from the bottom of the stairs.

Tromping down the stairs and settling into her usual spot at the table, Cas brought a bowl of green beans from the microwave, setting them down next to a prepackaged casserole as he took his seat.

Claire was silent, and still avoiding looking at Cas directly. The bruises still showed, but they were healing quickly.

"I assume you've spoken to Will by now-"

"Maybe I should eat in my room, this test is important." Claire cut him off.

"I just want to know how he took it, if you feel safe at school." Cas said calmly.

Claire leaned back in her seat, tapping her fork on her plate. "He said you're a pushover, and I should sneak out because you'd never know I was gone."

Cas picked at his food with his fork. "You seem to share that opinion. But believe me, Claire, if you were gone, I would certainly notice."

Claire rolled her eyes.

"Dean came by earlier, he had a suggestion for some work you could do, something that might keep you busy, he said he can arrange it around your schoolwork." Cas said in an attempt to change the subject.

"He really wants me watching his kid after this weekend?" Claire scoffed.

"No, actually, he doesn't. Not until some time has passed." Cas said, "Something else. He made some good points."

Cas didn't notice Claire's stressed reaction.
"Great. Great, yeah. I guess I should have seen that coming." Claire mumbled.

"He said you could stop by after dinner, ...or tomorrow, if you're still studying. It was starting to rain, though, so you might need an umbrella." Cas said quietly.

Claire was silent through the rest of the meal before clearing her plate and heading straight back to her desk upstairs.

With shaking hands she grabbed her phone, stumbling through her text message.

'Meet me at the mailboxes'

Dean made his way through the darkened house with a large heavy duty flashlight, listening to the sounds of rainfall and thunder.

He locked the door, and made his way to the fridge, fumbling slightly as he grabbed a beer.

The power had been out for over an hour, and Ben had gone to bed, but he still felt wired.

Popping the cap off the bottle, he was headed for his armchair when over the sound of thunder, he heard an insistent knocking at the door.

Changing course, he pulled the door open. "Cas? Everything okay?"

"Look, I don't want to talk about it. Talk about anything else." Claire said from the passenger seat.

"Okay. Um... colors for prom? Do I have to match your dress or something?" Will said, putting the truck in park. "I'm not wearing pink."

Claire shook her head. "I don't even care if we go anymore. We could just skip town."

Will shrugged. "You could. I'm good where I'm at. But if you ditch, I'm gonna be swarmed by all the other babes that want a piece of me."

"Yeah, like Jenny?" Claire snapped.

"Hey, what was I supposed to do, huh? I was drinking, and she wanted to have a good time." Will answered. "Unlike some people."

Claire shook her head. "Shut up."

"Hell, we could be having a good time right now." Will said, shifting in his seat.

Claire crossed her arms and shrank back into her seat. "Not a good time for this."

"Yeah, well, it's never a good time for you. You should see a doctor if you got a period that lasts the whole time we've been dating." Will replied.

Claire checked her phone again. "If I hear back from Abigail or Katie, can you drop me off there?"

Will gave an exasperated roll of his head and looked out his window. "That's it, huh? Just using me to get a ride? Great. Don't feel like you owe me or anything."

"Why would I owe you?" Claire asked with a hint or attitude. "And what is it exactly you think I
owe you?"

"C'mon, Claire. You don't have to be a genius to figure that out. All I'm saying is, I'm sure you've got some time while your friends check with their folks, and then... Sure, I'll drive you wherever. Otherwise, I'm guessing we're about four and a half, five miles out, and the closest place is your house anyway."

Claire glared at him. "It's pouring now, and you're seriously going to be like that?"

Will shrugged and chuckled. "I know what I want, and how to get it."

Claire grabbed her backpack and reached for the door handle.

"It's almost eleven, what's up?" Dean swung the door aside as Cas set his soaked umbrella down on the covered porch.

"Is Claire still over here?" Cas asked, stepping inside.

Dean shook his head, "She never came by."

Cas rubbed at his face. "When the power went out, I went to ask her if she wanted a flashlight so she wouldn't run her phone out of battery, but she's not anywhere in the house, or the storage building, so I assumed you were both discussing your job offer, and lost track of time... I don't understand, she has a test tomorrow, she's usually very responsible."

"You guys didn't have another fight, did you? Maybe she took off to a friend's house." Dean suggested.

Cas shrugged.

"Okay, uh... Why don't you check in the shop, and I'll go get my generator running, if I get the yard lights on, it'll be easier no matter where we're looking, and if she comes back up the road, we'll see her." Dean said, handing Cas a set of keys, one sorted out from the rest.

"Okay." Cas nodded, heading for the door.

Dean threw on a heavy jacket from the nearby coat closet and followed him out.

At the base of the steps, Cas made a beeline for the repair shop, and Dean broke off toward a small utility shed.

Inside the shop, Cas was well aware when the yard lights came on, because the interior went from pitch black, to near-dawn.

"Claire?... Claire, if you're in here, please come out." Cas looked around the office, and made his way out to the bays. "Claire?"

Dean shut the shed tight against the rain, spotted Cas locking the office door again, and made his way over, avoiding a few of the larger mud puddles.

"I don't think she's in the shop." Cas said passing him his keys. "This really isn't like her, I think I should start calling her friends' parents, in case one of them knows something."

"No, look," Dean said, pointing to a figure coming up the gravel road, passing the first driveway
leading to the repair shop, "that's her, right? No one else would be out here."

Cas didn't wait for Dean to finish speaking before walking quickly out of the driveway gate for the house, and going straight to her.

By the time Dean caught up, Cas had Claire's face in his hands, and in the bright yard lights, Dean could see her lips were blue. She was soaked head to toe, blonde strands plastered to her face and neck. Her eyes looked glazed and she seemed less than aware of her surroundings.

"Claire, where were you? Are you hurt? What happened?" Cas grabbed her shoulder and shook it gently, but failed to get a response. "Dean, she's freezing."

"Yeah, looks like it. My place is closer."

Cas nodded, pulling Claire along below the umbrella. Claire was watching the ground around her feet as they moved slowly across the yard toward Dean's house. Half way from to gate to the door, Claire suddenly pulled back from the arm Cas had around her shoulders. "No, I'm not going in there."

"Hypothermia isn't a joke, Claire, come on." Cas pulled at her arm.

Claire panicked, throwing her weight into getting away from him, but slipped, dragging them both to the ground. She felt something heavy against the side of her foot in the patch of dead grass to the side of the drive. She felt around for it and quickly had it in her hand, and struggled to her feet.

She was shaking again. The shaking had stopped somewhere between Will's truck and the gravel road, but everything was a blur. She wasn't sure she had the energy left to defend herself, but she couldn't stop.

"So, what, you're gonna pimp me out like mom did?" Claire asked.

Cas got up, looking confused. "What? Are you talking about the costume contests and beauty pageants she put you in?"

Cas moved closer, still set on getting her inside. Claire shoved his arm away. "You can't. I'm not doing this anymore."

"Claire, your temperature is too low, do you know where you are?" Dean asked. "If we don't get you warmed up, you're going to be leaving in an ambulance."

Cas tried again to get close to Claire, but backed quickly when she raised the metal bar in her hand, pointing one end at him. "No!... God, you're just like her!"

"Okay, what? What is it?" Cas asked, putting his hands up, palms out.

"She was on drugs a long time before I called you, barely made rent, until she couldn't do that either, but you know what her landlord said? He said 'If there's grass on the field, play ball.'" Claire said, letting her hand drop.

"Oh my god." Dean gasped quietly, feeling his heart wrench.

"I don't know what that means, Claire... Is that a baseball thing?" Cas asked, shaking his head.

Claire's face quickly twisted through a range of emotions, the most obvious seemed to be betrayal. Claire moved back, and Cas tried to take a step toward her, only to realize she was swinging the bar
Dean grabbed Claire's arms interrupting her swing before she could connect, and lifted her bodily from the ground, one hand shaking the bar from her hands. "Claire, you have to stop. Nobody's gonna hurt you. But we need to get you inside. You're too cold, it's making you sick."

Claire continued to struggle near mindlessly as Dean shook his head in frustration and adjusted his grip.

"Okay, if that's how we gotta do this..." Dean said, heading for the porch. "Cas, can you get the door?"

Going up the stairs carefully, Claire struggling the entire way, Dean regretfully shoved his way through his bedroom, depositing the sopping, muddy, furious mess that was Claire onto the floor of the master bath. Dean backed out immediately, pulling the door shut, thankful to see Cas in the room with him.

"Claire, listen to me. You took a swing at your father with a tire iron... You could have killed him, do you understand that?... You need to get warm, the water heater is gas, so the shower will work fine for that. There's a basket of clean stuff in here on the chair by the door, it's Ben's, it'll fit. Get cleaned up, and come down stairs. I'm gonna lock the door on our way out... Nobody's gonna bother you, I promise." Dean went quiet, looking over to Cas in the dim light coming through the windows from the yard. Through the door, he wasn't sure if what he heard was frantic breaths or sobbing, but the lock on the bathroom door clicked, and he could hear footsteps inside.

Dean followed Cas into the hall, turning the lock and pulling the door shut. One of the other doors was cracked open, "Dad?... What's going on?"

"Go back to bed, Ben." Dean answered.

Downstairs, Dean led the way to the kitchen. "You want a drink?... Hell, after a bombshell like that, I need one."

Cas shook his head. "No, I better not... I've never heard that before, 'grass on the field'?"

Dean raised his eyebrows. "You've never heard that? Where did you go to high school?"

"A boarding school in Germany, actually." Cas answered.

Dean nodded, pouring whiskey over a small glass of ice. "I don't think either of the kids need to hear this, but you do."

"So, then, ...when she said 'pimped out,' ...she wasn't being figurative." Cas said quietly from his chair on the porch, shaken by the discussion. "Her mother allowed this man to..."

Dean wordlessly offered Cas the rest of his whiskey, which was gratefully accepted and quickly consumed.

"I wasn't messing around, man. She really could have killed you if she hit you right. And she needs help to deal with this." Dean said softly, trying to keep it together, rubbing at the corners of his eyes with his first finger and thumb.

"Yeah... what you said about anger management earlier, take it out on a project, I still think that's a good idea, but you're right. She, um... she needs professional help. This is..." Cas' voice cracked, "I
can't fix this."

"You already did as much as you could, even though you didn't know. Now this is..." Dean had a hint of anger in his voice, "This is fucked up, but if you knew that was happening?... You still would have gone and picked her up, you just would have killed him on the way out of town. You can't beat yourself up over something that you didn't know."

Cas shook his head. "It's a wonder she trusts anyone, her own mother..."

Dean took the empty glass as Cas passed it back to him, and set it on the small table to his other side. A particularly bright flash of lightning revealed streaks of tears Cas didn't bother to hide.

"I need to go clean up and get Claire something warm to wear home, but I don't know if I should leave." Cas muttered.

"What's the worst that could happen?" Dean asked quietly.

"She might go after you with a tire iron." Cas said, wiping one cheek.

"Well, she's tough, but I don't think she'll go after me like she does with you."

"Why's that?"

"Because she doesn't trust me." Dean said flatly.

Dean put the empty glass in the sink and heard the sound of the shower upstairs turning off.

He put a small pot of water on the stove, setting a mug on the counter, and dumping two envelopes of hot chocolate mix into it. He pulled a temporal thermometer out of the first aid kid, listening closely to the quiet activity upstairs.

As soon as the water was hot enough, he mixed in into the mug, and took it and the thermometer to the living room.

He set the mug on the windowsill to the right of his armchair, and went to the bottom of the stairs as Claire came down. She had taken some drawstring athletic shorts and a tshirt from the basket upstairs, and her hair was still very damp. She gave the occasional involuntary tremble.

Dean reached for her temple, even as she gave him a distinct glare, but she didn't pull away.

Checking the reading with his flashlight, he set the thermometer down, and picked up a folded quilt he had set on the couch. "Not good, you're still too cold."

Claire tried to reach for the blanket, but he already had it around her, and walked her further into the living room by her shoulders.

In a quick motion she wasn't expecting, Dean put one foot on the footstool in front of his armchair, and turned to sit down, purposefully upsetting her shaky balance. He was sitting all the way to the left, and she had landed almost entirely to the right, legs at an angle over his outstretched shins, and sunk too deeply between him and the side of the chair to make struggling a viable option.

Still very cocooned in the blanket, she asked, "What the hell are you doing?"

"First aid." Dean replied. Carefully he picked up the hot chocolate with his right, passing it carefully around her to his left hand, and handing it to her. "Here. It'll help get your temperature up."
Claire eyed the mug suspiciously. "How do I know it's not drugged?"

"You don't. But let's face it, if I was going to hurt you, I wouldn't need to drug you first, that was pretty clear getting up the stairs. And your dad's going to be back any time anyway... Drink up." Dean said quietly.

Cas' heart felt heavier with each step up the dark stairs. Out of habit, he found himself in his office, looking anywhere but the smiling photographs of his daughter.

They were lies. He wondered vaguely if she'd been ordered to smile for the camera, if any of them had been honest happiness. He thought about how Claire acted day to day, and wondered if he had ever seen her smile in a way that wasn't forced.

In the dark, his eyes still went to his favorite, the place on the wall so familiar. In contrast with the ones around it, this photo held a regal look of grim determination, entirely inappropriate for such a small child.

He realized what he was actually seeing was Claire's true face, maybe not happy, but impossibly strong.

He sat down hard and buried his face in his hands.
"Fix cars?"

"Yeah."

"I don't know how to do that."

"I didn't either when I started. But the jackass I've got working the desk is stuck there until he can stand up, since he crashed his bike."

"You could just stick him on one of those rolly things and shove him under the car."

Dean figured Claire had to be warming up, because the heat under the blanket containing her was making him drowsy. She seemed far more alert.

The yard lights suddenly went out, making the room even darker than before. "Crap... Looks like the generator quit."

"So how did you learn to fix a car?" Claire asked.

"Did you know the guy who had this place before me?"

"Bobby?"

"Yeah. He moved out here about fifteen years ago, closest he could manage to retiring. Anyway, he had a shop in the city, back when I was a kid, and I broke in, didn't know anyone was still there."

"Why did you break in?"

"Shut up... Anyway, if you knew Bobby, you know he had guns, woundo up with one pointed right at me. Told me if I needed money that bad, he'd give me a chance to work for it, but I had to stay out of trouble. I was, I don't know, fourteen?... I lied about my age, but he never called me on it, I started with basic maintenance stuff, it's not that hard once you get used to it, and it helps tune out all the crap in life, like it's not even there." Dean shifted slightly, trying to keep his leg from falling asleep.

"So how did you know Bobby? Your dad?"

"No. I went to get the mail one day, saw him sitting on the porch cleaning a gun, so I got his mail too, and brought it to him."

"Did he give you a beer?"

"Shut up."

"Yeah, me too." Dean said with a quiet chuckle. "How long ago was that?"

Claire shrugged. "Just after school let out for summer."

Dean considered Bobby's stroke, and when it had happened. "So, about five months before he died, huh?"

Claire didn't answer, but took a long breath. "Why did you move here?"

"Bobby didn't have any kids or siblings, and his wife, Karen, she died a few years after they moved
here. He left me the whole place. And Ben just seemed like he needed a fresh start after his mom
died. He's pretty happy here, couldn't have a dirt bike in the city."

"Yeah, too many car mirrors."

"Yeah, the next time he takes one off, you'll be able to put one back on."

"I don't know. Seems complicated."

"How long were you out in the rain tonight?" Dean asked as directly as possible.

"I don't know. I started walking around eight, I think."

"Three hours, are you kidding? It takes guts to keep going like that. You'll do fine... What were you
doing out there, anyway?" Claire started to open her mouth, but Dean cut her off, "Nevermind. I'm
pretty sure I can guess. Same jerk that hit you?"

Claire didn't answer.

"Shit... If you want to take that tire iron with you when you leave, you go right ahead, just use it on
them, not your dad."

Cas tapped on the glass of the front door before letting himself in.

Coming into the living room, his eyes fell on the bundle of Claire in the chair with Dean. "Are you
feeling any better?"

"Yeah."

Dean didn't think Cas looked convinced. "There's a thermometer..." he said, pointing, "right there.
She was at 96.1 when she came down."

Cas picked it up, fumbling with it.

Dean held out the flashlight. "Here, trade me."

Cas took the flashlight, passing Dean the thermometer, and waited as Dean took Claire's temperature
again, holding the light steady to see the reading.

"97.9. Almost normal. But I think you should stay home tomorrow." Cas said, reaching for her hand
and pulling her up out of the chair over Dean's lap. He handed her a small duffel bag. "Don't forget
to get your stuff from upstairs."

"Yeah, well, I can't see, dad."

Cas handed her the flashlight as well and sat down on the couch as Dean worked at getting his knees
to bend enough to get his feet to the floor, and Claire headed upstairs.

"Did she, uh... did she say anything else?" Cas asked cautiously.

Dean shook his head in the dark, his voice soft and barely audible over the rain. "Nah. Not like that.
Talked about Bobby Singer, mostly."

"You knew him?"

"Yeah, well, I didn't actually buy this place. He didn't have any blood relatives left to leave it to."
Dean said. "Told you about him earlier. At the school."

"Your boss was Bobby?" Cas asked.

"Yeah. Before he moved out here..." Dean said. "Listen, Claire didn't say it, she didn't have to, but
the kid that hit her the other day, it's same one that made her walk home tonight. She said she was
out there for about three hours."

A flash of distant lighting flickered in the curtains, illuminating the room just enough to show the
seething anger on Cas' face. "I told her she wasn't allowed to see him anymore. I just have no idea
how to enforce that."

Dean shook his head, "I can't help you with that, except try to give her something better to do with
her time."

Cas leaned back on the couch, rubbing his forehead. "Thank you, Dean, for all your help... it's been
a crazy night."

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"I'm okay. Really." Claire said, rummaging in her backpack. "Crap, my notes are trashed."

"You could use the extra time to study." Cas suggested.

"Dad, if I have to do a make up, I get a lower grade." Claire said, pulling the damp papers out. "I
come in with anything less than a missing limb, she's not going to let me do a make up test anyway."

"All right, but, hang on..." Cas said, catching her arm as she rushed to the door.

Claire, exasperated, turned to face him. "Yeah?"

"Will. You're going to stay away from him, aren't you?" Cas asked, trying to catch her eyes.

"Yeah, sure." Claire said dismissively, attempting to turn to the door again.

Cas stepped in front of her. "Claire, please. I tried giving you an order, that obviously didn't work... I
can't control what happens to you, or the choices you make, but I love you, and I want you to come
home safe."

Claire looked up slowly, and was silent for several seconds before she spoke, her voice quiet. "Are
you going to cry?... Because if you're going to cry, I'm going to make fun of you the whole way to
school."

"I am not going to cry." Cas said, stepping through the doorway.

Claire continued as he locked the deadbolt. "Then do you have cancer or something? Because you
don't say crap like that."

"I don't have cancer."

"Well, you're not on drugs, I'd notice." Claire said over the roof, opening the car door.

"I'm sure you would." Cas answered, getting in on the driver's side.

"Fess up. You're sending me to military school, right?" Claire asked, shoving her backpack into the
floor as Cas started the engine.
"Yes, because rifle training is going to sort out your attitude." Cas replied, backing out of the driveway.

"You know the experts say sarcasm has no place in a healthy parent-child relationship." Claire prattled.

Cas took a deep breath. "Funny you should say that."

Claire gave him a quizzical look as he pulled up to the highway.

"I'm going to look for a family therapist." Cas said, watching the road as he turned, Claire's silence weighing heavily in the air.

Claire carefully picked her way through the crowded hall, until a familiar voice popped up in her ear, taking her elbow. "Smile and keep walking, and also, I told you so."

"What the hell, Kevin?" Claire asked, as he dragged them both into the empty science lab.

"Dude. Seriously." Kevin said, letting go of her arm.

"I'm not a dude, dude."

"Did you see what's going around online?" Kevin asked, flipping through apps on his phone.

"My phone is at home in a box of rice. What is it?" Claire said, moving to read over his shoulder.

"Basically, Will said you were being a bitch, he told you back off, and then you said you were going to tell your dad he raped you to get him in trouble."

"None of that happened." Claire said, stunned.

"Hey, do you think I'd be in here telling you if I believed it? Hell, no. No guy wants that kind of accusation hanging on him."

Claire looked up, "Why are you telling me?"

"Same reason I'm taking a freakin' harem to the prom, I'm tired of watching assholes treat women like shit. Especially when the asshole is another woman, but that's a different discussion altogether."

"You're really weird, Kev."

"Thanks, you too." Kevin answered. "Now, you need to know, Miranda and Katie liked a 'vaguebook' post Chaz made that was absolutely about this, Abigail seems like she's on the fence, I talked to her while I was looking for you. When you get home, don't open anything, don't turn on your computer, leave your phone alone, you're Amish now, okay?"

"That bad?" Claire asked, her brow furrowing.

"Uh... let's just get this over with in advance." Kevin threw his arms around Claire's shoulders and stroked her hair far too quickly. "There, there, it's going to be okay, and karma's going to skin his ass alive."

Claire shook her head, "This is really horrible."

"It's bullshit, though. You're gonna get through it."
Cas pulled up to the curb of the high school prepared for the usual ten minute wait before Claire managed her way to the car, and was surprised when she immediately jumped in.

The look on her face was far too familiar, carrying strong echoes of the Cinderella photograph.

"Is everything all right?" Cas asked.

After a few carefully measured breaths to calm her agitation, Claire turned to face him. "Are we religious? Is there some kind of hell we believe in? Because I really need a hell right now."

"Well, I think faith is a personal matter you should decide for yourself, but I consider myself agnostic." Cas said quietly, trying to get a good idea what Claire's mental state was.

"What is that?" Claire asked.

"The idea that God might exist, but doesn't nitpick our lives the way most organized religion demands... Are you okay?"

A group of teens walked by, about twenty feet from the car, a few of them staring. "Fuck my life."

"Claire..."

"Please just drive, I need to get out of here."

Cas quickly got the car back on the road. "Is there anything I should know?"

"There's a rumor about me, and it's not true." Claire said quietly, dropping her head.

Cas nodded. "Unfortunately, those kind of rumors are very common in high school... Of course if you can get a friend to say you were with her at the time so it couldn't have happened, that generally calms things down, and it'll blow over, but it can also attract unwanted attention."

"Things have changed a lot, dad. It's not that kind of rumor. If I had slept with him or cheated on him, nobody would care."

"Russian spy?" Cas asked with a smirk.

"Is that a cold war thing?" Claire asked. She turned to look out the window. "He told a bunch of guys I said I was going to get him in trouble by falsely accusing him of rape. And he's backing it up by staying away from me so if I go confront him, it makes it look even worse, and it's all online, it was making the rounds before I even got back last night... So, yeah. Military school, right? Can I start tomorrow? Not too late for a jar head prom, right?... Why are you turning here?"

Cas pulled onto a side road. "Frozen custard. You're going to need the calories for all the push-ups you'll be doing."

"Really?"

"Well, the first part, yes. Military school, I'll have to think about."

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Saturday morning, Cas was on his roof in jeans and an old tshirt, carefully pulling loose shingles and looking for damage. The leak seemed to be coming from close to the peak of the roof, and the last storm hadn't helped any. He'd already put a large sheet of plywood down across the beams in the attic crawl space and placed a five gallon bucket under it, but it was only damage control.
From his vantage point, he could see Ben going up and down the road on his small, noisy dirt bike, and Claire walking toward the auto shop. It was still early, and he would rather have been sleeping in, but more rain looked to be in the forecast later in the month.

Concentrated on his work, he didn't realize he no longer heard Ben's bike until he heard someone coming up the ladder.

"Claire?" Cas called.

"No, Mr. Novak, it's me." Ben answered him from about half way up.

"Ben, be careful. I don't know if your father would want you up here." Cas said, getting up and carrying a small stack of water damaged shingles to the low edge of the roof, dropping them onto a tarp he'd spread out in the back yard. "Do you need something?"

"No." Ben said from the top of the ladder. "Do you want some help?"

Cas looked at the area of roof he'd taken apart, "There's a leak, it might have weakened the roof enough to be dangerous."

"I can be careful. And you're bigger than me, you'd fall in first."

Cas chuckled at his last point. "Check with your father, if it's okay with him, come back, and I'll find you something to do."

Claire pushed the shop door open and pulled it closed behind her. She could smell gasoline fumes and motor oil, and cheap car air fresheners even before her eyes adjusted to the dimmer light.

Inside the wood panelled waiting room, to her left was an old leather couch in decent shape under the window blinds, an end table holding a few old magazines in the corner, and a couple of folding chairs against the following wall. Past the folding chairs was a water cooler in the following corner, a door for a single occupant restroom, and a very dark hallway. Between her and the hallway was a large painted metal desk that looked to have been manufactured at least four decades before.

On the desk was a desktop computer with a flat-screen monitor and a fairly new printer that looked to have the ability to scan as well. Along the right wall, behind the desk and filling an odd gap between the desk and the entrance to the hallway were a pair of tall bookcases and a filing cabinet.

"Hi. What can I do for you?"

Claire would have jumped, but the voice coming from behind the desk was gentle enough not to startle her. "Jeez, how do you see anything in here after being outside? It's like a cave." Seeing a little better now, she could make out his face. There was no way this guy was much older than she was, and he had big blue eyes and a shy smile.

"I'm looking for Mr. Winchester."

The boy shook his head with a chuckle. "We don't have a Mr. Winchester here, but Dean is in the bays right now. Do you want me to take you back there?"

Claire wondered about his choice of words, but felt relaxed enough she was about to tell him to lead the way.

"Alfie!" Claire heard Dean in what sounded like a small roar. "Quit messing around. You get out of
that damn chair, somebody better be bleeding, you got that?"

"Uh..." Alfie seemed to manage a smirk that still came off as shy, and gestured down the hallway.

Claire was about to make her way through it, but Dean appeared at the other end, leaning on the wall, his arm above some chart that was taped up to the wood panelling, fingers of his other hand coated in grime and holding something small and metallic, keeping track of whatever he was looking at.

"You get yesterday's order in yet?" Dean called down the hall. His breathing was slightly labored.

"Not yet. It's nearly finished." Alfie responded.

"Okay, get that done... Claire, come on in here."

Stepping out of the dark hallway into the large, open garage, Dean turned to the right, opening a door to reveal a small room lined with shelves. "Close toed shoes are good, but you're going to want something with steel toes in case you drop something heavy. Twenty bucks at the big box store, not a big deal, and they do have some specifically for women."

"Why would they make steel toed boots for women, couldn't they just get a small men's?" Claire asked curiously.

"'Pink it and shrink it.' Doesn't work. Women walk differently. Trust me, get your boots from the women's section."

Claire looked sceptical as Dean dug through a plastic bin on a waist high shelf. "No offense, but, why would you know about women's boots?"

"No, that's a fair question. My wife..." he grunted, pulling down another bin from a high shelf in the large dark closet to set it on the floor, "Lisa, she liked to go hiking. Before Ben was born, get out of the city for a few days. The one time she got boots from the men's section, we had to turn back after an hour because she was miserable. She did some research. These days, shoes and boots are designed to work with the way legs swing, the way your foot comes down, the way you carry weight. And all of that is different for women."

Claire nodded. "Okay."

"I'm not trying to make you uncomfortable, it's just science." Dean said, pulling a large plastic wrapped square of folded cloth from the bin and checking the label.

"Yeah, I get it. What is that?" Dean passed her the package. "A jumpsuit?"

"Coveralls, it'll protect your clothes."

"You don't wear these." Claire stated, but clearly questioned.

"And you don't have to, if you want to do this in jeans and a tshirt that's fine, but you'll want a couple pairs of jeans and a few tshirts just for this if that's the way you want to go, because they will get completely ruined. Also, near any running machine, anything loose is dangerous. Necklaces, long hair, clothes, hell, one guy I worked with got his wedding ring caught and lost his finger." Dean said.

"Great. So, basically I get to look like a guy?" Claire asked.
"You won't look like a guy... I have no policy on makeup, and earrings are okay if they don't hang down." Dean replied. "Go ahead and get that on over your clothes, I'm going to check on Alfie."

Claire took off a necklace and bracelet, putting them in her pocket, managed to struggle into the coveralls, and looped her ponytail up into her elastic band. She could hear Ben's voice in the office, and went to the hallway.

"Yeah, that's fine, see if he wants to borrow the nailgun." Dean responded to Ben, before turning back to Alfie. "The name stays. If you have other logo ideas, that's fine, I'll look at them, but all I want is something similar, just more recent. Make it look professional."

"Are you sure you can keep the name?" Alfie asked.

As Claire got closer, she could see a laptop open on the desk with a graphic design program running, and the words 'Winchester Automotive' clearly visible.

"Who's going to ask me to change it?... The shop was the only thing he had to leave his name to, and as long as it's my shop, it stays."

"All right." Alfie closed the program window and went back to working on a logo in a frame that also bore the words Singer Automotive.

Dean nearly walked into Claire when he entered the hallway. "Okay, let's get started."

Claire followed Dean through the bays. The first was empty, and the rolling single-car door open. The second had a green Chrysler in it with the hood open, and the bay door closed, and the third had what looked like one of the junkers from the yard pulled in, the bay door only half open, but letting in enough light.

"You can't break it more than it is, this is just to get your bearings. If you can do this without burning the shop down, you pass." Dean said, moving to the driver's door, and reaching inside through the missing window.

Claire heard a thunk, and the hood popped up about an inch and a half.

"Get it open, and you're gonna check the levels of oil, transmission fluid, and wiper fluid." Dean said, moving back to the second bay, and taking his attention to the Chrysler.

Claire put her fingers into the gap, looking for the lever of the latch. There didn't seem to be one. She crouched to look, but it was too dark. Standing, she tried again to feel out the hood release, before looking behind her at the tools on the wall.

Dean looked to be completely absorbed in his repair, so she didn't bother to check in with him before taking a keyring sized flashlight from the wall to get a better look.

"The new ones don't match the rest." Ben said, looking over the fresh shingles.

"Yes, well, I'm going to have a company do the whole roof this summer. This was a temporary measure to keep the water out." Cas explained, wiping the sweat from his brow. "On that count, we've done very well."

"I guess so." Ben answered. "And you can't see it from the street."

"Considering the location, I'm not very concerned about curb appeal." Cas said, turning to collect the
rest of the tools in a large orange bucket. "Better start down the ladder, Ben, I'd like to be sure you're out of the way before bringing this down."

On the ground, Cas took the battery pack out of the nailgun before handing both pieces to Ben, just before he spotted Dean coming up the front walk.

"Dean, thanks for the loan of the nailgun, that went a lot faster than I had expected. How's Claire doing?"

"She's getting by. I got her started on a piece of crap with a blue book in the negative, so she's not going to break anything important." Dean said, "but I told Ben I'd take him roller skating this afternoon, so, after she's done I'm closing it up for the day."

"Well, if you get back early enough, I was going to grill tonight if you want to come have dinner with me and Claire." Cas offered.

"Sorry, maybe another time, we always get pizza and shut the rink down, it's kind of our thing."

Claire scrubbed at the dark stains all over her hands. "Does this stuff ever come off?"

"Of course. There's a little tub of stuff that looks like Crisco on the shelf over the sink inside the garage, you scrub with that first while your hands are dry, rinse it off, and then wash with the hand soap." Alfie said quietly.

"Good to know." Claire answered.

"Hey, how long did it take you?" Alfie asked.

"How long did what take?" Claire asked, standing in the middle of the hallway.

"To figure out he hadn't popped the hood all the way?" Alfie asked.

Claire's eyes opened wider. "Are you serious? ...I spent half an hour prying it open with a screwdriver, and all I had to do was go pull the thing?"

Alfie tried to straighten his face. "If it helps, when he went to get Ben, he said you were very determined."

"What an ass." Claire muttered, looking back into the garage.

"Bobby did it to him his first day. Same with me. Of course since Bobby had already put me through it, when Dean did it to test me, I just walked over and popped it the rest of the way, and he said that was good enough." Alfie said.

"So, some kind of company prank, then?" Claire asked.

"No... the lesson is, if you don't start at the very beginning, you miss things. And in the back of the shop, always second-guess anything the customer says they did, because they might not have done it, or they might have done it badly."

The door swung open letting a flood of bright sunlight in, along with Dean. His eyes settled on Claire, somehow, despite the contrasting darkness of the hallway. "So?"

Claire took a deep breath. "There was no oil on the dipstick, the transmission fluid is at a normal
level for cold but it's the wrong color, and the plastic box that holds wiper fluid has a huge crack on the bottom, and is bone dry... And apparently it would have taken me a lot less time if I double checked that the hood was all the way unlatched first."

"Did you top it up?"

"No."

"Why?"

"Because if it doesn't run, it would waste the oil, the transmission fluid would have to come out first, because it's gross, and the wiper fluid would just run out all over the floor."

Dean chuckled. "Good."

"What's so funny?"

Alfie turned in the chair again. "The only wrong answer there is 'Because he didn't tell you to.'"

Dean shook his head, "Bobby ripped me a new one for that, told me to use my damn brain. Not a problem here."

At the sound of an engine and the crunch of wheels on gravel, Dean checked out the window. "Your neighbor's here. Go ahead and clock out, I'll show Claire how when she's done cleaning up."

Claire was about to head back to the garage when Alfie pulled a set of crutches from between the filing cabinet and the bookshelves, and let Dean help him to his very unsteady feet. "You got it... Don't overdo it."

Alfie was nearly as tall as Dean, but far more slender, with narrower shoulders.

Dean picked up the black backpack containing Alfie's laptop and followed closely behind him out the door.

As it closed, Claire continued to the utility sink, scrubbing with the strange hand-cleaner, watching the white slime and black patches turn into a uniform gray that coated her hands before rinsing and washing with the hand soap.

"Don't expect it all to come off. That takes practice." Dean said, coming out of the hallway and going to the half open door of the third bay and closing it.

"How bad was Alfie's accident?" Claire asked, trying to get her coveralls off without dislodging her shoes.

"He's lucky to be alive. He's lucky he still has use of his legs. And he's lucky he was wearing his helmet that day, or half his face would have come off on the road." He went to the first bay and closed that door as well, leaving the garage dark. "His motorcycle was a complete loss... God, you know, this is the only place in town with a rig to tow a bike, so they called me out there to get it off the road, the ambulance had already left, and I knew it was his bike, but they couldn't tell me anything, couldn't even say if he had been alive when they got there. It's the mangled chunk of orange over in the back of the building where he doesn't have to see it."

Dean caught a hint of worry on Claire's face, even in the dark. "It's okay. He got pretty banged up, and it's gonna take a while, but the doctors say he'll be fine in a couple more months."
Claire nodded. "Why did you call him a jackass?"

Dean started making his way back to the office. "Let's just say he's made some life choices I don't agree with."

Claire followed him in, and stood near the desk as he pulled up a spreadsheet on the computer. "I told him to clock you in when you got here, but this is pretty self explanatory. Just remember any time you make a change on here, you hit save. Every single time. Blew a circuit once, lost track of the hours for a week."

"What if the computer breaks?" Claire asked.

"Automatic off-site back-up, a little more secure than the cloud." Dean continued when she shot him a funny look. "Yeah, well, beats floppy discs."

"Okay. So we have a schedule or something like that?"

"No, but we have an addition getting built on next month, and the sooner you know what you're doing, the sooner the backlog gets cleared, the easier it'll be. Morrison's on the other side of town is closing down, the owner's retiring, selling his place to a developer, which means we're going to have more business, we need to be ready for that." Dean said, making for the door. "So, show up when you can, clock in, and get to it. If you get past what I can call part-time, I'll send you home."

"Okay." Claire answered, going outside, and blinking hard as her eyes adjusted, heading home.

"And Claire?" She turned back around. "You did a lot better than my first day. Remember that."
Chapter 6

Claire stepped up onto the tire iron, holding onto the roof rack of the Subaru, and bounced until the last lug nut gave way. It wasn't a perfect system, but it worked.

She placed the jack under the frame as Dean had showed her, and began to raise the car.

"Claire?" Alfie's voice came from the hall.

"Yeah?" she called.

"Dean's bringing the truck around," Claire jumped to hear Alfie in the hallway right behind her, "You're going to want to see this."

Alfie slowly and carefully made his way through the open door of the first bay around the Subaru. Claire followed him out.

The large flatbed truck slowly came around the building, and pulled to a stop, then backed up to an empty area closer to where the yard began, before beginning to lower the platform on which the classic car rested, and allowed the winch to loosen, letting it roll down to the ground. He got out and started disconnecting the cable under the front of the frame.

"What is that?" Claire asked.

"A '56 Corvette."

"It's pink."

Dean got to his feet. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

Claire shot a look at Alfie, who had finally caught up, who only smiled and kept quiet, although he was breathing a little hard from the effort of getting across the short distance.

Dean hit the controls to wind the winch, and put the platform back in place before taking off his work gloves and going back to the convertible.

"So, what's up with the pepto-bismobile?" Claire asked.

"It's a classic, the roof and interior are good, and they wanted it gone. Switch out anything we have to, new paint job, it'll bring in quite a bit on anew online car auction. Got a couple junked ones we can get half the parts from, anyway."

"Red, right?" Claire asked.

Dean shook his head, "Black."

"Oh, come on, it wants to be red." Claire argued, "Look at it."

"Black." Dean repeated.

"Alfie, back me up, here." Claire said.

All three looked at the car.
"Off-white." Alfie answered.

Dean tilted his head, staring at the car and gave a small nod.

"Yeah, okay, I can see it." Claire agreed.

"Did you finish with the Suburban already?" Dean asked, turning to Claire.

"Yeah, but to reach the transmission stick, I had to climb up in there."

Dean shot a look at Alfie. "She did. One hundred percent under the hood."

Dean narrowed his eyes at Alfie before turning back to Claire. "Did you knock anything loose when you were climbing around on the engine block?"

"I don't think I did, and I was trying not to. Then I moved it over there," she pointed, "And just so you know, that's a lot bigger than my dad's car. Then I was taking the bent rim off the blue car, like you said. Almost done."

Alfie wobbled slightly, looking a little green.

"Desk. Now." Dean said firmly, causing Alfie to mock a salute, turn around, and make a beeline for the closest door.

Turning to see Alfie struggling back to the building, Claire spoke quietly, "Sorry... I guess I should have stopped him?"

"You aren't responsible for him. What he does is his business... Unless, like, if he's unconscious and in danger, then, sure, whatever." Dean said.

Claire nodded. "So, don't help him?"

"Don't... don't make yourself uncomfortable to help him, okay? You've got enough to worry about. He can handle himself." Dean said, going back to the flatbed wrecker, and getting into the cab.

Claire walked back to the bay she'd left as Dean moved the truck to its usual place.

Out of the darkness, a small, choked sob woke him. "Dad?"

Dean, laying on his stomach, lifted his head slightly. "Hey... What's wrong?"

Ben scrubbed at his face as more tears came, interrupting anything he could attempt to say.

"Hey, it's okay." Dean said, rolling onto his side, and scooting back, patting the bed. Ben climbed in next to him, as he'd done many times when he was much smaller, and several times since Lisa's passing.

"Did mom ever go to a church?" Ben asked quietly, in a shaky voice.

Dean took a deep breath, as he had a feeling where this was going. "Sure. She used to go to a synagogue with her grandma when she'd stay with her in the summer... She learned a lot of good stuff there, too, she told me about it."

"What's a synagogue?" Ben asked.
"Uh, a church, or a temple for Jewish people." Dean answered. "It's still about God, and treating people right, so basically, it's church."

Ben wiped at his face again. "Jack was saying stuff about mom again, and one of the girls said she couldn't go to heaven if she didn't believe in God."

Dean put an arm over Ben and gave him a tight squeeze. "Your mom did believe in God, and she is in heaven, because no God that gives a damn would kick out a lady who volunteered in a soup kitchen and gave blankets and care packages to the homeless, okay? Because all the big religions say you're supposed to help people. If a bunch of self-righteous folks want to go to church, or whatever every Sunday and pray about the problems in the world instead of getting out there and fixing them, that's fine, but personally, I don't think any God would want that. And it's not okay to judge people over what they think about it."

"What if Maria's right and mom's in hell?"

"I'm pretty sure Jewish people don't believe in hell, and they were around a long time before the idea of hell was a thing." Dean mumbled against the pillow.

Dean had almost drifted off, when Ben's voice came again. "Dad, ...did you go to a church when you were a kid?"

'Every Sunday, in a long sleeved shirt to hide the bruises,' he thought. But he would never say that to Ben.

"Yeah, I did... You need to go to sleep, bud."

"Okay, let's start with you, Cas... What made you make this appointment in the first place?"

Cas glanced at Claire, who was watching him with an emotionless expression.

"I ...have some concerns. Mostly about how Claire was treated, before she came to live with me." Cas answered in a soft voice, trying to choose his words carefully.

"And these concerns, are they a problem right now?"

"Yes. I think so." Cas answered.

Claire gave a typical teenage sigh.

"Do you have something to say, Claire?" the therapist asked.

"Nope!" Claire said brightly with an obviously fake smile.

"Claire, if you want to say something, it's fine. That's the whole point." Cas offered.

"No, I'm good. Just going to sit back and listen to people talk about personal stuff in my life like I'm not even here." Claire said sarcastically.

"Okay, let's make sure we start from the beginning. Cas, when did Claire come to live with you?"

"About two and a half years ago."

"And her mother granted you custody, why?"
"She didn’t, technically. We never had any arrangements for custody." Cas said.

"All right. Then why the change?"

Cas started to open his mouth, but glanced at Claire again. She was silent.

"Claire had found me online, we had lost contact, and we had been talking occasionally for about a year. I was getting to know her better as a person, and she told me her mother had a problem with drugs, and that she needed to leave."

"And you believed her?"

"Why wouldn't I believe her?"

"How old was Claire at the time?"

"Fourteen, fourteen and a half."

"So if she had had an argument with her mother, she could have been lying, manipulating you."

"She was telling the truth. Her mother had obvious track marks."

The therapist nodded. "You understand drug addiction is not grounds for terminating custody, don't you? The state regularly allows people suffering from addiction to keep their children so long as they are attempting to receive treatment."

"I don't see what that has to do with anything." Cas said quietly, looking at Claire only to see she was uncomfortable, and shrinking into her chair.

"Was her mother aware she left home?" The therapist asked.

"Yes. I called her the next morning. I told her Claire was safe, and she could reach her at my address. Claire wanted to go to college here, and the high school is very highly rated."

"What is her behavior like at home, on a normal day?"

"She's responsible... She has an odd sense of humor, but it's very amusing. She even volunteers at the elementary school where I work."

"What makes you think she's been mistreated?"

"She said she was."

"When?"

"About two weeks ago."

"And what did she say?"

Cas took a deep breath. His voice shook. "She said... that her mother pimped her out."

"And you believed her?"

Cas looked incredulous. "Yes."

"Was anyone else there when she said this?"
"Yes, my neighbor. She said something else, as well, he had to explain it to me."

"Claire, what do you remember of this conversation?"

"Not much." Claire answered, staring at the wall. "I was kind of out of it."

"Out of it,' how?"

Claire only shrugged in response.

"She was suffering from low grade hypothermia. The boy she was seeing made her walk home during that bad rainstorm that flooded 5th street." Cas explained.

"You didn't call your father to come get you?"

"No. By the time I thought about it, my phone was soaked." Claire said blankly.

"I seem to recall that storm being in the middle of the week. What were you doing out on a school night?"

"I snuck out." Claire said, as if it were expected.

"And Cas, you consider that to be responsible behavior?"

Claire snorted. "Go on, dad, tell him how I busted up your face so bad the office lady thought you'd been in a car accident, and then I nearly killed you with a crow bar because I thought you were going to let Dean hurt me."

"You attacked your father with a crow bar?"

"No. It was actually a tire iron, sorry." Claire said, faking amusement.

"And who is Dean?"

Simultaneously, Cas answered "My neighbor," and Claire, "My boss."

"You work for him?"

"Yeah, see, I thought he wanted to fuck me, turns out he was just offering me a real job."

"Claire!" Cas exclaimed. "Do you really have to speak like that right now?"

"Cas, if you're right, if there is a trauma here, it's best if Claire expresses herself in her own words... So, you work for him now, even though you thought he had an impure interest in you?"

"Yeah, well, it was easier after he got all dad-like at me."

"How do you mean?"

"Well, like my dad just said, I had hypothermia. I was too cold. Dean put me in a blanket and gave me cocoa, I sat on his lap for a while, and we talked about a dead guy we both knew."

"And that didn't strike you as sexual, or predatory?"

"Well, dragging my ass upstairs to his bedroom and throwing me in the shower, sure, that was scary, but after I came out, no."
"This man dragged you into his bedroom, and you equate this with fatherly behavior?"

"No. That was 'predatory.' The blanket and cocoa, that was dad-like."

"Cas... Where were you when this happened?"

"I was there with her, her temperature was very low, and she didn't seem to be very aware of what was actually happening. Dean stopped her from hitting me with the tire iron, and she wasn't very coherent at that point, but we knew she needed to get warm immediately."

"And you didn't take her to the hospital?"

"We don't live in town, and I didn't think it could wait."

"And you didn't give her a blanket and cocoa, you had him do it?"

"No. I'd gone to get her something to wear home."

"And what was she wearing, other than the blanket?"

Cas shook his head. "Clothes she borrowed from Dean's son. Why is this so important?"

"If I suspect a minor has been harmed, I'm required by law to report it."

"Hey." Claire spoke harshly, standing up from her chair. "Dean's a good a guy. The freak who raped me, and the junkie bitch that let him? That happened a long time ago in California, and had nothing to do with Dean, or my dad. They were doing everything they could to help me. So you wanna focus on the real problem instead of making a mountain of shit out of my fuck up?"

"Claire, please, sit down." Cas said softly.

Claire shook her head, and spoke calmly, "No, I'm pretty sure I'm done here." she walked out, slamming the door behind her.

"Is this sort of emotional outburst normal for your daughter?"

Cas took a deep breath. "Not without just cause, it seems."

Cas opened the driver's side door and sat down, putting his hands on the wheel out of habit. "Dr Thompson said he'd like to see you by yourself for the next appointment, and that your outburst in there showed you were placing the blame on the appropriate subjects, but he's concerned about why you would continue to associate with Dean."

"I don't want to go." Claire said quietly.

"I understand he made you uncomfortable, but-

"No. He made it sound like you're a shitty dad, and Dean's a creep. And if he reports something, I don't have any proof, and they'll send me back to live with mom." Claire's voice cracked, "I can't... I'd rather die."

"Claire, don't say that."

"I mean it, dad. If I had to go back there, I'd run. I'd hitchhike, sleep under bridges, anything it took, and if I got murdered, I really wouldn't care."
After a few rattled breaths, Cas answered her. "I would care. Very much. And I am not going to let that happen."

Claire looked around the garage.

She'd completed the tasks Dean had asked of her, cleaned up most of the tools that weren't in immediate use, and had run out of things she felt competent doing.

At the sound of the front door shutting loudly, she moved into the hallway, and was surprised to hear Kevin's voice.

"Hey, did you get my poster done?"

Alfie looked up from his chair with his ever-present small smile. "I got the graphics done, but I still have to get it printed."

"Man, you are really catching up." Kevin said, laughing, "That bike was just slowing you down."

"Maybe." Alfie said.

"Claire? Dude! When did you become a greasemonkey?" Kevin asked in surprise as he caught sight of her.

"She didn't tell you at school?" Alfie asked.

"No, she doesn't talk at school anymore, she lives in dark corners. I don't even see her online." Kevin replied.

"You told me I was Amish now, no computer, no phone, none of it." Claire reminded him. "Just sticking with the plan."

Kevin's eyebrows went up. "Two weeks? That's pretty dedicated. I don't know if I could do two hours without my phone. Did you talk to Abigail?"

Claire nodded, "Yeah, not on the fence so much anymore, you're the only one who's still talking to me."

"Shit, Claire... What about prom?"

"Fuck prom. I don't need this kind of stress." Claire answered, leaning on the wall.

"No. Nonononono. You gotta go. Otherwise that jerk wins." Kevin went around the back of the desk, dragging Claire from the wall. "Not that I don't dig the new make-under, the mechanical grease looks great on you. Right, Sandman? She looks good... but seriously, you need a dress, a manicure, and you gotta show up just to show that asshole he's not in charge of you."

"Right. You did ask me... with the rest of the entire grade." Claire said shaking her head. "I'm sure your other dates want to be seen with the ultimate social pariah."

Kevin shook his head. "No way. I told you I was gonna set you up with Sandman."

Kevin stepped back, gesturing at Alfie.

"That's your neighbor, 'Sandman,' who has a bike, and makes, god, what did you say, 'beautiful computer generated art that will melt your brain with it's beautifulness?"
"Yeah, well, it's not gay if it's true." Kevin answered.

Claire raised an eyebrow.

"No offense to your dad, who isn't even here, c'mon, you know me." Kevin continued, turning to Alfie. "Not like you're doing anything, right?"

Claire leaned to the side, looking around Kevin. "Why does he keep calling you Sandman?"

"My name's actually Samandriel Alford. Samandriel doesn't fit on the patch." he said, giving a tug at the patch on the chest of his shirt.

"And you don't go by Sam?" Claire asked.

Alfie shook his head.

"Hey, Sandman's name is bitchin', don't cut it down like that." Kevin said.

"Are you the only one who calls him Sandman?" Claire asked.

"No way, he totally uses it for his handle, because he rides." Kevin said, his back to Alfie, as Alfie shook his head.

Claire nodded. "Yeah, okay, sure."

"About what? His name? The prom? What?" Kevin asked.

"Go home, Kevin." Claire said teasingly.

Kevin spun around, "Yo, 'Alfie.' Take this girl to the prom."

Kevin shoved Claire forward, stepping behind her. "Watch, he'll do it, he never says no to anybody."

On cue, Alfie shrugged. "Yeah. I'll take her to prom if she wants to go."

Kevin leaned forward, sticking his chin over Claire's shoulder. "Oh, and she's really tough, so you're gonna be the one in the dress."

"Yeah." Alfie said, nodding slowly. "I thought that might be the case."

"You got a dress for that already, right?" Kevin kept at it.

"Sure, yeah. Of course. It's red. Because she likes red." Alfie's face was starting to carry a hint of the same color.

Work boots sounded heavily in the hallway.

"Dean!" Kevin said loudly. "Make Claire go to the prom with Sandman."

"Alfie, take Claire to the prom." Dean said tiredly, going into his office.

"Yes, sir, Mr. Winchester." Alfie replied.

"Ha! No getting out of it now, your boss said you have to." Kevin said to Claire, moving to lean into Dean's office. "Hey, you got any car audio systems laying around?"

Claire shook her head. "I'm really not planning on going."
Alfie looked up at her with those big eyes that were getting far too distracting for her lately, and that smile that practically spelled out 'harmless.' "That's too bad, Kevin made it sound like a lot of fun."

"Right. Getting dressed up for a formal dance, when you aren't even supposed to be walking around sounds fun?"

"Well, I'd get to see you all dressed up, too, so that's probably worth it."

"Are you really going to wear a red dress?" Claire asked skeptically.

"I didn't have my heart set on it." Alfie said with a hint of a laugh.

"Okay, good, because I have this rule, y'know, I don't go out with guys who look prettier than me. So..."

"So, we're on for prom?" Alfie asked.

"Yeah. I guess." Claire said softly, trying to ignore the obvious grin Alfie allowed to take over his face.

"C'mon, Dean!" Kevin's voice came from the hallway, "Where's your love for the humble rice-burner? A Camry can be a decent car!"

Alfie looked down the hallway with a hint of concern as Claire quickly went in. "I got it."
(Thanks, everybody, for the kind reviews. I do appreciate them, and the holiday wishes are very sweet!
Thanks for reading! FW)

"Mr. Novak?"

Cas looked up, surprised to see Ben in the doorway by himself.

"Yes?"

Ben ducked inside. "Well, I figured if I was going to get in trouble, I might as well just come in here to start with, sir."

Cas set down the pen he was holding. "Did you do something to get in trouble?"

Ben shook his head. "No, but I could tell it was coming."

"How could you tell?" Cas asked.

"Jack started talking to me, so I just walked off. He started to follow me, so I came in here." Ben shifted in his chair. "Once he starts, I just don't know how to get him to stop. He won't leave me alone."

"Given the circumstances, I can't say I blame you. Why don't I see if Ms. Joan has some time to come in here?" Cas said, getting up.

Uri appeared in the doorway, noticing Ben right away. "Ben, did you get in trouble again?"

"No sir, not this time." Ben said, turning around in his chair. "I just came to talk to Mr. Novak."

"You're supposed to be with your class, Ben. You can't keep coming to the office." Uri said firmly.

"To be fair, he's being harassed by one of the other students." Cas offered.

"Ben," Uri started with a glance to Cas, "Go back to your class."

After Ben quietly scurried out of the room, Uri gave Cas a suspicious look, and continued on his way.

Cas was quiet through dinner, but for some reason a dark smudge on the outside of Claire's wrist kept catching his eye. It had become more routine to see missed spots of grime on Claire's hands, and occasionally her face.

"Did somebody run over the dog you don't have?" Claire broke the silence.
Cas shrugged. "You never said, how are you enjoying your job?"

Claire nodded, chewing, then said, "It's good. I'm learning a lot of stuff."

"Dean said he thought it might improve your confidence, being able to take pride in your work." Cas said softly. "What do you think?"

Claire grinned. "Well, I know where to find brake lines now, and Dean let slip how to make it look like an accident."

"What?"

"Yeah, when he realized he'd said that, he had pretty much the same face." Claire said with a quiet laugh.

"And you think this is funny?" Cas asked.

Claire laughed harder, "If you could see your face right now... Oh, man, that's great..."

Cas waited until she calmed down. "Well, this is concerning... This is the happiest I think I've ever seen you, and you're talking about ways you could kill people."

"That reminds me, I have a new date for prom." Claire said, taking another bite of her dinner.

"Talking about killing people reminds you that you have a different date for prom?" Cas asked, wondering what she'd say to clarify.

Claire nodded. "Yeah, actually. Instead of the guy who Dean told me I could have the tire iron for, I'm going to go with Alfie from the shop."

"Your co-worker, who was in the motorcycle accident?... Is he still in school?"

"No, he dropped out. Kevin said he was going to try to set me up with him anyway, I just didn't know he was talking about Alfie until today."

Cas shook his head a little, "I realize I haven't met him, but I can't say he sounds very reputable."

Claire shrugged. "You thought Will was okay at first."

"I regret thinking that." Cas answered.

"Dean wants to know if you're going to help me cash my checks or set up an account for automatic deposit." Claire said between bites.

Cas thought for a moment. "Well, you're the one working, what do you think?"

"All right, just like I showed you last time. The oil type is on the cap, new filter is sitting on the toolbench, okay?" Dean said as Claire continued to jack up the Miata.

"Yeah, got it." Claire said.

After Dean left the bay, headed for the yard, she noticed the jack wasn't taking the car very high. She wouldn't have room for the dolly, but being fairly small, she was certain she'd fit.

Pulling the oil drip pan along with her, she scooted underneath, carefully getting the pan into place.
As she began to open the valve over the pan at an awkward angle, she heard something creak.

All at once with the jack clattering onto its side the car came down, landing hard on its tires, the frame pressing down heavily into her stomach, weighing on her ribs, chest, and face.

Panic closed in on her, and she found it increasingly difficult to breathe.

Alfie, hearing the sound of the car landing, spun around to look down the hallway, and snatched his crutches. Hurrying to get to the garage, however, he was halfway through the hallway when a misstep left him on the floor.

One useless knee still in a brace under his jeans, Alfie kept his leg straight as he dragged himself the rest of the way into the first bay.

"Claire? It's okay." Alfie said, fumbling to get the jack low enough to put under the frame again.

"Get this damn thing off me!" Claire said, her voice frantic and shrill.

"I'm going as fast as I can. I'm gonna get you out. Can you breathe?" Alfie shoved the jack under the frame.

"Hurts to breathe..."

"Okay, shallow breaths until I get this thing up." Alfie was pumping the handle of the jack as quickly as he could.

The jack was barely going upward now, but soon Claire was trying to struggle out from under the car. With one particularly hard shove against the bottom of the Miata, the car rocked.

"Stop! It's gonna fall again, don't move!" Alfie commanded.

Slowing down, he noticed the car was sinking lower, and it dawned on him that he would not be able to keep levering at the jack for much longer.

Switching hands, Alfie hooked his arm under Claire's upraised knee, wrapping his hand around the top of her thigh, and threw all his weight into dragging her out, as Dean suddenly appeared in the doorway of the bay.

Alfie fell over, landing against the side of the Miata as it quickly sank onto all four wheels.

Claire lay still on the floor, gasping for air.

"What just happened?" Dean asked.

"Car fell." Alfie said, starting to shake somewhat. "The jack isn't holding pressure."

Dean quickly got to the floor next to Claire. "Claire, you breathing okay now?"

Claire nodded.

"Okay, I'm gonna check your ribs, okay? Don't kill me." Dean said, waiting until Claire rolled her eyes at him before carefully putting his hands on the bottom of her ribcage where an obvious line had been imprinted by the frame, and giving a small squeeze.

Claire jerked. "Sonofabitch!" she hissed.
"Okay. Is your dad home right now?" Dean asked.

Claire shook her head, "No, I had to take his car today, he had a meeting."

Dean passed Claire his phone. "Call him, tell him you're probably fine, but I'm taking you to the urgent care place. We'll pick him up on the way."

"Why do I have to have him there?" Claire asked.

"Because you're a minor. Stay still, and call your dad, I'm getting the car... Alfie, get your ass back in that damn chair- where the hell are your crutches?"

Alfie pointed vaguely in the direction of the hallway.

"I'll send Ben out here, I'm sure you can keep him busy until I get back." Dean said, getting to his feet. "Next time, close the damn release valve on the jack all the way before you start trying to lift the car."

Dean stormed out of the bay door, and headed for the house. His phone still in her hand, Claire turned her head to look up at Alfie, "Why's he pissed off at you?"

"He hasn't had anything good to say about me for a while. He's been pretty uptight since I dropped out, said I was wasting chances he was never lucky enough to have, and ruining my life." Alfie chuckled. "At least he stopped calling me 'hey, jackass' since you started working here."

Alfie braced himself against the car as he carefully got up from the floor, and moved to lean against it.

"Well, thanks for getting me out. And I think you're right, there's something wrong with that jack." Claire said quietly, dialing her father's number.

Alfie nodded, but said nothing.

"You wanna play chess?" Ben asked, breaking the silence.

Alfie looked up from the jack he'd brought to the waiting room desk. "Sure."

He moved the jack to the side as Ben retrieved it from his father's office and set the old, solid wooden set on the desk, pulling one of the folding chairs closer.

"My birthday's coming up. My dad said I could have a party, but all the kids at school suck." Ben said.

Alfie moved one of his pieces. "All of them?"

"Basically." Ben replied.

"Well, that's not good. Everybody needs friends." Alfie watched as Ben's hand hovered between two options on the board.

"How do grown ups make friends when they don't have school anymore?" Ben asked.

Alfie shrugged. "Kevin could probably tell you. It seems like he knows everyone in town. He's headed in anyway."
"That means it's time to close up, right? Should I shut the bay doors?" Ben asked.

"No, your dad likes to do that himself. I think it helps him remember he's really done for the day. But he'll probably be grumpy tonight." Alfie said, taking his turn.

"Why? And where'd he go?"

"Claire got hurt, but not in a big way. He took her to get her dad and get some x-rays just to be safe." Alfie answered as the door swung open and Kevin stepped inside.

"Sandman, what's up? You ready?" Kevin asked.

"Nope. Gotta wait until Dean gets back, he had a little accident in the shop." Alfie said.

"What, he didn't throw some duct tape on it and walk it off?" Kevin said, dropping onto the couch.

"Claire had a car fall off a jack. But she's probably fine." Alfie explained.

"And, like, land on her?... How is she not a pancake?" Kevin asked.

"She was between the wheels."

"Oh, so, she just got a little squished. How'd that happen?"

Alfie tapped on the jack on the desk, contemplating his next move. "Equipment malfunction."

The chess set abandoned, Alfie was prodding at the jack on the desk again as Ben, upside-down on the couch, his head hanging over the front, feet on the windowsill, continued to talk to Kevin.

"Yeah. That's how I got Sandman over here to do a couple of gigs with a White Stripes cover band. And I had this one class with him, I got moved up for it, and we had this sub for three weeks, she was really nice, but man, she was old, and she came in on Mondays, always really cranky, and he would just bust out singing Journey... You know who Journey is?"

"Yeah," Ben answered, "My dad has some Journey."

"Right, so, old people music. And he wouldn't start at the right place, just jump into the chorus, so he's all, 'Doooon't stop! Belieeeeving!'" Kevin mimicked, and then cut himself laughing, "It worked, though. Hey, what was that other one that made her smile?"

"Faithfully." Alfie said, not looking up from the jack, flipping it on it's side.

"Yeah, it was awesome. And this one guy, Eric, he wanted to test out his autotune, so he got us to help him out with that, and man, let me tell you, I would listen to this guy over Stevie Nicks. She's all scratchy and rattley,-"

"Stevie Nicks is very talented." Alfie said quietly.

"Sure, but you're wrong, and being wrong over there, so I can deal with that." Kevin answered.

Ben slid off the couch carefully, righting himself as he went. "So, would you guys go?"

Kevin nodded. "Karaoke and cake? Yeah. Count me in. How many kegs are you gonna have?"

Alfie laughed quietly.
"I'm serious." Ben whined, "If it's just me and my dad, it's gonna suck."

"Yeah, no, I mean, we'd go. Right?" Kevin asked, looking up.

"Yeah. I'd go to that." Alfie said.

"This is gonna be awesome." Ben muttered, as headlights flashed across the window.

Moments later, Dean came in the door, still as unwashed as when he'd left.

"How squished did she get?" Kevin asked. "Was there crunching, was there blood?"

"Clear out." Dean said darkly. "I need a word with Alfie."

Kevin got up, waving Ben to the door ahead of him.

Once the room was empty, Dean turned to face the desk. "You could have gotten her killed, has that crossed your mind? Accidents with any machine this big are bad enough, but stupidity, not thinking, that is bullshit. I have seen you use a damn jack enough times to expect you to know to close the valve, how hard is that? Even on painkillers, you can't be this dense!"

Alfie didn't flinch as Dean yelled harshly.

"You need to go re-enroll, catch up, and graduate, and you're going to have plenty of time to do it, because you're not going to be working here."

Alfie set the jack upright on the desk, and looked Dean in the eye. "I haven't been on the painkillers in over a week. Raise the jack, I want you to see this."

Alfie passed Dean the lever, and gestured to the jack.

Dean irately used the end to check that the knob allowing the jack to drop was turned as far as it would go, muscles straining, as though he were attempting to break it off, before putting the lever in place and raising the jack. At it's full height, he stopped.

Alfie stood carefully, holding onto the side of the desk, and put one hand on the top, pressing down. The jack began to sink back into it's resting position.

"The jack is broken. And even with broken equipment and an injury slowing me down, I probably saved her life. If you want to fire me, that's fine, but it's your job as an employer to make sure the tools are functional."

Dean nodded grimly. "Okay, so you probably closed the valve. And you think you could play it off as wrongful termination?"

"Only now that you've put it that way." Alfie said quietly.

"Get out." Dean growled.

"See you tomorrow." Alfie said, taking his crutches from the wall.

Dean said nothing, heading to the garage.

"I think you're okay for school, but I don't want you working on cars, or driving while you're on these." Cas said, looking at the bottle of muscle relaxers.
Claire nodded sleepily.

"Are you sure you're not hungry? I can bring you up a sandwich."

"No, that smoothie was actually really heavy, so I'm good." Claire said.

Cas nodded and set the bottle down on the nightstand. "Don't take your next dose until at least 5 a.m., okay? Later would be better so it isn't wearing off at school."

"Sorry I dragged you out of your meeting."

"Just make sure the next time a car falls on you that you check the calendar on the fridge and schedule it in advance." Cas said, earning an amused expression from Claire. "When do you want to go shopping for your dress?"

Claire started to shrug, regretting it immediately. "Shit... um, after I can move again, and before all the good ones are gone."

Cas nodded, moving to the door. "I'll be awake for a while, call if you need anything."

Claire threw a thumbs up at him as she settled further into her pillows. He turned off the light and pulled her door most of the way shut before making his way downstairs.

Cas was moving quietly through the house, turning off lights and sorting things as he went, when through the living room window he saw Dean, leaning back against the top of the low fence next to the walkway gate.

He opened the door, and moved out onto the porch leaving it half open as Dean turned around. He was holding two bottles of beer and a bottle-opener, and seeing Cas on the porch, came through the gate and up the walk.

"Hey, figured you'd be pretty rattled, too..." Dean said, gesturing with the hand that held the bottles. Cas nodded, and accepted one Dean held out to him, and made for the porch swing, leaving plenty of space for Dean to join him.

"Listen, uh..." Dean started as he sat down, "What I said in the waiting room, that Alfie didn't close the valve?... I went in there, yelled at him, and he, um, he showed me, I tried the jack myself. This wasn't his fault."

"She said breathing was painful..." Cas said quietly. "If he hadn't been there, what would have happened?"

Dean nodded slightly, staring at his boots. "Well, I was around, but, she would have had a hard time calling for help, she wouldn't have had enough room to get enough air to stay conscious for long, and then maybe she would have started to suffocate, slowly, until someone found her."

"So he saved her life." Cas said, taking a drink.

Dean swallowed hard. "Probably, yeah, but only because I put her in danger. This is on me, for not keeping track of the maintenance on the jack, and telling her what to watch for. Hell, if it came down when he was getting her out, depending how he did it, could've killed them both. And I'm sorry."

Cas shook his head and looked down. "My great grandfather worked in a railroad yard... He got caught between two cars, and he was crushed to death. My grandmother told me when I was about Claire's age, and I'd been a smart ass to her, acting like I knew everything, but she was much
younger when it happened. You can imagine there wasn't an open casket. She told me about her mother's face when she came home from confirming his identity for the undertaker... She told me every day is a gift, and not to waste it."

Dean listened intently, not sure where Cas was going.

"Claire is happier. It's hard to see it, but she is. And I knew when she first went in there, she could come out with half her fingers missing, because sometimes equipment just fails. And sometimes people die, and it's still not anyone's fault." Cas chuckled, "Come to think of it, she's only alive because of an equipment failure."

Dean laughed. "Yeah, Ben, too."

"Anyway, the point is, you'll fix the jack, teach her to be safer and she'll continue on her path of gear-headedness, and have something besides school and college plans to look forward to."

Dean nodded. "What's she going for, college-wise?"

"Business management." Cas answered.

Dean tilted his head, "Man, I always wanted to grow up to get a desk job when I was a kid." he said, sarcastically.

Cas nodded, "She's smart, she could have a really good job... What does Ben want to be?"

"Pretty sure he's still stuck on firefighter." Dean answered, draining his beer.

"Explains his penchant for climbing ladders... You realize, we're even, now?" Cas asked, turning to see Dean's face.

"How's that?"

"Well," Cas said, starting to laugh, "I hit your child with a car, and you dropped a car on mine."
(Glad everyone's liking it. This may be my best work yet, I may have to send some of my readers from another platform over to check it out.

There is a list of the songs meant to have been performed for this chapter at the bottom. Please keep in mind, JA's talent aside, canonically, Dean can't sing.

Thanks for reading! FW)

Claire pulled the door open to see Ben looking up at her with big eyes. "Hi."

"Hi. Um, are you feeling better?" Ben asked.

"Uh, yeah, sure." Claire answered. "What's up?"

"Kevin and Alfie said I should do karaoke for my birthday, and I wanted to see if you and your dad want to go." Ben shifted his weight awkwardly.

"To a kid's party?" Claire asked, raising an eyebrow. "How old are you turning?"

"Ten. But I'm gonna be the only kid there. Kevin and Alfie said they'd go." Ben answered.

Claire shut her eyes for a moment. "Are you one of those weird kids that doesn't have friends?"

"If I say yes, will you come do karaoke with us?" Ben asked.

Claire gave him a scrutinizing look. "Maybe..."

Ben looked down the road toward the shop, turning a little paler. "Kevin said if you said no, he was gonna come over here and..."

"Okay! Let me just stop you right there, because whatever Kevin said he would do, he would actually do it. That's how he wound up at a pep rally in an evening gown and heels, and if you tell me, I'm going to call him on it, and then things get weird. So... Okay, I'll go. But I can't drive right now, so I'll see if my dad's busy, otherwise I'll have to ride with you guys... Do you want a present?"

"No, I just want people to show up." Ben answered.

"Okay. When?"

Dean shook his head as he pulled up to the restaurant. A large sign over the building looked as though it had seen better days, and boasted of pizza and specialty rootbeer. Kevin had not stopped talking since he and Alfie had gotten in the car.
He glanced at Ben in the rear view mirror, who was hanging intently on Kevin's every word, and rolled his eyes.

"...So then this varsity quarterback goes up to her, thinking, she's really small, so she's gonna be scared of him, and Claire gives him this look, like 'what do you want, meathead?' I have never seen this guy do this before, he staggered." Kevin said.

"She made him stutter?" Ben piped up.

"Clearly you've never seen that look from her. But if she ever used it on me, I'd probably run home crying to my mom."

Dean caught sight of Claire coming up to Kevin's door, and popped his own door open, prompting his passengers to do the same.

"All I'm saying is," Kevin said, opening his door without looking, "she's great, but nobody sane wants to piss Claire off."

Kevin stood up, and found himself face to face with Claire.

"Good advice." she stated plainly.

"Hey, Claire." Kevin said, attempting to sound innocent. "Can I hug you, or is that going to puncture a lung?"

"Yours, maybe." Claire answered sarcastically. Turning to Ben, she passed him a gift bag, "Happy birthday." "Thank you. You didn't have to, though." Ben said quietly.

"Yeah, well, kids are easy to shop for." Claire muttered.

Heading inside, the group were ushered to a table near a wall with a good view of the karaoke stage, and put in their order for pizzas, sodas, and beers for Dean and Cas.

A young man was making a brave attempt at a Toby Keith song when Kevin nudged Claire. "Hey. Stay cool."

"Why?"

A voice behind them was fairly clear. "Oh my god... So, what's up, you got a new stepdad, Claire?"

Will, and his friends Chaz and Jim were seated at the next table. Cas was barely aware of the exchange, but Dean had noticed, and let his conversation with Cas drop off. Claire wasn't turning around, but by the tilt of her head, it didn't look like it would take much.

Kevin didn't move, hissing to Alfie, who was between him and Cas, "Ruby Callahan."

Alfie nodded, and turned past Cas' shoulder to address Will's group. He leaned in, stroking the back of Cas' shoulder, and in an effeminate voice, lisped, "I know, isn't he dreamy?"

Dean would have laughed at the look on Cas' face if he weren't both concerned with the kids at the next table and wondering how this was going to end.

Kevin managed an equally effeminate voice without the lisp, and acted shocked.

"You hussy!" Kevin slapped at Alfie's shoulder. "You said I was your boy-toy!"
Alfie spun back around to comment, leading into some kind of hurried exchange, but Dean's attention was quickly shifting from Will's puzzled face, Cas doing his best impression of a statue, Claire beginning to ease into a smile, and Ben starting to giggle.

"Fine! I'll take you back!" Alfie declared far too dramatically.

Will had given up, and changed his focus to the other people at his own table.

"Damn right you better!" Kevin said, getting up, and supporting Alfie physically as the two made for the stage. Kevin put a chair in the center, and Alfie sat down straddling it, facing forward, as Kevin got the microphones and told the unamused employee which song they wanted.

Ben, interrupted by the loud start of the music as Timber began to play, leaned over the table to say something to Claire.

On the stage, Alfie was actually doing a fairly good job at the female vocals, and Kevin was hamming it up, clearly having a good time.

Dean leaned toward Cas. "Hey, you okay?"

"I'm not really sure what's going on." Cas spared a glance at his daughter, noting her mood had improved substantially, despite Will being less than fifteen feet away. Claire moved closer, taking Alfie's seat next to Cas.

Dean shrugged. As the song ended, Kevin came down, speaking briefly to the de facto DJ before coming back to the table.

"What was that about? Ruby Callahan?" Claire asked.

"We went to the same summer camp one year, and there was this girl, one of the other campers had gone to school with her in another state, and had known her as Robbie Callahan. Word gets around, she nearly got beat up, so we just started flanking her, and any time it looked like trouble, we'd just make complete asses of ourselves and suddenly, she wasn't so interesting anymore." Kevin pointed to a nearly imperceptible scar on his forehead, "See this? Sandman threw me over a log in a fake fight over a nonexistent tube of lipstick I said he stole from me. Totally worked, though, Ruby finished out the week just fine."

"You guys acted like idiots and got hurt trying to keep a trans kid safe?" Dean asked.

Kevin nodded, taking a long drink of his soda.

"All right, I can respect that." Dean said.

The music started again as the DJ finally found the right file on the computer. Kevin leaned over the table, speaking to Ben. "We're gonna get you up there for Party Rock Anthem after this, so get ready."

Cas caught the beginning of the song, and turned to Kevin. "Is he singing a Dolly Pardon song?"

"Not exactly. The White Stripes covered it, but I don't think the lyrics changed. He learned this one as a favor for a cover band." Kevin said.

Dean took a drink, and paused to consider the multiple levels of the situation he was monitoring. First and foremost, Ben seemed happy, and given the disaster his last birthday had been, the first without Lisa and with no friends in attendance, this was a major improvement. Claire was calm, and
Cas looked less unnerved. Kevin had Ben interested in the next song and Alfie... Alfie had Claire's complete attention. That did seem out of the ordinary, even if they were planning to attend prom together.

"Are you going to sing, dad?" Ben asked over the music.

Dean shrugged "Probably not."

"C'mon, what about Bon Jovi?" Ben suggested.

"I'll think about it." Dean answered.

A round of laughter came from the next table. "Yeah, and then maybe we'll get to hear some showtunes, I'm sure Mr. Novak can help out with that."

"No, he forgot his high heels."

"Hey, maybe he'll do 'It's raining men.'"

Claire gave an earth-shattering eyeroll and got up from the table. Cas watched as she went to the side of the stage to look through the catalogue. Dean caught a rather embarrassed look on Cas' face as another round of laughter rolled through. Soon enough, Kevin was dragging Ben up to the stage, and Claire was back, leaning down next to Cas' ear.

Dean wasn't sure what she said, but Cas pushed his beer a little closer to Dean and indicated he was going to follow her.

Claire stopped in the double-entrance and rounded on Cas, blurting out, "I stole your Stone Temple Pilots CD."

"What?" Cas responded, thoroughly confused.

Surrounded by glass, her words echoed shrilly as she rambled almost too fast for him to catch all of it. "I know I said they suck, and that meant you had room in the car for better music, and I know when Scott Weiland died you went out and bought it again, but I took it. I was going to put it on my iPod and put it back before you knew it was gone, but it fell down behind my dresser, and I couldn't get it out. It's still there."

"You stole my copy because you secretly like the band?" Cas asked, "Claire, that's ridiculous... And it's not exactly stealing to borrow a CD from me, intending to put it back, but you shouldn't be embarrassed about having taste."

"You're not mad?" Claire asked.

"No... Why are you telling me now?"

Claire shifted her weight. "Are you going to sing?"

Cas started to shake his head, "I don't want to embarrass you."

"Okay, normally, I would act all embarrassed, but I'm not. Not really. And Kevin said if I didn't go to the prom, that those assholes-"

"Claire-"

"They win. They win at being big douchy assholes who get their way. And they're doing it now, to
you, because they think they own the planet,"

"Claire-"

"So, just, I'm not going to let them win, and you shouldn't either. And they have Interstate Love
Song, and you know that one really well. And you don't actually sound like someone shoved a
sandpaper cat into a tea kettle and-"

"Claire!"

"What?"

"It's just karaoke. I'll sing if you want me to. Calm down." Cas waited for her to speak, but she
seemed to have run out of words. "And what about you? Are you going to sing?"

Claire was quiet. "I guess."

Cas raised his eyebrows.

"I, um... I think I'm done freaking out now."

Cas nodded.

"Sorry I took your CD. And I didn't ask you to help move the dresser to get it out when you were
looking for it."

"I'm sorry, too." Cas said.

"For what?"

"Stealing your father's music, you're never going to be able to live that down. Come on, we should
get back to the party, maybe I can find something in their selection that will really embarrass you."

"Dad-"

"Somewhere Over the Rainbow, maybe, you liked that one when you were two weeks old. It put
you right to sleep."

"Dad-"

"Though being a Judy Garland song, something of a stereotype." Cas commented with a wry smile.

Cas made his way back to the table as Claire picked her way over to speak to the DJ. Only half way
through the song, and Alfie had passed his microphone to Ben, and was looking worse for wear.
Kevin got Claire's attention and motioned toward Alfie, making sure he got a response as he and Ben
continued ton sing.

Claire waited as Alfie carefully got up, and helped him back to the table.

Dean watched Claire's reaction carefully as Alfie put an arm around her shoulders. The guy certainly
wasn't heavy by any stretch of the imagination, but he still had to stop himself from getting up by
acknowledging that she didn't have her usual uneasy look.

Claire settled Alfie into his seat next to Cas, where his soda still sat, and leaned toward her father,
"I'm up next, then it's your turn."
"What are you going sing?" Alfie asked, his voice a little strained.

"Insane Clown Posse." Claire answered, dropping into her chair on the other side of Kevin's, propping one foot on his empty seat between them.

"Serious?" Alfie asked.

"No, it's Imagine Dragons." Claire answered with a chuckle.

As the song ended and Kevin and Ben waited for the next one in the queue, Will spoke up behind them. "Claire, you cram some more pizza in your face, you can do Fat Bottom Girls."

Chaz and Jim laughed uproariously at this as Claire's face reddened slightly.

"Hey!-" Dean started, but Alfie had already turned around, shooting a pointed look at Claire as he did.

"You know what happens to guys like you after high school?" Alfie asked, his voice still gentle, but somehow firmer than Dean had ever heard it.

Will shrugged, leaning back as though he were accepting some form of challenge. "What?"

"Nobody knows," Alfie said quietly, "Because nobody cares. They just show up at their reunions later with a beer gut, a comb-over, two ex-wives, child support payments, and all they can talk about is football, and how cool they used to be."

Dean stifled it, but the look of impending doom on Will's face was too much, and his shoulders began to shake. He looked to Claire trying to sober himself, but she was also trying to hide a smile.

On stage, Kevin had mostly taken over, helping Ben, who was stumbling over the lyrics to Dynamite. Dean knew Ben liked the song, but to him it was just noise to be tuned out.

Claire got up as it ended, and Ben ran back to the table collecting high-fives.

Kevin rounded the table as Claire got onto the stage, slightly out of breath and draining his glass. Alfie glanced at him, jerked his head toward the table behind them, and then looked directly at Claire. Kevin's mouth tightened as he seemed to get the message.

The song, Roots, struck Dean as somewhat dark, more suited for a man's voice, but still a good fit for Claire. The lyrics were rather depressing, but still carried a message about pressing onward despite adversity. He hadn't heard it before.

Chaz started to laugh at something, which seemed to get Kevin's attention, and not in a positive manner.

Ben had gotten to the point he was grinning ear to ear despite the pizza he was shoving in his face, but the comments from the peanut gallery were starting to get louder, and he shot Dean the occasional confused look.

Claire's song ended more abruptly than Cas had expected, and he hurried onto the stage, getting the microphone from Claire.

"Brace yourselves," Dean heard from Will as the music began, but although he didn't catch the rest of what was said, but one of the words was unmistakable.

All at once, Claire's eyes flashed with anger, and Kevin grabbed Alfie, dragging them both to the
floor in some mock-up of a rather loud make out session, bumping into the table behind them unapologetically, bringing a chorus of hushed swears from Will, Chaz, and Jim. This soon silenced Will and his friends, and startled Claire into distraction, first gaping at her friends on the floor, then dragging her eyes away to focus on Cas as though she shouldn't have looked in the first place.

Dean jumped out of his chair, went behind Cas' seat at the end of the table, and hauled Alfie off of Kevin. Kevin started to protest in his best lisp, but Dean had already planted Alfie back into his seat.

"I'm going to remind you guys, you're in public, and there's a child present. Keep it PG." Dean pointed between the chairs. "Claire, switch with Kevin before these two get us all kicked out."

Claire obediently slipped into Kevin's seat, switching their plates and sodas as Kevin got up from the floor, dusting himself off.

Dean shook his head at them, sinking back into his chair, looking over at the stage. Cas seemed not to have noticed the interruption. His deep voice with the hint of a rasp to it fit what he was used to hearing, and his pitch was almost perfect. Dean turned to Claire as the music faded, "Did you pick that one for him?"

Claire nodded, "Yeah, he sings it in the car."

"You're the only one who hasn't sang, dad." Ben piped up next to him as Cas sat down again.

"Yeah, maybe we should keep it that way. I'm going to ask the waitress to bring out the cake." Dean said, getting up from the table.

As Dean sat down again, ignoring Kevin's chortling, he also tried to ignore what looked to be Alfie's fingers playing with a strand of Claire's hair as she was saying something to him quietly. He could tell it was at an angle Cas probably wouldn't notice.

Will and his friends had left. Dean had let Ben drag him up for Don't Stop Believing after the cake and opening the gift Claire had brought. It looked to be some sort of yahtzee game involving zombies and shotguns on the dice.

Dean drained his beer, and picked up his conversation with Cas about the roof repair, as Kevin came around the table to show Ben how to play his dice game.

"You know, I wouldn't have guessed you for the musical type." Dean said when they'd hit a lull.

"Yeah, well, I was in a choir in high school, it's easier in English."

"Right, boarding school. Why'd your parents ship you off like that?" Dean asked.

"My uncle. My parents died when I was a kid. It was easier than actually making me move in with a relative I didn't actually know."

"So, him and your grandmother?..."

"They're both gone now, but not a big deal, I was never close with either of them."

"Ouch." Dean answered him.

"Dad, look, they all came up brains!" Ben said, tapping on his elbow.
Dean got behind the wheel, waiting for Ben to buckle in next to him. "So, did you have fun?"

"Yeah, this was great!... Hey, how come you didn't want to sing that one I wanted to do?"

Dean started the car. "I used to sing that to your mom."

"Yeah, I remember."

"Well, I didn't think it would be a good idea."

"Why?"

"Because... well, it still hurts. Now, if you like that song, and you want to hear it, that's fine, but... I

don't know, it's one of those things, and it's gonna take me a while."

Ben nodded, and went quiet for a bit as Dean drove. "Mom liked it when you sang to her."

"Yeah, she was the only one who did." Dean chuckled.

Ben squinted in the dark, trying to read the instructions for his dice game again as Dean contemplated his last call from his brother.

"Dad wouldn't want us to be this disconnected."

"No, Sam, dad made it pretty clear when he threw me out that I wasn't supposed to come back. Can't say I care what he'd want."

"Okay, look, Jess and I are looking at a month at her folks' cabin this summer, there's a lake, and I think a week or two could be fun for Ben, let him get comfortable with Jess, I mean, she's going to be his aunt soon... It'd be nice for him, and... Look, if something happened to you, the last thing you'd want is for him to feel like he's going to total strangers, right?"

Dean glanced at Ben, considering the offer. It was hard to know sometimes, where family began, and where it ended.

The week Ben was born, Bobby had driven five hours to come see them, and somehow the casserole he'd brought was still hot.

He'd held Ben, gingerly and somewhat intimidated, having little experience with babies, but when Lisa was busy feeding him, Dean had showed him the nursery. Bobby had looked around, nodding, beaming, even, and Dean had confessed exactly how terrified he was at the idea of raising a child.

Bobby had hugged him tightly and said he was going to do just fine.

A week later, Sam had sent a congratulations card, having received Dean's message left with his secretary at the law firm, since Dean didn't have Sam's home number.

Dean wondered if Jess was the reason Sam suddenly knew how to use a phone.

Had it been Bobby, if Bobby were still alive, he'd have sent Ben in a heartbeat. Had it been his own father, he'd never have answered the phone.

He wished he had some idea what Sam was like these days.

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Claire sat half turned in her usual seat next to Cas as Kevin and Alfie choked and laughed through
the world's worst rendition of Barbie Girl.

Cas tried to keep his eyes on the road and rub his forehead at the same time.

"You know what? This was fun. I think even Will had a good time." Kevin said loudly.

"What?" Claire asked.

"Shyeah, did you see the way he was looking at Dean? Oh, wait, you were watching your dad. Anyway, yeah, Dean had this big hunky macho flex when he picked up Alfie off of me." Kevin continued.

"I'm telling Dean you called him big, hunky, and macho." Alfie said with an amused grin.

"I'm not embarrassed." Kevin said far too fast to be completely true.

"How could you see that, you were practically under Will's table?" Cas asked. "And really, none of that was appropriate."

"Third house down, dad." Claire said, pointing to Kevin's.

Cas pulled the car over, and Claire and Kevin piled out, both helping Alfie out of the car.

"Thanks for the ride. Sorry I faked hitting on you, Mr. Novak!" Alfie called before Kevin shut the door as Claire passed him his crutches.

Alfie settled his crutches under his arms, and looked her in the eyes. "Your dad's really nice... He knows I'm not into him, right?"

"Yeah." Claire answered, "Clearly you're with Kevin."

"Good," he replied, as Kevin and Claire walked on either side of him getting him across the street, "Because, if he thought that, it would make things weird."

"Because he's a guy?" Claire asked.

"Well, there's that, and also there's one hell of an age gap." Alfie chuckled. "Does he know we're going to prom?"

"Yeah."

"Okay, just checking." Alfie said quietly. "See you at work."

Alfie went inside and Claire accompanied Kevin back across the street. "So... I'm done pretending I didn't see it. Is he a good kisser?"

Kevin scoffed. "No idea."

"What the hell does that mean? I don't know who's it was, but I know I saw tongue."

"Yeah, well, we were trying to freak out the jock-squad, and it worked, they left. Not the same thing at all. Like the difference between pro-wrestling and a shoot out. So, no, that should give you no indication of actual moves on actual girls, for either of us." Kevin said, passing through Cas' headlights with Claire, "But since you asked, he was definitely drinking cherry coke. Anything else, you'll have to figure out for yourself."
"Yeah, maybe I will." Claire chuckled.

Kevin mocked a punch to her shoulder before running up his driveway as Claire got back in the car.

"What exactly happened while I was away from the table?" Cas asked quietly.

"Will was being an asshole, and they had your back." Claire answered. "They really weren't trying to make you uncomfortable."

Cas nodded thoughtfully. "Certainly the strangest way anyone's ever stood up for me, but I appreciate the thought behind it... I decided you can keep the CD, by the way."

"Yeah?"

"Well, I've already replaced it, so why not?"

"Great. Thanks..." Claire said. "You're not going to help me move the dresser, are you?"

"No," Cas chuckled.

(Playlist, in case you want it:

Toby Keith - 'Should've been a cowboy' - some guy
Ke$ha and Pitbull - 'Timber' - Alfie & Kevin
The White Stripes - 'Jolene' - Alfie
LMFAO - 'Party Rock Anthem' - Alfie, Kevin, & Ben
Taio Cruz - 'Dynamite' - Alfie, Kevin, & Ben
Imagine Dragons - 'Roots' - Claire
Stone Temple Pilots - 'Interstate Love Song' - Cas
Journey - 'Don't Stop Believing' - Dean & Ben
Aqua - 'Barbie Girl' - Alfie & Kevin )
Another lazy weekend with warm weather had arrived, and no sooner than he’d set the ladder against the side of the house was Ben at Cas’ elbow.

Eyeing the brushes, Ben was happy to run back to the shop for his father’s permission to help paint.

Cas was up taping plastic over the second floor windows when he came running back. "He said it's fine."

"All right. I'm only doing one wall at a time, you know." Cas said.

"Maybe if I help it'll go faster?"

Claire heard the sound of the desk chair coming through the hallway as she plugged in the code reader under the dash, and turned the key.

"I think I should ask you some questions about the prom." Alfie said quietly from the doorway.

Claire made a face as three different codes showed on the small screen, each of them a reason the check engine light would be on. "Yeah?"

"Well," Alfie said quietly, smiling to himself where she wouldn't see it, noting a smudge of grease on her face, "What color is your dress?"

"I don't know, I haven't gone shopping for it yet." Claire answered. "Oh, crap, it's a week away, isn't it?"

"That's right." Alfie confirmed. "So, how about this, what colors are you going to look for?"

"I have no idea." Claire answered, dutifully copying the codes down on a beat up spiral notebook, and double checking them.

"Is red your favorite color?" Alfie asked.

"Uh... yeah," Claire answered distractedly, turning the car off and unplugging the code reader, "But it doesn't look good on me, makes me look weird."

"Okay, well, I was going to wear a dark blue suit, is that okay?" Alfie asked, turning the chair slightly.

"You already have a suit for this?"

"Technically I already have a suit for my funeral, I was just planning to use it for this, first." he said through a large smile.

Claire stood up, looking at him quizzically. "What?!"

"When I got my motorcycle, my Aunt Naomi thought she was being cute, and sent me the suit saying I'd need it sooner than later, riding around on a death-machine."

"That's not being cute," Claire said, closing the car door, "That's being a bitch... Come to think of it, she probably jinxed you."
Alfie shrugged, "Either way, I have a suit. So, if you want, I can text you a picture of it so you can go off of that when you get your dress, or I can go get a black one that will go with anything."

A small grey Yugo suddenly pulled into the open second bay. Dean got out carefully, obviously annoyed by its diminutive size and also its very existence.

"You can't text me anything, I don't have a phone right now. You can send it to my dad's phone." Claire replied.

"Alfie, get the info up on this thing, owner is Mrs. Larson, one of Bobby's special customers." Dean said, looking ready to punch the car.

"Special customers?" Claire asked.

"Retired, fixed income, probably widowed and old enough to be Bobby's grandma." Alfie said quietly, "No charge for labor, and a deep discount on parts."

Dean rubbed at the back of his neck, frustration written all over his features as he made for his office.

"What's a Yugo, and why have I never heard of it?" Claire asked, moving to look at the back of it as Alfie rolled back toward the front desk.

"Because you kids live in the space age, in the bright and shining future, where you type tiny electric postcards with your thumbs, blissfully unaware of tragedies like polio and disco. You're welcome." Dean growled, shutting the office door loudly.

Claire quietly went to the front desk, and sat on the large empty space usually used for paperwork. "When you're done, I need to look up these codes and how to fix them."

"Dean's computer is-"

"Nope." Claire scoffed.

"He's not mad at you, I promise." Alfie said softly.

"Still not going in there." Claire reiterated.

"I'm not supposed to get out of the chair, so, I guess I can drag one over from the wall for you." Alfie said, turning back to the screen.

"You're not going to let me sit on your lap?" Claire asked, reviewing the codes.

"I didn't say that." Alfie chuckled, "In fact, you can do that any time you want."

Dean scratched at his eyebrow with his thumbnail as he hurried along the gravel road toward Cas' house, quickly spotting Ben on the ladder.

He hadn't been expecting to walk up on Cas bent at the waist, shoving a paint can lid closed with a grunt, his well-worn jeans and tight tshirt splattered with paint and showing clear signs of sweat.

Cas stood up, breathing roughly, probably having just moved several of the paint cans and looked up. "Your father's here, better come down.. Carefully."

Cas ran the back of his paint-smeared hand across his forehead as Dean approached.
"That's really coming along." Dean said, looking up at the wall. "Good color. What brand did you get?"

Cas pointed at the cans at his feet as Dean craned his neck to look. "Yeah, well, I don't want to have to do it again anytime soon. I thought it would hold up better."

"Yeah. I was thinking about getting vinyl siding, but I'm not sure yet. Kind of don't want to change Bobby's house, you know?" Dean said with a shrug.

Cas nodded. "I can see that. But if you leave it to Ben, how would you feel if he changed it? Took out a wall or remodeled the kitchen or something?"

Dean shrugged, "Yeah, I guess I wouldn't care, and Bobby wouldn't either."

"This was my parents' house, my father tried to keep it exactly like his mother had it, and my mother hated it. She didn't get along with her mother in law. So I change it any way I please, and I've made it clear to Claire if she keeps it when I'm gone, to do the same." Cas said, gesturing at the house.

Ben got off the ladder and moved to wash his brush in a large bucket of murky white water.

"Just toss it in, I think we're done for the day." Cas said, checking his watch. "It's almost three."

"Yeah, way past due for some lunch." Dean said, patting Ben on the shoulder. "You want to join us? Claire clocked out and left with Kevin and Alfie half an hour ago, said they were going for a burger."

"Thanks, but I have to get cleaned up, I said I'd take her to get her stuff for prom at three-thirty." Cas said, clearly not looking forward to the shopping trip.

"You want a paper bag to breathe into when you see the price tag?" Dean joked.

"I don't know, it might be enough of a shock seeing her in a real dress for once." Cas replied.

Dean nodded, "Yeah, I probably made the difference worse with all the engine grime. Well, good luck with that. Remember, pictures are great for blackmail in case you need it later."

Cas shook his head and laughed, beginning to move the painting supplies to the storage building.

Claire shot Cas a look that said volumes as the bridal shop employee brought yet another pink prom dress and hung it on the rack by the changing room door.

"Um... no offense, but I hate pink. Traumatic experience at a bubblegum factory. I still can't talk about it."

"Oh, sweetie, don't you worry about it," the large, matronly woman answered her, "You won't be looking down at yourself, I can tell you have confidence."

"Yeah... how about black? Got anything with a Harley Davidson logo? Because, I mean it, I can't wear pink." Claire answered.

"I'll see what we can do." the woman replied, "Are you sure you're a size 10?"

Claire nodded, and the woman bustled away.

Cas shrugged, and turned to look at a rack of jewelry next to a stand of veils as Claire took the only
A short time later, the large woman entirely blocked the doorframe of the changing room as the door cracked open so she could help Claire with a zipper.

Moving aside, Claire stepped out to look in the triple mirrors the small rooms clustered around.

"You're thinner." Cas said quietly from his nearby chair. "Are you sure...?"

"I eat, dad. You see me do it... Oh my god, what the hell is up with my arms?" Claire asked rhetorically, twisting them gracefully in front of her.

"Looking butch, there, Claire, you gonna flex, or get out of my way?" a young woman asked in a snotty tone, coming up behind her, impatiently waiting for her turn.

"Nice to see you, too, Julie." Claire said sweetly, a hint of irritation in her eyes as she stepped back, rubbing at her bare upper arms self-consciously.

"I should say, this, dear," the heavyset woman said, bustling between them, "This, this is not butch. This is toned. If we were to have dad over there try it on, that would be butch. What do you do, honey? Do you do ballet, or the cross-fit? Maybe gymnastics?"

Claire spoke softly, looking embarrassed, "I work on cars."

Julie burst out laughing hard enough to make her snort.

"Oh, now, that's attractive." the woman said, looking down at Julie with disdain and more than a hint of attitude. Turning back to Claire, she looked her up and down, "You should try modeling in your spare time, sweetie. You're certainly built for it. And if you have help to get into it, we can get you into a size 6."

"Oh, god, you're a skinny little greasemonkey!" Julie continued.

"I'd rather handle it myself." Claire replied.

With a nod, the woman hurried off again, this time returning with a pale blue gown with a pattern of rhinestones running down one side, and hustled her back into the tiny closet of a changing room. Shooting a rather nasty look at the still giggling Julie, she handed Cas a small box. "Here you are, then, 'dad,' she'll need these. Not everyone has the gumption required to take on heavy labor, break
glass ceilings, and still carry themselves like a lady."

"Press-on nails?" Cas asked, looking at the box.

"Sadly, yes, but the best on the market. My second husband was a mechanic, and the dirt never really goes away." she confided. "You should be very proud of your daughter, she's making strides my great grandmother only dreamed of. And she was a suffragette."

"Yes. She's a very strong, capable young woman." Cas said quietly.

The door cracked open and Claire stepped out, clearly still unnerved at the length of her skirt.

The heavyset woman shooed Julie away from the mirrors, nearly shoving Claire in front of them, and Cas came closer to get a better look.

The heavyset woman turned around to face Julie, who'd made a hushed comment to another girl and picked up laughing again, "If a seam bursts, we may need to move you up to a size 14."

Claire caught sight of Julie's scowl in the edge of one of the mirrors, and turned sideways flexing the arm she had to the mirror, curving it low in front of her. Relaxing her arm, she turned around, "Okay, I like this one."

Dean slipped into the yard unnoticed, looking around for Ben, but didn't see him.

Cas was manhandling the long aluminum ladder, shaking it violently to get it to retract, the muscles under his tight, damp tshirt moving gracefully, his tan skin covered in a thin layer of sweat, looking slightly flushed from his efforts, his hair a complete wreck.

"Hey, where's Ben?" Dean asked, trying to avoid looking directly at Cas and failing miserably.

"The kids came over from the shop and took him to a movie." Cas said, dropping the ladder to the ground with what was almost a shove as he flung it away, and approaching Dean slowly, backing him up to the wall. "Just us for a couple of hours."

Cas put his arm to the wall next to Dean's head, blocking him in, kissing him deeply, his other hand grabbing at Dean's belt as he nipped at his lower lip, making Dean moan, then reached down...

Dean woke with a jolt and a gasp, finding his own hand between his legs. It was early, but knowing he wasn't getting back to sleep, he made for the shower.

Dean nearly slammed the door as Mrs Larson pulled out of the parking lot, a stark contrast to the cheerful calm he'd kept as the elderly woman had thanked him repeatedly and said he was a blessing to the community.

"She's going to drive that damn thing till she dies," he muttered to the wall.

"And you'll be here, manufacturing yet another part that no longer exists to keep it running for her. And she's going to bake you cookies again." Alfie said softly from the desk.

Dean reached into his pocket and pulled out a set of keys, tossing them onto the desk as he walked through, heading to his office.

"What are these for?" Alfie asked, picking them up.
"The 'pepto-bismobile.' It's done. And it's not pink." Dean answered, dropping into his chair.

"You want me to list it?" Alfie called into the hallway.

"Not yet. You and Claire need a ride for prom, take it. Needs a good run anyway, and you'll both notice if there's a problem with it." Dean said loudly.

The sound of the desk chair wheels clattered as they rolled though the hallway, stopping at the half way point that was Dean's office door. "You're serious."

Dean looked up from his paperwork, giving Alfie a hard stare.

"Listen close, because I am only gonna tell you this one time... She has been through hell. Do not mess this up. You screw this up, and I will come down on you like a sack of bricks." Dean looked back down to the papers.

Alfie looked slightly concerned. "Well, Claire's going to have to drive, right, so-"

"I wasn't talking about the car." Dean muttered.

Alfie was silent long enough that Dean looked up to see if he was still there.

"What?"

"Nothing, just... It must really be serious for you to actually say something about it... I'm not going to screw this up."

Dean looked down again, and soon enough, the sound of the wheels made their way back to the front desk.

Ben got onto the bus and quickly headed for his usual seat, only to find it full, and made for one further back, finding the only available spot also happened to be directly behind Jack.

Sitting down, the bus lurched and began to roll forward. Ben stared at a worn patch of denim over his knee, well aware it would soon become an actual hole.

Jack turned sideways, putting an elbow on the seat back. "Hey, so, I heard something about why you and your dad moved here."

Ben didn't answer, but he knew as soon as he looked up that any response, even eye contact, was a mistake.

"Yeah, heard your dad beat your mom up so bad she died." Jack continued, "Because she was cheating on him."

"My mom wouldn't do that, so you must have her mixed up with your mom." Ben answered, looking across the aisle.

Jack stood up, throwing a punch over the back of the seat, catching Ben in the eye. Ben threw his arms up in front of his face and rolled to the aisle floor, absorbing a few more hits as the driver stopped and got out of her seat, pulling Jack away toward the front.

Cas walked out of his office carrying a large stack of flyers for student distribution, sorted with paperclips and sticky notes denoting the classes, and left them on Leslie's desk in the front office.
Coming back down the hall, he noticed a small, familiar face looking up at him from a desk past his door.

Ben had blueish bruising around his cheekbone and eyebrow, and the softer tissues were starting to turn brown. A small tear in the skin was visible where impact must have happened, but at the same time he had something of a satisfied look in his eyes.

"Ben?" Cas came closer, crouching, turning the child's head gently to get a better look, "What happened?"

"Jack hit me on the bus." Ben stated flatly.

"Why didn't you go to the nurse?" Cas asked.

"Mr. Garrison told me to sit here. He said he was going to call my dad. But that's okay, right? 'Cause there's a camera on the bus."

"Did you hit back?" Cas asked.

"No, sir." Ben answered. "I just put my arms up like..." he demonstrated.

Cas nodded. "Good... Good... Hang on, if the nurse isn't busy, I'll see if she'll come take a look at you."

"Because his father's on the school board, he has free reign to assault another student? Uri,-"

Uri cut him off, "Ben has been in this office repeatedly, and I am out of options."

"Call transportation, they have video," Cas argued, "And why would you leave him sitting in the hall, bleeding?"

Uri took a deep breath, and narrowed his eyes. "I have no use for troublemakers, Cas. Whatever your personal involvement might be."

Cas shook his head, "What?"

"I'm not sure why Ben has taken such a liking to you,-"

"He's my neighbor, I know his father."

"It doesn't seem natural." Uri's emphasis on the last word made Cas feel like he'd swallowed a brick.

"We will continue to run this school my way, and I strongly suggest you avoid bringing any more attention to yourself where Ben is concerned."

Giving a hard nod, Cas left the room, going back to his own office, passing the desk where the first-responder who ran the I.T. department for the district, filling in for the nurse that day, was trying to get Ben to keep an ice pack on. She patted Ben on the knee and got up, following Cas into his office and closing the door.

She spoke quietly, not wanting Ben to hear. "He said another kid hit him on the bus, but there's no other kids at the desks."

"Believe him," Cas replied, "This has been going on for a while. Uri decided to let the other child stay in class today."
"Are you sure?" she asked, worry written all over her porcelain features, "I've never seen a kid leave a mark like that... And I've seen his dad in here, the guy is huge, looks like he could punch through a wall."

"Charlie, I know him, and I trust him with my own child." Cas said, "Also, I've been around them enough to notice Ben isn't skittish about Dean, not like you'd expect, if that were the case."

Charlie shifted uncomfortably. "You're sure? I mean, absolutely sure?"

Cas sat down. "His father didn't do this. In fact, I need to contact him, since I don't think Uri will. Transportation will have video of what happened."

Dean stalked into the office quietly, and set one hand on the counter, waiting until Leslie was off the phone.

"Can I help you?" she asked, her voice grating his last nerve.

"Yes, I'm Dean Winchester, I understand my son Ben got hurt on the bus today."

"One moment..."

"If at all possible," Dean continued, "I'd like to speak with the principal."

Leslie nodded, getting up, and hurrying into the hallway just as Charlie came through an attached door from the nurse's office. She jumped a bit, and nearly succeeded in turning around and ducking back into the nurse's office.

"Are you the nurse?" Dean asked abruptly.

"Um, filling in... She's out today." Charlie said anxiously, avoiding his obviously angry gaze.

"I got a call from somebody saying my kid showed up here, big bruise on his face, some blood, did you check him over?" Dean asked.

"Yes. Contusion, no signs of concussion, gave him an ice pack. And made notes." she pointed to the clipboard in her hands. "He might want some painkillers later, mild, over-the-counter stuff."

"How much medical training do you have?" Dean asked rather pointedly.

Charlie rambled at top speed, "I... I just work in I.T., the district paid for me to take a first responder course so I could fill in sometimes, I'm not a really a nurse, I just do first aid. Sorry. But he looks okay, though. I mean, not like 'okay' okay, because he looks like someone hit him with a brick, but like he'll be okay later, and-"

Dean gave a heavy eyeroll and went around the end of the counter, headed for the hallway. Charlie alternated between instincts to stop him and to get out of his way as he moved. "Sir, you can't go back there, sir, unless you sign in, unless you're already-" Dean pushed past her, leaving her at the corner, "...signed in...um..."

Dean spotted Ben immediately, and crouched next to him, carefully pressing at the edges of the bruise until Ben gave a hiss. "Got anything else you need to bring?"

Ben shook his head, and Dean stuffed his papers into the backpack under the desk.

"Okay, hop on." Dean said, turning around as Ben stepped up onto the chair, climbing onto his
father's back.

Dean paused at the counter, filling out Ben's information on the student sign-in/out sheet as Leslie returned.

"I'm afraid Mr Garrison is unavailable right now, but he'd like to have you come in for a meeting." Leslie said, noting Ben's presence over Dean's shoulder. "The earliest he can manage would be Monday at eight."

"I'll be here," Dean answered, slightly constrained by Ben's arms around his neck.

"And Ben is not supposed to leave, he has an in-school suspension."

"Well, you can change that to an out of school suspension, and I can take my kid in for x-rays, or I can put pictures of his face all over the Internet with your number attached and take him for x-rays anyway. So... what sounds easier?" Dean growled.

Leslie looked taken aback. "Well I hardly think he needs x-rays from a little scuffle like that."

"Why don't you ask your medical professional?" Dean said, gesturing vaguely toward Charlie.

Charlie shifted and made a helpless face, "Uh... better safe than sorry?"

Dean nodded. "Good answer. Call me a worry wart, but he'll be in tomorrow with a doctor's note."

"Who was it that called you, if you don't mind my asking?" Leslie asked shrilly.

"I did." Charlie squeaked from her corner, as Dean shrugged. "I called him."

Charlie watched Dean walk out, Ben clinging to his back, carrying Ben's backpack in his hand, and scuttled down the hall, ducking into Cas' office.

"Holy jeez..." she muttered, zipping around behind Cas' desk to peek out the blinds where Dean was getting Ben into the Impala, "Who put miracle grow in that guy's wheaties?"

"Thank you, Charlie." Cas said quietly, not looking up.

"Don't mention it, but we're even now for that wedding when you went as my plus-one to shut my grandma up... The other kid should have gotten in trouble, this is total crap." she muttered.

Cas sorted a stack of paper to the side. "I hope you believe me now."

"Yeah, I get it now, no way he hit Ben, but who's got the tranq darts for when he comes in on Monday?" she stepped away from the window as the Impala roared out of the parking lot.

Cas shook his head, "Uri put himself in this situation, he needs to handle it on his own terms."
"This session is supposed to be just you, Claire." Dr Thompson stated, holding the door open.

"It's gonna be you and an empty chair if my dad doesn't come in." Claire answered.

"Claire, really, you-" Cas started.

"I'll wait in the car." Claire cut him off.

Raising his palms in defeat, Cas got up and followed her into the room.

Claire sprawled slightly in the same chair she'd been in last time and waited as Cas and Dr Thompson sat down.

"So, Claire... how is school?" Dr Thompson asked.

"It's high school, it sucks by default." Claire answered, staring at the ceiling.

"Tell me about your friends."

"They all hate me right now. Except Kevin, he's okay. But he warned me they were all assholes, so, I guess I had that coming."

"How would you describe your home life?"

"Good?" Claire shrugged. "I mean, since dad moved me out here, I don't have to worry about coming home to find a passed out heroine junkie with a needle still her arm, and..."
"And?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't know."

"What about your job? What business does this Dean run?"

"It's a car repair place. I do maintenance and small repairs... I'm learning a lot, getting a good workout, and Dean said it helps, like doing puzzles, all the other crap isn't as bad, it's easier to ignore it."

"Helps you run away from your problems?"

"Maybe... More like, deal with the stuff you can't fix."

"And prom? That's this weekend, isn't it?"

Claire nodded.

"Are you going?"

"Yeah."

"Who with?"

"Your mother."

"Claire..." Cas warned quietly.

Claire chuckled, "I have a date for prom, a guy I work with - not Dean - he's a friend of the only person at school who still talks to me, why do you care?"

"Why would I care? Well, it's my job to find out how mentally healthy you are. Not to say it's not healthy to stay home from the prom, but if there were something keeping you from it, that could be something you'd want to discuss." Claire didn't respond, "Is there something you'd like to discuss?"

"Not really."

"What would you rather be doing right now?"

"What wouldn't I rather be doing?"

Dr Thompson shrugged, "Let's try this again, what would you most like to be doing right now, instead of being here? Just off the top of your head?"

Claire's guarded expression changed drastically. "Well... If Dean would let me, I guess Bobby's car could use some work."

Cas turned his head to look at her directly, finding her answer completely unexpected.

"Who's Bobby?"

"The, um, the dead guy me and Dean both knew."

"Were you close with Bobby?"

"I didn't know him for very long, mostly I'd get his mail and he'd be cleaning one of his guns. Sometimes I'd sit down and talk with him, I guess."
"What kinds of things did you talk about with Bobby?"

"I don't know... just stuff."

"And you were comfortable talking to him?"

"Yeah. Once you got past the 'crazy old-guy with guns' thing, he was really nice."

"If he had firearms, what made you approach him in the first place?"

Claire shifted in her seat, and scratched her cheek, "He looked like he could use a friend."

Cas sat down, pulling the car door shut. "I get the idea you were closer with Bobby than you'd let on... If you had told me, I would have pulled you from school for his funeral... I'm sorry you missed it."

Claire swallowed, and nodded.

"I think you should ask Dean about the car. He was very fond of Bobby, I'm sure he'll understand."

Cas said softly, reaching to touch her shoulder.

"I was going to steal one of his guns." Claire said with the voice of a terrified child.

Cas' face fell, "What?"

"The week that I met Bobby... that was the only reason I went over there... Mom called the house phone. I hung up as soon as I knew it was her. I knew Bobby had guns, and I was going to take one, in case she showed up."

Cas watched as Claire began to tremble.

"I'm sorry, dad, I was scared."

"Claire... is... did you...?"

Claire covered her face for a moment and took a few deep breaths. When she had recovered, she looked straight out the windshield. "I didn't steal it... Bobby asked why I was asking him how to use it, and, I had had a whole beer... he never asked how old I was, so technically he didn't know, and I told him. I told him about what happened to me, and that mom had called, and what she said, and I couldn't..."

"He gave it to you?" Cas guessed.

Claire nodded.

"Where?" Cas asked firmly.

"It's in a shoebox ...under my bed."

Cas started the car, driving in silence, headed for home.

Pulling onto the gravel road, he immediately swung into the parking area at the front of Singer Automotive.

Claire moved to open her door.
"Claire," Cas' voice was the hardest she'd ever heard it, "Stay in the car. You're not to move from this spot until I tell you otherwise."

Cas got out and marched straight for the bays.

"Dean?" Cas called, checking around a car parked in the first bay. "Dean, are you here?"

Dean emerged from the incredibly dark hallway wiping his hands on a red rag. "Cas, hey. What's going on?"

"Claire has one of Bobby's guns." Cas said, agitated, "Not right now, I mean, she has it in a box in her room."

"Okay." Dean answered, giving an inflection for him to continue.

"She shouldn't have it. I've never handled one myself, I need to get it out of there." Cas rambled slightly.

"Where is she right now?" Dean asked.

Cas gestured to where he'd parked. "In the car."

"Okay, she told you where it is?" Dean asked, setting the rag down, and starting toward Cas' house.

"Yes, she said it's in a shoebox under her bed." Cas glanced at his car with an unamused look as they passed it at an angle. Claire seemed to be curled into a ball in the passenger seat.

"Why does she have it?"

"She said she told him what happened to her, and her mother had called, and he gave it to her." Cas replied.

Dean shook his head, "That doesn't sound right. Close, but I don't think that's everything. She say anything else? Did he teach her to shoot it, clean it, put it away right?"

Cas gave him a worried glance as they walked, "Would that have been normal for him?... And apparently she wasn't joking when she said Bobby would give her beer."

Dean chuckled, "Okay, at least on that one, you can calm down a little. Bobby was dealing with some liver problems, he'd been drinking the non-alcoholic beer for a couple years, didn't even keep the real stuff in the house. She probably wouldn't have known the difference."

"Great. Now I just need to deal with the fact that my sixteen year old has been hiding a gun in her bedroom for the better part of a year."

Dean pulled the only shoebox from below Claire's bed, opening the lid.

"Shit... probably the scariest looking one he had in a believable size." Dean mused, looking down at the black handgun.

He picked it up carefully and pressed the button on the side above the trigger, dropping the magazine into his palm, and setting it down to pull back the top, dropping one shiny bullet from the chamber. He thumbed it into the top of the magazine, and slid the magazine back into the bottom of the handle with a click, getting up from the floor. He tucked it into the back of his waistband and dropped his tshirt over what still showed.
"I'll clean it, if it's been fired since he gave it to her, I'll be able to tell. But... looks like you have a bigger issue." Dean said, pushing the lid of the box closed with his toe, and knocking it back under the bed.

"What?" Cas asked, weariness in his voice.

Dean gestured to the box, "The box is for the work boots she just got. That means at some point in the last month, she moved it. You'll want to find out why."

Claire watched as Dean went back to the shop, wishing she could join him. Anything had to be better than what had to be coming.

Cas dropped into the seat, ignoring his belt, spinning the car around, and out of nowhere they were in their own driveway.

"Dad..."

"Claire, the danger you put yourself in... You... God, Claire, I want to say you have no idea, but this is so much worse! You're too smart to not have understood the risk you took!... And Dean pointed out that box was new. You moved it to where it was since you started working... How am I supposed to help you if you tell me nothing?!" Cas rubbed his hand across his forehead, "...you couldn't even tell me when a CD fell behind your dresser, Claire... What are you so afraid of, that you have to keep everything a secret?"

Claire sat unearthly still.

"Why did you move it?... I really wish he hadn't pointed it out, now, but there's no getting around it... At some point in the last month, you picked up a gun that had bullets in it, a gun I didn't even know was in the house... Were you going to hurt someone? Even yourself? I need to know."

"I wasn't going to hurt anyone." Claire's voice was barely a whisper. "Kevin said to stay offline, and not get a new phone, but... he can't stop people from sticking death threats in my locker."

"Death threats?" Cas repeated.

Claire looked down, "One said they were going to slit my throat at midnight... I didn't sleep."

Cas reached across the car and wrapped his arms around Claire, who stiffened immediately.

Dean noticed Cas coming up the drive and propped the door open for him, waving him in, and went back to the kitchen island.

Over the tile, newsprint had been layed out, and on top, in many pieces, was the gun he'd taken from Claire's room, along with several small wire brushes, solvent, cotton patches and gun oil.

"Please tell me it wasn't fired." Cas said, stepping inside.

"Not even once. But check this out," Dean said, holding up the lower part of the gun.

He pointed to a pinprick sized hole above the handle that aligned with the chamber and barrel, and pulled the trigger a few times.

"I'm not sure I understand." Cas said.
"There's no firing pin. Somebody took it out." Dean said. "A little pin should come out right here, it would hit the primer, the primer sparks the powder, powder goes bang, fires the bullet, and the brass ejects out the top. No firing pin to hit the primer, no bang, bullet's not going anywhere."

"There's no pin, so there's no way it could hurt anyone?" Cas asked for clarification.

"Fancy metal lump that holds bullets." Dean said, tossing it onto the counter where it landed with a thud. "She could've hurt someone with it the same as with a rock, but it wouldn't go off, not even by accident."

"I didn't know Bobby, do you suppose...?"

"He did this on purpose, same as the non-alcoholic beers." Dean answered with a nod, "He probably figured if she was going to try to get a gun, better she get her hands on one she wouldn't be able to tell was disabled until she tried to use it. Same as the beer, she could drink a hundred and never get drunk, but she didn't know that, and with easy access, she wouldn't go looking for the real stuff. He knew what he was doing."

Cas leaned on the counter. "She said he gave it to her because she told him what happened to her, and that her mom had called, and she was scared her mother would come to the house."

Dean nodded, "Well, if her mom had showed up, and had this thing shoved in her face, she probably would have backed down real fast."

Cas nodded reluctantly.

"Look, I'm not saying that what Bobby did was right, but he did what he could." Dean said quietly.

Claire was sitting in the porch swing when Cas returned.

Despite the silence between them, thick and oppressive, Cas sat down next to her.

"Now what?" Claire asked, a hint of fear in her voice.

"I have a feeling it's crossed your mind, so let me be perfectly clear, you will not be going back to your mother. Nothing you could do would make me send you back to her."

Claire moved as though she could breathe for the first time in an hour.

"I'm not sure what to make of this, Claire, how to discipline you for this... I know you were afraid, and teenagers aren't known for good decisions, and being afraid brings out the worst in people, but I don't think you want to hurt anyone. And you offered this information of your own accord... You told me about the beer, you told me about the gun, but if you had told me last year that your mother had called... if you had told me instead of Bobby, about what had happened to you... It wasn't Bobby's job to make sure my daughter felt safe in her own home."

Claire sniffed and wiped at her dry cheek from habit. "I'm sorry."

Cas leaned back a little, "Dean could tell it hadn't been fired... There will be things in your life that are going to be none of my business. There are a few already. I think you know the difference."

Claire nodded. "So, you want me to stop keeping secrets?"

"I'm a bit more concerned with the violence, but, yes. Major ones, anyway."
Claire seemed to curl into a tighter ball. "Someone offered me a hash brownie at a party during Christmas break... I didn't take it, and I stopped hanging out with her, but I guess it counts as something I should have told you."

Cas stared out at the gravel road and the empty field beyond it.

"Listen, if you have to take something away from me, make it prom, okay? Because there's one next year, so, whatever. But I really want to keep my job."

Cas shook his head, "No, that's... Clearly you need them both, since I can't think of any other options, just... No more guns. No alcohol, no drugs, and don't date people who hurt you."

Claire nodded, "I'll try."

"We should finish this up soon. Claire's going to be leaving and I want to get some pictures before they go." Cas said, peeling the remaining masking tape from around the false shutter on the second floor.

"Hey, how many more rounds of this till you're done?" Dean called up from the ground.

"I'm not sure, but I should be able to finish it next weekend." Cas said, making his way down.

"Are we done?" Ben asked, looking carefully for any spots he might have missed.

"I think so." Cas replied, reaching to take down the ladder.

Ben looked up as he started to move it. "Hang on, Mr Novak, you left a paint can up there. I'll get it."

Ben started up the ladder as Cas turned to look at the road where Dean had parked the '56 Corvette. "Are you sure you want to let them take it? They could take my car."

"Trust me, I thought it through." Dean said. "I'm going to guess they'll get back early and I'm going to find out exactly how fast it goes, but if there's anything wrong with it, I find it now instead of after it goes up for sale."

The paint job was certainly stunning, the indented near-oval shapes stretching back from the from wheels were black, contrasting nicely with the off-white paint and silver trim.

"So, when does Alfi-" Cas was cut off by the sudden rattle of Ben's failed attempt to come down the ladder with the small, open container of paint.

The ladder twisted as Ben came off it, and being closer, Cas caught the boy as he fell, curling over him as the ladder slipped from the side of the house falling sideways, some unseen sharp edge scraping deeply into the back of Cas' shoulder, cutting through the white cotton tshirt he wore.

"Shit! Ben?" Dean moved quickly, pulling Ben from the ground. Ben was wearing most of the paint.

"I'm okay." Ben answered.

Dean spotted the slowly growing stripe of red down the back of Cas' shoulder. "Run home and get the big kit from the kitchen."

Ben took off quickly as Dean gestured toward the back door of the house. Cas led the way in.
"How bad is it?" Cas asked.

"I've got a neat trick that'll keep you from having to get stitches. That answer your question?" Dean chuckled, grabbing a handful of paper towels from Cas' counter.

"So, did you have really clumsy co-workers at the last place, or what?" Cas asked, turning a chair back to the table and sitting down sideways, as Dean sat down, guiding him somewhat.

Ben came through the front door out of breath, carrying a large watertight plastic box, bringing it straight to the table and opening it up.

"Actually, I was in the Army for a bit, and I was training to be a medic. I was hoping..." Dean stretched the side of the shirt to one side to help Cas get his arm through, slipping out of the ruined shirt, "to use the G.I. bill to go to college, and then maybe move on to medical school."

"So you were hoping to become a doctor?" Cas asked, grimacing against the pain as Dean stood slightly and pressed the paper towels to the wound.

"Yeah, well, life happened." Dean said. "But damned if the training I got doesn't come in handy."

Assuming 'life happened' likely meant Ben, Cas didn't question further.

"Um... Mr Novak... is that like an earring?" Ben asked, blatantly looking at the left side of Cas' chest.

An awkward silence ensued, but just as Cas was about to speak, Dean, having glanced down over his shoulder, cut him off.

"It's like a tattoo, Ben. Not a big deal, just something some people get done. Now quit gawking."

Dean dug around in the kit, "Where's all the gauze?"

"The mummy costume, dad."

"Right, I forgot. Okay, go get some from the upstairs kit."

Ben left again, not at top speed this time.

"I'm sorry, I completely forgot... I'm sure he didn't need to see that." Cas said quietly.

"Relax. He's seen my tattoo, he'll get over it... Almost done... So, if you use a bunch of sterile plastic strips on each side, and pull them between each other in a kind of zigzag of the pressure, you can usually get these things closed just fine. The asshole that showed me how to do this used soda straws to line them up." Dean muttered, "...there we go. Okay, once we slap a bandage over this thing, you'll be fine."

Suddenly the room was too quiet. Dead quiet.

Dean didn't mean to say anything as he continued to diligently press down the edges of the medical strips to keep them from curling, but the words came anyway, his voice soft, "So, if you're just going to sit around doing nothing all night, you could come over, hang out." Dean tried to clear his throat, but it didn't work as well as he'd hoped, "Grab some beers, chat, y'know, whatever."

Cas gave a shrugging nod, looking back over his shoulder a bit, "Well, 'whatever' does sound like fun."

"Listen, I, uh-" Dean started, but Ben walked through quickly, depositing a smaller box next to the first. Dean dropped whatever he'd been about to say and dug into the box, fishing out the items he'd
need for the bandage.

Ben turned toward the sound of footsteps coming down the stairs. Claire emerged in her dress, facial tissues tucked in around the top, her hair in some odd kind of curlers that looked completely foreign, and a thin layer of what looked like pale green paint in various areas of her face. She barely glanced at the unexpected company, making a beeline for the fridge, grabbing a slice of leftover pizza, and munching it cold.

"What's all that green stuff?" Ben asked.

"I'm secretly an alien." Claire answered, headed back to the stairs.

Claire came downstairs quietly, to the point that Alfie didn't notice until she tapped him on the shoulder.

He had been standing by the foot of the stairs, leaning on his crutches, talking quietly with Cas, but turned to look, and fumbled the box of the corsage he was holding, a small choking sound catching in the back of his throat. "Damn. Um, I mean, hi."

Alfie started to adjust his crutches to pick up the box, but Cas beat him to it, and passed it back to him.

"Hi." Claire answered, amused by his reaction.

"Sorry, just, you look completely different."

"And scary, apparently."

Alfie shook his head, "No, just, um... way out of my league."

"Good save." Claire said with a small smile, "So, did you get a good look at the car?"

Alfie nodded as Cas herded them out to the porch for pictures. "Yeah, Dean did a great job on the paint."

After some more fumbling with the corsage, and pictures on the porch, by the gate, and by the car, Dean appeared around the bend. "Put the camera down and let them leave, Cas. You're going to make them late."

After some odd hustling, Dean managed to get them on the road. Watching as they pulled away, he gave a small wave.

"You know she's going joyriding in that car, right? I still think they should have taken my car." Cas said quietly.

"Yeah, well, it's prom, it's supposed to be fancy. And this one doesn't have a back seat." Dean muttered.

Realizing he had said it aloud, Dean was about to apologize, but Cas started chuckling. "Okay, good point."

"You know, I kind of wish I'd crashed my bike sooner." Alfie mused from the passenger seat.

Claire shot him a look before turning into the parking lot, "Why?"
"So I could get your door like I should be doing." Alfie said with his nearly ever present smile.

Dean passed the paper plates around as Ben pulled the lid from the bucket of fried chicken.

"So Claire said something about Bobby's car, has she mentioned it to you at all?" Cas asked.

"Not a word. Why, does she want it?" Dean asked, grabbing a biscuit, dropping it on his plate, and turning around to get into the fridge.

"She said she wanted to fix it up, but if she were going to put that much work into it, she might want to buy it from you." Cas said with a shrug.

"Hell, I'm not using it, and I don't think I could sell it. She should have it if she wants it, god knows I wasn't over here keeping him company." Dean said quietly, setting a can of soda in front of Ben and opening his beer. "Besides, there are far worse things she could have gotten of his, as we found out."

"What about Alfie? He worked with Bobby, maybe he'd want it?" Cas asked.

Dean shook his head, "No, that was my first thought. Alfie doesn't want it. He's actually got a really nice car that Bobby helped him fix up, he just hasn't been able to drive since the bike crash, busted up his knee."

Kevin, with three girls in tow, showed up a short time after Claire and Alfie arrived, and helped to fill the table they'd claimed.

After several rounds on the dance floor alternating between his dates, Kevin dropped wearily into the chair next to Alfie as two of his dates went off to dance together, and the third stopped to greet a friend.

"Okay, what happened to the fourth one?" Claire asked, leaning across Alfie.

Kevin shook his head, "She has a boyfriend, she just finally convinced him to go... So, two of them are together, they just aren't out yet. Awesome lady number three totally understands. I don't want to speak too soon, but, I think there's potential there."

"I thought you weren't into the whole dating thing?" Alfie asked.

"This is different." Kevin said plainly.

Alfie leaned in toward Claire, hoping she'd hear him over the music, "Listen, I don't want to make you sit here all night, you should dance if you want to, I'm sure you can find somebody to fill in."

Claire scoffed, jokingly, "No way. I'm not running around on you like that."

Alfie laughed, "Okay, well, you can't go to your prom and just not dance, how do feel about if we pick a slow song, and I'll try not to lean on you too much? And if that doesn't work, Kevin can cut in?"

"You mean I got all dressed up and spent hours on my hair and makeup and you're not going to let me hide over here by the wall the whole time?... Yeah, okay. Next slow one, whatever it is, and if it sucks, we make fun of it on the ride home." Claire answered.

Alfie nodded, "It'll be the next song, then. I've been keeping track of the pattern."
"What pattern?" Kevin asked.

"Two fast songs, a slow one, a fast one, another slow one, and repeat." Alfie answered.

Kevin shook his head. "Dude. Stop it. Pay attention to the hottie I hooked you up with, not finding the dimensions of the room and stuff."

Alfie grinned and stood up, careful not to disturb his crutches as he moved, taking Claire's hand and giving the illusion of helping her from her seat before putting an arm around her shoulders.

Claire turned barely at all to face Alfie as they reached the closest available spot on the dance floor that seemed far enough from the table to count, and keeping a steady arm around his waist, let him guide her into a sway.

"I'm really sorry, this can't be very fun for you." Alfie said softly, close to her ear.

Claire shook her head a little, "Don't do that. I'm having a great time."

"Okay... Am I allowed to apologize for leaning on you more than I thought I would?" Alfie said with a grin.

"Nope."

"Can I apologize tomorrow if your shoulders are sore?"

"Why? Did you want to see who can do more push-ups?"

Claire felt it more than heard it as Alfie laughed.

"Oh, god, she actually showed." Claire recognized Julie's voice immediately and decided to ignore it, "... like a damn caveman in a dress, too."

"What band is this, anyway?" Claire asked.

"Um... I really don't know." Alfie replied. "Are we making fun of it later?"

Claire was about to respond when Will backed into Alfie, nearly knocking them both down as Claire steadied him.

"Woah, careful, folks... Hey, should you be gimping around the dance floor? You're going to trip somebody." Will said with a cruel laugh.

"We were doing fine until you got here." Alfie answered.

Claire tightened her arm around Alfie's waist, getting his attention, and they both made an attempt to ignore the other dancers.

Something was said quietly, likely from Chaz, and Will answered. "Yeah, I bet, it's probably a kink. Likes them weak, so they don't fight back... She beat up her dad, you know. Probably did the same to him... Just got to show her who's boss."

Claire stopped and steered them both toward the table. "I'm sorry, this was a bad idea."

"No, it wasn't." Alfie said, straining as he moved, but flashing her a smile, "Prom might suck, but we get to play with the coolest car in the parking lot."
Claire nodded, "Got that right."

Alfie sat down in the same spot as before, but this time Claire turned her back and leaned on the table, similar to how she usually did to the desk at the shop. "Have you ever been to the abandoned airport on County Road 40?"

Claire shook her head. "I don't usually spend any time in that side of the county."

"There are three runways still in good condition, and sometimes folks will head out there to race, so it's not on the streets where other traffic might, y'know, suddenly show up." Alfie said, "Just, if you're wondering what that car can do."

"Never crossed my mind." Claire answered, "You're a bad influence, you know."

"So, you weren't planning to take a back road on the way home and open it up?"

Claire tilted her head to one side. "Well, now that you said something..."

From all too close, Claire heard Julie's snorting chortle, "Oh, crap, somebody should warn him."

Claire turned slightly, spotting Julie, her date, Chaz, Will, Katie, and Jenny at the next table, as Alfie reached for her hand, threading his fingers into hers at an odd angle.

"Warn who about what?" Claire asked with a false aire of patience.

"You know," Will answered, "To make sure you aren't too close to your house in case you wind up walking home again. Since you like to get a ride, but you don't put out."

Claire's cheeks were starting to burn, but Alfie tugged at her hand.

"Well, actually, she drove, so technically, if anyone's putting out tonight, it would be me." Alfie said, then turning back to Claire, "Did you still want to go? Or...?"

Claire nodded, grabbing her purse and waiting as he got his crutches in place before heading for the parking lot.
(Hope everyone had, or is having, a lovely set of holidays. Looking forward to New Years! Yay, things go kablooie!... So...

Warning: some of Claire's death threats are read aloud. It's a demonstration of how awful she's being treated, please take it as a reminder to treat people with kindness and respect.

Also, don't blink or you'll miss it. Yeah. ;)

Thanks for reading, love you guys! FW)

Cas peeled the label on his beer a bit as Dean insisted Ben head to his room. Dean gave Ben a rather large walkie talkie, and picked up the other, coming back out to the porch.

Cas looked up as Dean hit the button getting a quick crackle of static. "Ben, this thing working?"

Ben's voice came back over the handset, affirming it.

"Okay, fallback is channel six. I'll test it again when we get over there." Dean said into the machine, motioning to the gate.

Cas set the bottle down and got up from his chair. "Wouldn't it be easier to have him call your cellphone with the land line?"

Dean shook his head, "Nah. It'd be going off the whole time. This is easier. Basically long distance baby monitor anyway."

"So, I went over the whole thing a bunch of times, I just don't see how this rumor would rate death threats." Cas said quietly as they walked.

"Kids these days... Still no cellphone, right?"

Cas shook his head. "No, it was damaged permanently, and she hasn't asked for another. I suggested it, and she said something about becoming Amish. All I understood was that Kevin had told her to stay offline, and she has."

Dean nodded. "Okay, so, cyber bullying. Can't wait for Ben to hit that age."

"And you think she would hold on to these notes?" Cas asked.

"I don't know, maybe. It's worth a shot." Dean muttered.

Cas looked over his shoulder toward the highway, "I can't remember what time it's supposed to end..."

"Relax. She'll probably be home early." Dean said.
"And catch me going through her backpack." Cas replied.

"Sure. You needed a pencil... If that's not good enough, you were making sure she didn't have any other guns." Dean said. "That kind of gave you carte blanche for parental meddling."

Cas shook his head. "Gun removal, good reason why you're tagging along."

Inside, Cas pulled Claire's backpack from her room and brought it downstairs to the kitchen table.

Digging through the backpack, he found a wad of small pieces of notebook paper stuffed into one corner, and pulled them out, peeling them apart carefully and attempting to smooth out the crushed edges. "Well, this is certainly a death threat. Though the spelling is awful."

Dean took one slip as the ball of paper started to come apart. "Hm. 'Kill errself, skank.' Oh, that's U and R. Quality stuff right there. Pulitzer Prize winners of the future."

"Something, something, 'ugly bitch.'" Cas shook his head, "Their parents must be so proud."

"Oh, this one's good, 'I hope you learn to forgive yourself, because other people are tired of your crap.' I'm not sure I'd call that a death threat, but at least it's readable."

Cas shook his head again, moving further into the kitchen. "I'm too sober for this."

Dean kept opening the notes as Cas sat down with a bottle of tequila and passed him a shot glass.

Dean touched the shot glass in silent acknowledgement that he would also partake, and raised one of the pieces of paper. "Good, actual grammar, 'I know you think you can treat people like this, but you can't. If I see you alone, you will get what you have coming to you.' Ominous."

Cas, having filled both glasses, took his in one swig. "You realize they leave notes because they won't confront her directly?"

Dean shrugged, reaching for his glass, "Think she could take a tire iron in her backpack?"

As Dean took his shot, Cas opened another one. "'You are...' what does that look like?"

Dean squinted at the paper. "Like somebody can't spell 'wretched.' Could say 'you are socket,' for all the sense that makes."

"Oh, god, they went there... 'If you accuse him, I hope it happens for real.'" Cas put the paper down and filled his glass again, and Dean's.

"Think that's still about the rumor?" Dean asked.

Cas picked up his glass. "I can't think of anything else that would make sense."

Dean downed his next shot and picked up the next piece of paper. "Oh, this one is threatening to photoshop her face onto porn and send it to her grandma... Creative."

Cas chuckled and leaned back in his chair. "These kids are assholes."

"Got that right." Dean mumbled, reading another, then immediately crumpling it, "Oh, shit, nope. Nope. Nuh-uh."

"What?" Cas asked.
"No, that was... that was bad." Dean answered, pulling out a lighter and walking to the stainless steel sink, quickly igniting it.

"You gotta tell me." Cas said, "Or I'll be wondering forever."

"Barnyard animals and electricity were mentioned." Dean answered, coming back to the table.

Cas picked up the bottle and filled the glasses once again, but Dean let his sit on the table, reaching for the next piece of paper.

"You think maybe we should burn all of them?" Cas asked, "Would that help her any? To not carry these things around?"

"Heh, turn it into a big art project, big huge wall of anti-bullying stuff, have the teachers encourage these little jerks to go read all the stuff they wrote... Here's the one, 'I'm coming to slit your throat at midnight.' What a great bunch of friends."

Cas reached for another, accidentally pulling away three. "They just keep getting worse. I suppose she has her reasons for holding on to them... I would tell the school, but they won't do anything."

Dean looked up, two more crumpled pieces of paper in his hands, inclining his head. "Do you hear that?"

Cas looked toward the door. "That doesn't sound like the car, does it?"

"No, I'd guess a midsized pickup with a diesel engine." Dean answered, but Cas was already halfway to the door. Dean got up to follow him.

Roughly the same time Cas opened the door, Will came through the front gate. Dean followed Cas out onto the porch as Cas descended the stairs. "Will... What do you want?"

"Just thought I'd swing by to check on Claire." Will answered, coming closer.

"I doubt that. Anyway, she's not here." Cas replied.

"Really?" Will played up his surprise, "She left the prom early, looked pretty upset, too."

"So, what, you left early to stalk her?" Cas asked.

"You know, I'm sorry to interrupt your little date, or whatever's going on," Will said, gesturing toward Dean, "But it's scientific research, actually. Freak of nature, how one useless blonde can be a prude and a slut at the same time."

"You need to leave." Cas said, stepping a little closer, "And I suggest you stay away from my daughter."

"Or you'll slap me with those limp wrists?" Will laughed.

"Or I'll replace your intestines with a garden hose." Cas growled, oblivious to Dean coming up behind him, "Get back in your truck and leave."

Will cocked his head, narrowing his eyes. "I don't think you've got the guts."

"In another minute, you won't, either."

Dean put a firm hand on Cas' shoulder, and made a small attempt to get him to turn back toward the
house.

After a few moments' staring match, Will attempted to strut back to his truck, and drove off, revving the engine.

Claire came to a careful stop at the end of the runway, grinning ear to ear. "We should make sure the top works."

Alfie shrugged, "That would really mess up your hair."

"That's okay, I'm just going to shave my head later." Claire answered.

Alfie squirmed slightly in his seat.

"What?" Claire asked.

"Nothing." Alfie chuckled.

"No, c'mon, what? You don't think I should shave my head?" Claire asked.

"Uh... you should do what makes you happy, but, if you are going to shave your head, can I take your picture first?"

Cas paced slightly inside the kitchen as Dean leaned on the wall.

"Do you think he was telling the truth? That she left upset?" Cas asked.

"She's got a backpack full of crap from the kids at her school, it's not hard to believe one of them might've finally said something to her face." Dean answered, "But Alfie's with her, I'm sure she's fine."

"Fine..." Cas rubbed his forehead, "If she left the prom, she'd be back by now."

"Maybe she didn't? Or they could be out getting a burger. No way to know."

"Great... so my daughter's out with a boy, and I can't even send a text to see if she's okay."

"She's out with Alfie." Dean reiterated, "He's on crutches, and she could take him even if he wasn't. I'm pretty sure they were going as 'just friends,' anyway. I don't think he's told her yet."

"Told her what?" Cas asked, pausing at the table for a half full shot.

Dean shrugged, "That he likes her. It's pretty obvious. But for right now, though, I think it's safe to say she's at least comfortable around him... How many have you had?"

Cas looked into his empty glass and set it down. "I lost count."

"Maybe want to put the bottle away?" Dean asked, stepping over to the table.

Cas picked up a few of the crumpled pieces of paper, looking at them as Dean took the bottle and put it back in the cabinet Cas had gotten it from earlier, then came back to the table.

Cas picked up several more of the pieces of paper, and pushed them back into the bottom of Claire's backpack.
"You're not going to talk to her about these?" Dean asked.

Cas pulled out one at random and left it on the table. "Yeah, I guess I have to."

As Cas went back upstairs with the backpack, Dean downed the last shot of tequila Cas had poured for him, and picked up the walkie talkie, moving to the bottom of the stairs.

Dean looked up as Cas was making his way back down, "Listen, it's been fun reading death threats and watching you scare that kid, but I gotta get back and make sure Ben's not sitting in the living room watching TV all night."

"Yeah," Cas said, nodding a little too hard, "Yeah, I hear you."

"Call if that little jerk shows up again, okay?" Dean said, stepping over and giving Cas a firm pat on the shoulder.

Cas leaned forward, not by very much, and pressed a delicate kiss to Dean's lips.

"Sorry." Cas said as soon as he pulled back. "That's not... because you don't... um... I-"

"You, uh, don't worry about it, okay? But, yeah, I should go." Dean said quietly, turning to the door, "I'll see you later."

Cas sat down on the second stair hard as the door swung shut. He hung his head for a brief second, then stretched out, leaning back on the stairs.

... Outside, Dean made it all the way through the gate before he had to adjust his jeans.

Claire shoved the convertible top down into place, almost expecting to hear something snap as she did. "Okay, what else?"

Alfie sat on the ground, using a piece of wire he kept inside one of the crutches to affix his smart phone to it, resting on the hand grip. "Looks good... The car's nice, too."

Claire rolled her eyes. "How are you going to have enough light, anyway?"

"Long-exposure. I made this app myself... Think you can keep from blinking for thirty seconds?" Alfie asked as she got back into the car, double checking that her skirt was out of the way before she shut the door.

"Probably."

"Okay, I'm going to use the light so I can see you on the screen, but it'll be off for the actual picture." The bright light on the phone came on, shining in Claire's face as he directed her to angle her arm on the side of the door, tilt her head, and put her right hand on the wheel.

"Why would I have my hand on the wheel if it's stopped?" Claire asked, still squinting at the bright light.

"Because it says you're in control of your life, and where you're going... That's why a picture can say so much." Alfie said softly, turning off the light, "Okay, looking at the stars, focus on one... jump up two stars from there... Okay, one to your left... one more... Perfect. Okay, once this starts, don't look down, or your eyes will fall out."

"Great, it'll go good with my bald head when I go as a skeleton for halloween."
"What would you do with your hair if you cut it all off?" Alfie asked, making a few small adjustments on the screen above his head.

"Make a rope out of it so I could have a golden lasso like Wonder Woman."

"Make people tell the truth?"

"That would be good. Maybe. I don't know, sometimes the truth is a lot worse than the lie, you know, if the lie is all you've got." Claire shifted her hand on the wheel.

"Are you going to let me make this up to you?"

"Make what up?"

"A real date. When I can walk, take you out dancing for real?"

Claire chuckled, "Shut up, that was the best dance ever."

"That was not." Alfie said with a grin, "That was a train wreck, and it's my fault."

"I don't know what you're talking about, you must have been dancing with someone else, because I kept thinking, 'man, this guy can really keep up.'" Claire said sarcastically, wrapping her words around a smile she couldn't hide.

"Uh-huh. Well, I need to figure out who I was dancing with, then, because she had her arms around me so tight-"

"You were falling over."

"I think maybe she's into me... Maybe it was one of Kevin's dates." Alfie said quietly, "I guess the only way to know for sure is to go out again."

"Well, yeah, because we have to be sure." Claire answered.

Cas, harboring plenty of drunken confusion dragged himself off the stairs and went to the kitchen calendar. One of the flyers for the prom was hanging next to it. It seemed to convey an end time most certainly passed by the hour of the clock.

Dean's lips had been soft. He tried not to think about it. He'd found a friend in Dean, a good friend. A friend who'd come over and get a gun out of his daughter's bedroom safely without calling the cops about it. Someone he could have a beer with and just talk. It certainly wasn't Dean's fault he was gorgeous.

And he had likely ruined all of it.

Cas turned off the living room light and stretched out on the couch.

Alfie carefully settled back into the passenger seat, and adjusted his crutches, pulling the door shut. He did something with his phone, and immediately perked up.

"Well?" Claire asked.

"It's great, just what I needed for the raw materials." Alfie said, shutting off the screen.
"Show me."

Alfie shook his head. "I can't, it's not done."

"Not done?"

"Yeah, see, I have to put it on the computer, and then the real work starts."

"How long does that take?" Claire asked.

"A couple of weeks, maybe."

"C'mon, you just took a picture of me, and you won't let me see it?"

"You'll see it when it's done. It's not like some selfie with a filter. This is just the start."

"Raw materials?"

Alfie shifted in his seat, "I promise, if it wouldn't ruin the whole thing, I would show you. But it would... Trust me?"

"Maybe... Maybe I'll just take your phone when you're not looking."

Alfie held the phone out, considering it for a moment, but as Claire reached for it, he quickly shoved it between the buttons of his shirt.

Claire burst with laughter, "What was that?"

"I stuck it in my bra."

"You don't have a bra."

"You don't know what I do at home. I could be into that."

"So, you have a bra?"

"No."

"Great, so I know what to get you for Christmas."

Alfie looked down, unwrapping the wire and shoving it into the aluminum tube of the crutch again. "Well, you wanted to run this thing with the top down, how much gas is left?"

"Most of a tank."

Cas awoke with his head pounding, and the blanket that normally hung down the back of the couch flung over him. Something was sizzling.

He ran a hand over his face as he made his way to the kitchen. Claire, in her pajamas, was scraping scrambled eggs into a large bowl.

"What time did you get home?" Cas asked, sitting down.

"Uh... I didn't look at the clock." Claire said, too loudly for comfort. "Are you okay? You look sick."

"I'm fine... Will came by looking for you last night. He said you left early."
"Yeah, because he and his friends were being assholes, so why stick around?"

Cas nodded slowly. "Right... so, how fast does the car go?"

Claire suddenly looked embarrassed. "The, um... the speedometer goes up to 140. But I didn't think that was a good idea."

"Thank god." Cas muttered.

"So... about 112, I guess."

"What?"

"It wasn't on the road, there's an old airport. I left lots of room to stop."

Cas buried his face in his hands. "So, basically, you had a good time, as safely as can be expected."

Claire's tone changed. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing." Cas said, bringing his hands down and getting up to fix himself some coffee.

Claire ate quietly as Cas set up the coffee maker, and looked for a bottle of painkillers, eventually returning to the table with a large mug of coffee and a double dose of ibuprofen.

"So, you weren't on public roadways, and you didn't attempt to top out the gauge... Good... that's... well, not safe, but, I guess safer than it could have been. Could have been more responsible, though."

Claire glared. "Safer and responsible? Just ground me already, or admit you're trying to start some kind of sex talk."

"Claire, jus--"

"I didn't sleep with him, dad!" Claire got up to storm off to her room.

"Claire, sit down." Cas ordered in a raspy voice, trying to ignore the throbbing protests that seemed to be coming straight from his brain.

With a huff she complied.

"I would give anything not to have to have this conversation, really. But I don't think anyone else is going to say this to you, and I think you need to hear it." Cas took a deep breath and focused directly on his coffee mug. "If you had slept with him, it's not the worst thing you could be doing, okay?... You're nearly seventeen now, society has ridiculous expectations for girls, and you've been through something... just horrible, but there's a big difference between... well, between what happened to you, and how it's supposed to be. Completely different. There really is no comparison."

"What, no lecture about pills and condoms?"

"The fact that you brought that up tells me we're past that."

"Can I go now?"

"Hang on." Cas said, pulling his wallet from his back pocket. He pulled out his worn photo of Claire as a baby, and set it down before pulling out another card, and handing it to her. "That's your health insurance card. I assume you can figure out how to call the doctor's office to make your own appointments... Of course if you need a signature or something, or if there's something you need to
discuss with me, no matter how uncomfortable the subject, it's fine, I promise to listen."

Claire took the card but looked down at the photo. "Who's that baby?"

"That's you." Cas said quietly, sitting back and taking a drink of his coffee, "Go ahead, I'm sure you have some kind of comment."

Claire shrugged. "Not really."

Cas rubbed at his forehead waiting for the painkillers to kick in as Claire lifted the photo from the table.

"Mom said I was an ugly duckling, and she didn't keep any pictures from before I was two, because I looked bald and fat."

"You were a beautiful baby. And your mother's a hideous beast, on the inside, where it counts." Cas said quietly. "I'm sorry, that's um... that's rule number one I just broke, isn't it? Don't criticize the other parent in front of the child... Babies are supposed to be fat and bald, they're babies."

"She said I was an accident, and I was never supposed to be born."

"I'm sorry she said that to you. But I'm pretty sure a good majority of the population is unplanned, so really the only issue is that she was enough of a bitch to point it out."

Claire handed him the photo and was quiet as he put it away. "There was a crumpled piece of paper on the table when I came down here this morning..."

"I went through your backpack." Cas replied without the slightest hint of remorse.

"Why?"

"You had a gun in your room, Claire," Cas replied dryly, Dean's words from the night before coming to mind, but keeping his no-nonsense tone, "That's carte blanche for parental meddling."

"So you saw the notes."

"You shouldn't carry those around, it's not good for you. Don't even read them. Just turn them in at the office and let them deal with it." Cas rubbed his temple and leaned on the table.

"Yeah, okay... Did you find anything else in there?" Claire asked.

"Was there something else to find?"

"I dunno, a crack pipe, schematics for a government building, cyanide capsules, and a toy helicopter."

"...A toy helicopter?"

"All of that and you're worried about the toy helicopter?"
Dean hadn't finished signing in when Uri appeared in the hallway.

"Mr Winchester, why don't you bring Ben back, he can get a pass for his teacher." he said, nodding to Leslie who began writing one out for Ben.

Dean and Ben followed Uri past Cas' office, past the desks in the wall, and into an office labeled 'Principal Uriel Garrison.'

Ben sat down as Uri closed the door after them.

"Ben," Uri said calmly, walking around behind his desk as Dean sat down as well, "Would you mind telling me how well you know Mr Novak?"

"Mr Novak lives on our street. I ran into his car with my dirt bike, and he wasn't even mad at me. And his daughter babysat me one time. They both came to my birthday, and sometimes he lets me help when he paints his house."

"Basically, he's nice to you?"

"Yes, sir."

Dean leaned forward, "What does this have to do with this Jack kid that keeps picking on Ben, and messed up his face last week?"

"I'll get to that," Uri assured him, "Ben, is there anything maybe you were asked not to talk about, concerning Mr Novak?"

Ben shot a confused look at Dean. "Do you mean like that earring thing he has on his...?" Ben raised his finger to point toward the side of his chest.

"Ben," Uri said firmly, looking Dean in the eyes, "Please have a seat in the hall for a moment."

Ben slipped out, closing the door behind him and Uri folded his hands on his desk. "How well do you know your neighbor, Mr Winchester?"

"I think I've gotten to know Cas pretty well. He's a good guy." Dean said quietly.

"Before his daughter came to live with him, he'd been in several relationships. Always with other
men, and now it seems he's been single for some time, with no obvious reason why. The previous principal here, Anna Milton, she had no issue with this..." Uri shrugged, "...deviancy. However, I am trying to keep this school safe for my students."

"Safe?... So you're going make sure my kid doesn't get attacked on the bus, or wake up crying in the middle of the night because some kid told him his mom is in hell?" Dean asked, leaning to one side, and pulling an ankle up onto the opposite knee, his voice giving away his irritation. "Because if being a single father is somehow suspicious to you, you should know, I'm in the exact same boat."

Uri spoke slowly, with intent, "Your son just implied Cas Novak has a nipple ring."

"Yeah, well, he does. Why does it matter?"

"You don't consider that a red flag? That your child would know an intimate detail like that about a grown man's body? ...That doesn't worry you?"

"No." Dean said, "I was there. Hell, I helped him take his shirt off."

Uri gave a small, confused shake of his head.

"That didn't sound right, okay, look, Cas got hurt, he was bleeding, and I bandaged up the back of his shoulder. Ben was around when it happened. So what? I mow the lawn without a shirt sometimes, guys can do that, nobody cares." Dean said with a shrug. "Come to think of it, the way the laws in this state are written to protect nursing mothers, girls can go topless too, baby or no baby, you see it all the time at Marti Gras in the city. So, there you go, gender equality and nipples for everybody."

Uri gave an overly patient blink, as if to make sure he understood what he was hearing, "Nipples for everybody?"

"Yeah. Now, rumor has it this kid is getting away with this crap because his dad's on the school board. Is that right?"

"Mr Winchester, maybe I'm not making myself clear, I'm-"

"Cas likes men. Got it, okay? I can tell. I knew long before I came in here. The guy can be as gay as the day is long, throwing rainbow glitter all over the damn place, I'd still sit down and have a beer with him... Talking about our kids, he mentioned his boyfriend left him when he was off picking up his daughter in California, but he's a good father, so of course he put his kid first. But you know what? He seems to be into grown men, not kids."

Dean leaned forward and poked at a framed photo of Uri and a woman in a grey dress, "And anyway, most child molesters are middle aged straight men in a long term relationship. Just looking at the numbers, looks like you're much more likely to be a danger to my son than Cas, and unlike you, Cas doesn't make Ben nervous."

Uri said nothing, but a dark look fell over his face.

Dean settled back into his seat. "So, how is it my kid gets attacked on the bus, doesn't hit back, and still gets a suspension while the other kid goes back to class? Because I've gotta hear this."

Dean could swear his eyes were tired from the amount of glaring he'd done as he went around the counter to sign out.

"Dean?"
Dean looked up to see Cas walking toward him, and beyond him, Uri, just out of earshot, with a decidedly grumpy look on his face.

"Ah, crap, your boss is watching." Dean said with a fake smile and a hushed voice.

"I know things are awkward right now, I just wanted to thank you for standing up for me... The, uh, the air vents echo."

"Yeah, of course," Dean said quietly, "That guy's an asshole, I don't care how many suspensions he's taking off Ben's record."

"Well, that's good news, at least."

"... And he's still staring. Okay, he's gonna be a creep about it. So, c'mere," Dean said, stepping forward to give Cas a quick and unexpected hug that included a thump on his back.

Unfortunately, said thump caused Cas to give a tiny squeak in Dean's ear as Cas' chest was still against his own, and he knew the sound would circulate in his thoughts for some time.

"Hey, you look like you again." Alfie said with a smile when Claire walked in. He quickly pressed a few buttons and closed his laptop.

"Shoot, I was going to wear that dress to come pull the radiator out of that little sports car... I wonder if I have time to change..." Claire said, passing through the office. "Clock me in?"

"Already done."

"Anything else done?" Claire threw over her shoulder as she went down the hallway.

"Of course not." Alfie called in response.

Claire re-emerged a few moments later, hands behind her head, quickly putting her hair up, the coveralls she'd gotten used to over her clothes, only half zipped up. "Hey, what song was it at the prom? The one we were going to make fun of if it sucked?"

"I have no idea. Honestly, I was a bit distracted." Alfie replied.

"You can't have been that distracted, I'm not that interesting."

"You don't remember either, though, so it looks like we're both that interesting." Alfie said, his eyes not leaving the screen, but making no attempt to hide his amusement.

Claire rolled her eyes and took a repair manual from the bookshelf behind Alfie, heading for the garage.

She popped the hood of the small red Mitsubishi, and started to get her bearings. She placed a drip pan not specifically for oil under the hose connections at the bottom of the radiator, and started disconnecting the hoses from the posts.

Claire soon had the radiator ready to lift out, but one hose wouldn't budge.

"Hey, when does Dean get back?" Claire called down the hallway.

"Soon, I think... No, wait, he's pulling around."
Cas put his phone away, having finished his call with customer support, and picked up the new phone from the table.

He wasn't sure if it was too soon to try to talk to Dean, but surely he could duck into the shop and speak to Claire unnoticed.

He approached the shop from the corner, hoping to make his time quick, when strained voices reached his ears.

Dean gave a grunt, as something rattled loudly, with a rhythm, "Damn, that thing's tight."

Somewhat muffled, Claire's voice, also straining, carried a bit more quietly. "I told you."

The rattling continued, as did Dean's growl, "C'mon, baby, mmph... off!"

Out of nowhere Cas heard Claire's yelp, "Oh, gross! It's in my hair!"

"Don't let it get in your eyes!" Dean said quickly.

Cas suddenly realized he was standing well inside the bay, and that the sounds he had heard were in fact related to the removal of a car radiator as Dean pulled his arm out of the space between the loose radiator and the timing belt, and Claire, splattered with traces of coolant, made her way out from under the car.

Suddenly, Dean, still breathing hard from his effort, was looking right at him. "Hey, Cas. What's going on?"

"I, uh... I got Claire a new phone, I thought if you had a slow day over here, it might be a good idea to bring it over." Cas said, gesturing at the phone still in his hand.

"I have to get this stuff off of me." Claire said, a hint of whining in her voice.

"Paper towels in the bathroom." Dean said, pointing.

After Claire was out of earshot, Cas visibly dropped his guard. "Dean, I want to apologize, I went way too far-"

"Hey, you already apologized." Dean chuckled, "Maybe you don't remember, but you did. And I told you not to worry about it."

"Well, I'll still be avoiding tequila for a while." Cas said, turning to look as a familiar pickup parked nearby.

"Not beer, though, right?" Dean asked with a chuckle.

Claire made her way into the office bathroom gingerly, trying not to spread the mess. She grabbed a brown paper towel from the dispenser and dampened it under the tap, wiping off what she could and trying to dab the rest out of her hair

The sound of a crutch on the floor behind her made her jump, but she calmed almost as soon as Alfie began to speak, his voice his usual happy quiet. "It's not that bad. But it's kind of hard to see in a mirror, do you want help?"

Claire turned to find him leaning heavily on the door frame, and passed him the paper towel.
Alfie carefully balanced himself and gently stroked the wet paper towel over the spots of coolant in her hair. "So... if the color stays... you could be the only girl in town with polka-dot hair."

Claire shook her head a tiny bit, and her voice didn't come out as loudly as she hoped. "I told you, I'm shaving it off."

"Yeah, I believe you." Alfie answered, his smile growing.

"And I believe you don't remember what song that was." Claire countered, her voice going even quieter.

Alfie stilled his hand and leaned down, kissing her gently. "I, uh... I meant to do that the other night, but, um..."

"You were distracted?" Claire asked.

"Yeah." Alfie said shyly, before kissing her once more. The moment he started to deepen the kiss, the office door shut loudly, and he quickly pulled away to look over his shoulder.

Will walked over to the desk as Alfie turned around, using the single crutch he'd picked up to make his way back to the desk, and get back into the chair.

"How can I help you?"

Will smirked and looked over at Claire, "Yeah, my truck's making a weird noise, figured I could come down here and get Claire to give me a lube job."

"Do we have a vehicle maintenance record for you?" Alfie asked, his usual smile starting to wane.

"No, I just heard Morrison is closing up, so I should start coming over here, instead... You know, any time my truck needs some attention." Will said, his attitude leaving plenty to be desired.

"Claire," Alfie said quietly, "Do you want to let Dean know we've got a new customer?"

"No, that's okay, I got it." Claire muttered, pulling a clipboard from the top drawer, tucking it under her arm.

"So, you gonna come take a look at it? Is making a weird noise, I'm sure you want to see for yourself." Will said, still smirking.

"Yeah, let's go." Claire said, starting for the door.

As Will followed her out, he spoke up, and tried to keep up with her fast pace. "I parked around the side."

"Yep." Claire answered, walking fast enough to make her hair bounce, trying to keep a good distance from Will as she made for his truck.

"Claire, c'mon. Slow down and talk to me." Will called.

"Why?" she asked, stopping to look at him.

"Look, I thought you'd calm down after prom, I didn't even make a big deal that you went anyway with someone else, even." Will explained.

"What?... You thought you'd just pull that crap in the truck, you know I almost had to go to the
hospital, right? And then you lied about it, so nobody at school will talk to me, they just send me notes about how they're going to cut chunks off my face and feed it to their dog, when I didn't do anything to you, and you still couldn't even leave me alone to finish one dance with my date? Did you think you could just make my life hell and then act like nothing happened?"

"You'll come crawling back eventually."

"Crawling back?... No. No, there's not going to be any crawling, unless it's you, crawling away."

Will shrugged, "I just figured-"

"You figured wrong." Claire snapped, putting her hand into her pocket, turning back around and marching toward his truck.

"Yeah, so I got her a new number, too, hopefully she can keep that quiet. She's still waiting on things to blow over at school, but-"

Dean stood up from where he was leaning against a large toolbox as Claire came into view. She walked fast through the large empty area between the shop building and a few cars, heading for Will's truck. Will stalked quickly after her, grabbing her left upper arm with his right hand. "Shit."

Dean and Cas both started toward them as Claire was forced to turned around, but her right arm came up and continued its path as she moved, catching Will across the jaw, making him fall over backward.

Claire stumbled back a bit, cradling her right fist with her left hand, a grimace on her face, as Cas reached her, carefully tugging her back to the garage.

Dean went straight for Will, hauling him to his feet. "Get the hell out of here, and don't come back."

"What the fuck, man? She hit me." Will protested.

"You grabbed her, it's self defense."

Will shook his head, "I'll call the cops."

"I've got five cameras you can see covering this spot, and two you can't. So you go ahead and call 'em. Just call 'em from somewhere else. Now get lost." Dean said, swinging a hand toward Will's truck.

In the shadow of the building, Cas soon realized Claire was shaking, and tears were forming. "Are you hurt? Is it your hand?"

Claire shook her head hard. "I'm sorry... I know you're getting fed up with me getting violent... I shouldn't hit anyone... I'm really sorry, dad."

Cas opened up her right hand only to find her fingers had been curled around a rather thick metal bolt that had left an imprint of it's threads in her skin.

"Claire, it's all right." Cas said, pulling her into a hug, "Nobody has any right to put their hands on you like that. You were completely justified in knocking him on his ass, and I've never been prouder."

Claire sniffed slightly and gave a small laugh as Dean, having watched carefully as Will drove away from a very obvious and visible spot, grumbled his way back to the open bay. "You okay, kiddo?"
Claire nodded, and with a furtive glance at the gate to the road, Dean made for the dark hallway.

Alfie shifted in the passenger seat as Kevin continued to talk.

"Then he said he saw me in a dress, and I said his mom liked that dress on me, and the protein-chugging meathead speaks up and tells the guy to cool it. Can you believe that? Anyway, how's the poster going?"

"It's done. I meant to bring it over this morning, but you left early."

Kevin tapped the wheel with his palm, "Yeah, I did, Margaret wanted to hang out before school. She's got a full schedule after, so... But it's done?"

Alfie nodded.

Kevin pulled into his own driveway, and waited patiently as Alfie got himself out of the car.

"Is your creep-ass uncle still visiting?" Kevin asked.

Alfie chuckled, "You're so nice to everyone else, I don't get it."

"The word 'skeeze' comes to mind. Just emancipate, man. It would fix everything. Your mom's never going to fly back from Europe to contest it."

Alfie shrugged, "That's why there's not much point. Besides, she'd probably leave me out of her will if I did. So, I just have to sit tight, forge my report cards, and wait."

"Man, you are a genius in the dumbest ways possible, you know?" Kevin said quietly as they approached the door.

"Yeah, I know. You said that when I started working for Bobby."

"Does Claire know?"

Alfie shook his head. "She hasn't asked."

"What about this contest in Dallas? Are you still thinking about it?" Kevin asked as they went quietly through the large, empty house.

"Thinking about it, yeah. I guess I could send something in, but my aunt's big on the whole art thing, said I could stay with her."

"As long as you don't show up on a motorcycle, right?" Kevin asked, following Alfie into a dark room and hitting the light switch.

Unlike the rest of the house, the room was small, and simply furnished. A computer with three screens and various gadgets attached filled the desk, and a photo printer sat on a nearby shelf. A heavily stylized poster of an orange Harley Davidson sitting in the driveway of the same home was on the wall in large frame.

Alfie dropped into the chair at the desk, leaning back and pointed to a high shelf that held several heavy duty cardboard cylinders. "Whichever one has your name on it."

Kevin, being shorter, had to reach quite a bit, but finally finding the correct tube, pulled it down and took out the poster.
The image he unrolled on the floor was of a crowded dance club, taken from behind the shoulder of a DJ, catching the lights on the panels which seemed to glow, and shadowy figures almost seeming to move. Darkness, neon, and even pastels worked together to craft a feel of a crowded room and loud beats echoing through one's chest cavity as lights flashed and moved about.

"Holy shit, man." Kevin breathed, "Forget guitars and pianos, that's easy, you made a damn soundboard look sexy... You gotta go for it, you're never going to get anywhere in this town."
"Hi..." the voice on the other end came through awkwardly when Dean picked up the phone, "Um, how's it going?"

"Well, it's definitely a better time for this than last time." Dean said, leaning back on the couch, rocking his soda can against his kneecap.

"So, I know you only met Jess for a few minutes at the funeral, and all, but, she's got a nephew who's two, and she's great with him, even when... um... Look," Sam paused for a deep breath, "Dean, I'm really sorry, looking back, I feel like maybe when Lisa passed, I should have taken some time off and seen what I could do to help, and, well, I just... didn't."

"Hey, man, don't. Okay? You... you weren't exactly someone who's really that close to start with, you know? It wouldn't be fair to expect you to dump everything and come running. And if you did, you probably would have just been underfoot. Me and Ben needed some time, and we got that."

Sam made an uncomfortable noise in the back of his throat, which prompted Dean to continue, trying to keep from hurting his younger brother's feelings. "It was good to see you when we did, though... and yeah, Jess seems like a good person, I meant it, I am really happy for you guys, and I get what you're trying to say."

"If, um... If you're not comfortable with Ben coming with us, maybe we can stop by and visit you guys, at least... Or did you already think about it?" Sam asked.

"I thought about it, and I think I need to talk about it with Ben, see how he feels. Kind of one of those in-between ages, you know? He might want to go, but he might not want to be away from home, so I'll see what he thinks. After that, I'll let you know, and if it won't work, you guys coming for a visit on your way through is probably a good idea." Dean answered quietly.

Dean pulled a repair manual from the bookshelf behind Alfie, and stood up again. "Wasting company time?"

"Well, if you have something I can fix here at the desk... Otherwise, not much to do unless the phone rings."

Dean looked up and immediately noticed the screen. "What is... Is that Claire?"

"Yeah."

"In the Corvette... Damn."

"It's not done yet."

"Yeah, well, it's still..." Dean scratched his head, "Has she seen this?"

Alfie shook his head. "I told her she could see it when it's done."

"You sell prints of stuff you do, right? How much would you want for a framed print of that?" Dean asked.

Alfie stiffened. "Um... what?... For this one?"
"Yeah."

"You... you want to buy this one?"

"Yeah, but it's gotta be in a frame. And I mean, like, perfect condition, art gallery condition." Dean answered.

Alfie shifted awkwardly and refused to meet his eye. "I don't know how Claire would feel about that, and... Dean, that's, um... kind of creepy, considering..."

"What do you mean?" Dean shook his head, "No, for her dad. He has a a whole wall of pictures of her in his home office, but they're all... Look, it's not a creepy thing, I'll pay you and you can take it to him yourself, if you want. Just don't tell him how much, it's gonna be a gift."

Alfie relaxed visibly, "Okay, well, yeah, that sounds a lot more okay. But Claire's been asking to see it for a while."

"How long?"

"Since right after I took the picture I'm using to go off of." Alfie chuckled. "She tried to take my phone out of my hand, I had to shove it into my shirt."

"So that's why you're not working on it while she's here." Dean guessed, earning a slow nod from Alfie, "Okay, how about a hundred for the print for her dad, and another hundred not to show her before he gets it?"

Alfie shot him a confused look. "Why would it matter if she sees it before he gets it?"

"I have my reasons. You can always tell her it's not done yet, and consider it done after Cas gets it." Dean answered.

Alfie shrugged, "She's really persistent, I don't know if I can hold out on her like that."

"Three hundred." Dean countered.

Alfie sighed and shook his head, "Yeah, okay. A print in a frame for Mr Novak, and she doesn't see it before he does... You know she's going to be all over me about it until he gets it, right?"

Dean nodded, walking to his office with a smirk Alfie couldn't see, muttering under his breath, "Counting on it. You're welcome."

Cas walked out onto the playground, looking around, watching carefully.

He knew perfectly well that Uri wanted him gone, but he'd been pulled from the office to cover for someone else's recess duty, so surely the fact that it happened to be fourth grade's recess could be overlooked.

Dean had let him know that he'd explained the situation to Ben as much as Ben would comfortably comprehend, and asked him to 'pretend Cas is a stranger' when at school.

Moving between the playscape and the swings he came to the blacktop with the basketball and foursquare courts, only to see exactly what he'd hoped to avoid.

On the far side of the court, and thankfully in full view of two teachers, Jack threw a punch at Ben's back, catching him in the head before tackling him to the ground.
Uri be damned, Cas started over immediately. As he broke into a jog, Ben rolled, grappling at Jack, and coming up to sit on Jack's back, keeping him pinned as the teachers approached them at a snail's pace.

"Ben! Get off him!" Cas could hear, "This is not appropriate at all."

"Why? So he can hit me again?" Ben asked sarcastically.

The other teacher took Ben's arms and lifted him off of Jack as the first helped Jack off the ground, and walked him away as the other spoke to Ben.

"You need to stay away him, Ben, or you'll be back in the office."

Cas slowed, Uri's threats weighing heavily on him now that the immediate danger had passed.

Ben's voice was like a higher version of Dean's angry growl. "So, he hits me, but I get in trouble? Why do I have to hide from him? If I'm going to get in trouble anyway, why shouldn't I kick his butt?"

"Just leave Jack alone."

"I do!" Ben yelled, "He finds me! He finds me right by you, and you don't care!"

"You cannot yell at a teacher-"

"What's going on?" Cas asked loudly enough to be heard.

The teacher speaking to Ben gave a helpless shrug, "Boys will be boys, right?"

"I don't think that phrase should carry much weight in today's society. What happened?"

"Well, Ben had him on the ground, and-"

"Why was Ben on the ground?"

She put a firm hand to her forehead.

"Gail, not you, too."

"Cas, you know... I know you know what this is."

Cas shook his head, disappointed as she walked away. He looked toward Ben to notice him glaring in the direction Jack had gone, a small scratch on his chin starting to show inflammation. "Ben...?"

Ben looked up at him with watering eyes that said he had nothing to lose.

"Your dad said to ask you for one more mile, what does that mean?"

Ben wiped at the scratch, "Uncle Bobby told him this story about this guy that got lost in the mountains or something, I don't know, dad tells it better, and the guy was going to give up, and he stopped, and it was cold, and he knew he was going to freeze to death, and he didn't care anymore, but he went a little bit further and found a town, and he lived. So later, he looked at a map, and he had walked over fifty miles, and the place where he was going to give up was only one mile from the town, and that's where he was going to die."

Cas gave a knowing nod. "Ben, I think I'm going to ask you for that last mile if you have it in you,
it's not fair to ask you to purposefully run from a bully, but I promise, it won't be much longer."

Ben gave a nod. "Okay, Mr Novak... I would give you a hug, but, that's something dad said would be a bad idea."

Cas nodded. "I understand, completely."

Claire walked into the office of the high school, and pulled a stack of paper from her backpack.

"Yes?" the woman behind the counter asked.

"These were inside my locker. My dad said to stop reading them and just turn them in. And he works at a school, so I figured he'd know."

"Someone put notes in your locker?" she asked, coming closer, picking one up and starting to read it, "We don't really- oh my god!"

"Yeah." Claire answered.

The woman opened another, "Do you know who's doing this?"

Claire shook her head, "No, but the handwriting is really different, so, I'm guessing a bunch of people."

"Your dad is right, don't read these... Sweetheart, what is your locker number?"

Cas sat down awkwardly as Dr Thompson took his seat.

"Cas, as long as Claire's uncomfortable talking without you, I thought we might as well get this out of the way... How are you holding up?"

"I'm doing well, I suppose. I mean, I haven't crossed multiple states to commit manslaughter, that has to count, right?"

"I'm sure you understand that if you're not doing well after something like this coming to light, it's normal, but we need you as stable as possible so that Claire has you to lean on."

"Of course."

"Given the situation your family is facing, I'd like to talk about Claire's reaction to healthy physical contact. Just to be clear, we are talking about hand to hand contact, pat on the back or head, hugs, things that would be perfectly normal for friends and family members. Does she seem to be okay in that sense?"

"I'm not sure."

Dr Thompson nodded. "Do you hug Claire regularly?"

"Regularly?" Cas asked, confused. "I hug her, sometimes, yes."

"How does she react? Generally speaking."

"Uh.. normal? Sometimes she gets tense, but, not often."
"Does it ever seem like she shuts down, or becomes agitated?" Cas answered with a shrugging shake of his head, "So, she may be a little uncomfortable, but mostly, she expects that if you are going to make physical contact with her, she's safe?... When was the last time?"

"Uh... last week. She'd been harassed by her ex boyfriend at work."

"Was she okay?"

"She... well, he grabbed her, and she knocked him down with one punch to the face... It, um... It was certainly something."

"A week ago... and the time before that?"

"I'm not really sure."

"I'll be honest, that's a little sparse. I'd like you to try to work in some kind of contact, even just a hand on the shoulder, at least twice a week, if you can. Some studies have shown even adults do better when they have more of a connection like that, and she's not an adult yet, her brain isn't going to be completely developed until about twenty-four. You think you can handle that?"

Cas nodded, "I think so."

"And her interactions with other people, does she seem okay with average physical contact? Or does she avoid it?"

"I'm sorry, I guess I don't really pay attention."

"Some people don't appreciate physical contact, but that's normally something that's obvious right from the start. Was she the type of toddler that preferred to be on the floor, or in someone's lap?"

Cas' mouth tightened as a wave of familiar regret grew, "I honestly can't tell you. Because I let her mother take her away when she was three weeks old, and I didn't see her again until I picked her up to bring her home. And...I didn't..."

"Cas, it's not at all unreasonable for a father to expect their child's mother to do the bare minimum to care for them and keep them safe. You didn't cause this."

"Yes, but I'm not blameless in this, either, because I chose not to be involved."

"Cas..." Dr Thompson leaned back in his seat, looking at Cas more directly, "When you were told that your child was in a harmful environment, you moved on it immediately. You went to where she was, saw evidence of it for yourself, and you removed her. And despite the fact that you came to her as a complete stranger just two years ago, after she'd already been abused this way, she feels safe enough accepting comfort from you. That's not a small thing."

Cas was quiet, but tried not to look skeptical.

"I'm guessing you're going through a lot of feelings of guilt right now, that can take time, let's table it for now. How about this Dean guy? A few things Claire said seemed off to me, what are your thoughts?"

"Like me, he's a single father, and we hang out sometimes. I know what she said sounded alarming, but, I was there, I've gotten to know him, he understood what she was saying before I did, and did what he could to help."
Dr Thompson nodded, "So, he's your buddy, he's a dad, he knows where you're at in life, what
you're going through, and despite the fact that she looks like a grown woman, he sees your daughter
as a teenager, and treats her like one?"

"Yes, exactly."

"That's far less concerning than what Claire said about him dragging her through his bedroom and
throwing her into a shower."

Cas chuckled, "He carried her, because she was in a state of panic, set her down on the bathroom
floor, and spoke to her through the door. I didn't understand what she'd said, and he was the one
telling her she was safe, and no one was going to hurt her."

"So, you have some support in him, he also sees her regularly, and has an idea what's going on. And
she's comfortable with him, despite what she said during that first visit?"

"Yes."

"Okay, that pretty much takes him off my 'watch-list.' I think we should bring Claire in, is there
anything specific you'd want to take this time to discuss with her?"

Briefly the death threats crossed Cas' mind, but he shook his head. He was concerned what would
happen if the incident with Bobby's gun came up.

"Okay," Dr Thompson said, standing and moving to the door. He waved Claire in, and moved back
to his chair, this time with a clipboard.

Claire sat down. "So, what are dragging out today?"

"How about the car?" Dr Thompson asked.

"Which car?"

"Bobby's car. You were going to ask Dean about fixing it. Where are you you at with that?"

"Spaced it. Next?"

Dr Thompson nodded, and made a check mark on his clipboard. "Favorite Beatle?"

"George. What else?"

"Any thoughts of self harm?"

"I drink soda and don't care about getting diabetes, that counts, right?"

"The airspeed velocity of an unladen swallow?"

"African or European?"

Again he seemed to check something off. "How much physical contact are you comfortable
receiving from your three closest friends?"

"Nudist mosh pit. Are we done?"

"Claire..." Cas rubbed at his forehead.
Dr Thompson sat with his fist tight to his lips for a moment before straightening his face and writing, "'Nudist mosh pit...' points for creativity... Who did your hair for the prom, Claire?"

"I did."

"Normally girls tend to have help with that for formals. Would having someone else fix your hair bother you?"

"I think I get what you're trying to ask, but you're not accounting for the sausage fest that is my life now... I got radiator fluid in it at work, and the guy I went to prom with helped me clean it up."

"Does he have a name?"

"Samandriel. But he goes by Alfie."

"So, Alfie... you guys dating, or was prom a one-off?"

"He's on crutches right now, so we're in agreement for at least one more date later, when he can walk."

"Did you get to dance?"

"Sort of. He kind of had to lean on me since we left the crutches at the table, and my ex nearly knocked us over because he's an ass."

"Okay, so, at least one person besides your dad can give you a hug without getting a punch to the face?"

Claire shrugged. "I recently started trying to be less of a bad ass, yes."

"How much less bad ass? If you don't mind sharing?... And if dad doesn't mind hearing it?"

"You lost me." Claire said.

"He's asking how far you two got." Cas stated.

"Not exactly." Dr Thompson started.

"First base. But not prom night, that was a couple days later, when he helped me with my hair."

"That was... blunt." Dr Thompson observed, "You doing okay, Cas?"

"He's fine," Claire stated dismissively, "But you might want to coach him on the sex-talk thing. Pretty sure he missed that day in parenting school."

Dr Thompson made a note. "That's a subject that should be approached carefully, but why don't we just go ahead and expound on that, since you brought it up. Did he leave something out?"

"Yeah, the 'not to' part. He even said it was none of his business."

The room was quiet as Dr Thompson looked between the two of them.

"That's... that's a new one for me..." Dr Thompson flipped a piece of paper up over the clipboard to read something, "Why are you in here, again?"

"Tire iron."
"Claire... We're here because this isn't something you should have to work through on your own."
Cas replied, "This would have helped you a lot more if I knew sooner, but I would like to make your life as normal as possible now that it's out there."

"I still think it was the tire iron."

Cas put the key in the ignition and waited.

"Well?" Claire asked.

"Just waiting for the actual epiphany for today, the last two times you waited until the car to spill your guts." Cas replied.

Claire was quiet.

"I thought for sure you'd have something to say, you must be out of sarcasm by now."

"What do you want to know?" Claire said, her voice unusually calm, "Three straight answers, make it fast."

"How many times did he hurt you?"

"Twice."

"Where did it happen?"

"In my room at my mom's."

"When I first got you home you cried. Why?"

Claire took two deep breaths making Cas wonder if she would answer, but she did. "My room was all I had, it was my safe place, they took that from me, ruined it, but you said that room was my room now. I knew it would be different because you wouldn't let anyone come in and hurt me."

Cas covered his face with his left hand, his elbow on the door. "This is exactly what is supposed to come out in therapy. Not 'nudist mosh pit.' You do understand that, right?"

"I almost said 'squid-fight at the nude beach.'" Claire answered quietly.

"Right... Of course," Cas replied, "Just as long as no one throws a jellyfish on accident."

"So?" Kevin asked, alternating between looking at the road and at Alfie.

"What?"

"Did you call your aunt? Or decide on a piece to enter? Or do anything about it at all?"

Alfie nodded, "Yeah. Actually, it just so happens I got an offer for a print of something that's not even done yet that's exactly the cost of the gallery's fee, so if that's not a sign, I don't know what is. So I called Naomi, and she knows I'll be there."

"The big finale is on a weekend, right? Because I will totally drive out for this."

"I think so, but it takes a week or something."
"Hold up... how much?"

"Three hundred."

"For one print?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Is your soul in the print, too?"

Alfie looked over at Kevin in the driver's seat. "What?"

"Nevermind. So which one are you entering?"

"You're supposed to enter three, I need to make sure they kind of go together, have a good flow between them, but I also need to make sure they're different enough to show off more aspects of what I can do."

Kevin nodded, pulling to the curb, blocking Alfie's driveway. "You think Dean will let you take the time off?"

"Of course. With me gone, he can hire some 'jackass' who can get out of the chair." Alfie said as he arranged his crutches and got out of the car.

As he headed up the driveway, Kevin turned the car into the drive across the street.

Alfie wasn't entirely surprised to find the front door unlocked, and headed for the kitchen.

A man with stocky build and a uniformly short haircut and beard was pouring a glass of red wine next to the fridge.

"Back again, huh?" Alfie asked with a small smile.

"Yes, well, the paperwork does get interesting when two people divorce, and neither are in the country when it happens." the man answered in a deep, raspy voice with a light British accent. "You don't have to pretend to be happy to see me, Samandriel. I can guess a young man of your age would prefer to be left to his own devices."

Alfie shrugged, "You'd be surprised how quiet it gets... So, any news on my parents?"

Crowley put the cork back into the neck of the bottle and placed it in the fridge. "My brother's in Hong Kong, currently, and Rachael's right where she's been the whole time."

At the distinct lack of detail, Alfie only nodded, his smile slipping away. Crowley gestured to him, head to toe, and up again. "You're still standing. Health's improving, then? Getting stronger?"

Alfie nodded, "Yeah, I can go without the crutches if it's short... I should be off them completely in another month."

Crowley nodded. "Your parents will be glad to hear it."

"Then why don't they call?" Alfie asked, his voice flat.

"Your parents care about you, Samandriel, they just expect someone else to do all the work raising you. Now you're grown, a nanny would be completely unreasonable, and cleaning services have taken the place of housekeepers, so they can't throw money at it and make it go away, and in that,
they're lost little children." Crowley took a sip of his wine and started for the spacious living room.

"Well, not to ditch you, Uncle Crowley, but I have a special piece I'm working on that I need to get done, and arrangements to make for an event at a gallery in Dallas... never thought I'd say any of that..." Alfie said quietly, making his way toward his room as Crowley sat down.

"If you like, I can tell your parents I walked in on some sort of debauchery, maybe they'll pencil you in for a visit at Christmas, but I wouldn't count on it."

Alfie stopped, "So, not that it's going to matter any since they aren't here, but which one of them is trying to get custody?"

Crowley looked genuinely sympathetic. "They expect this to take until after you come of age. To spare you any drama, I'm sure."

Alfie nodded. "So, neither of them. I'm not mentioned at all, am I?"

"You are, but only to designate property neither of them can take. Your trust fund, your belongings."

"Think you can get them to let me keep the house? Because the trust fund doesn't kick in for a while." Alfie's voice was apathetic, but his eyes gave him away.

Crowley looked around, "This one?... They won't miss it, and if they want me to continue to handle their mess for them, they'll do it."

"Thank you."
"...So anything you're doing to avoid him, you can stop when you're around Mrs. Hamish." Cas said, taking a seat in the living room of the Winchester home.

"Just let him hit me?" Ben asked.

"No. If he hits you, that's his fault, but the running and hiding you're expected to do at school is unreasonable, so while I don't suggest you set him off on purpose, if you are doing what all the other students are doing and he picks on you in front of her, she already knows what the circumstances are, and she's agreed to help." Cas explained.

"How come the only teacher that wants to help me is the oldest one at the school?" Ben asked, stuffing another cookie in his mouth, and picking up his pencil again.

"She's retiring at the end of the year, and moving to be closer to family. So, if she were to get tough on a student, and the student's parents didn't like that, they wouldn't be able to do much about it. They couldn't take her job away, or make her miserable around town, because the job is ending anyway, and she won't be here." Cas explained, leaning on the arm of the couch.

Ben finished writing an answer on his math homework and looked up, "So his parents bully other grown-ups."

Cas shrugged, "That's not something I should discuss."

"Because school is your job, and you have to be professional." Ben said with a nod.

Ben raised himself onto his knees, picking up the package of cookies and holding it out to offer them to Cas over the coffee table. Cas took two and sat back. "Your father did a good job of explaining that to you."

"He also told me that Jack probably messes with me because someone messes with him." Ben said quietly.

"That's very common, unfortunately. But that doesn't excuse the way he treats you."

"So, then, who's going to help him?"

Cas smiled, "You know, Mrs Hamish asked me the same thing... But don't worry, I have some
ideas."

Claire sat at her desk, digging through two different sections of the same large book, and making notes on a spiral, when her phone chirped.

'Are you coming in today? Dean wants to know'

'I can in an hour' she replied.

Claire set the phone down, and continued to write. "Three... two... one..."

On cue, the phone rang.

"Hi, Alfie."

"Hi. Just calling to remind you," Alfie replied, in his usual quiet, soft tones, "Dean says no company business through texts, and to use the damn phone like an adult so we keep our social skills sharp and not scare away business from our more age-advanced customers."

"You started dialing before he stopped talking again, didn't you?"

"Yes, I did." She could practically hear the smile he wore. "So, an hour?"

"Yep."

"Okay."

"Anything else?" she questioned.

"Yeah, actually, um, you sound really pretty today."

Claire chuckled quietly as she heard Dean start grumbling in the background, the echoes clearly carrying from the garage. "Okay, he's getting too used to this. Text me when he's at a spot where he'll hear you, and I'll call the office phone. Answer like you're supposed to."

Dean grabbed a bottle of water from the beat up fridge in a forgotten looking corner of the garage, and went into the front office to sit down on the old couch.

"Okay, check the tracking on the shipment, see if it looks like it's getting delivered tomorrow." Dean said, catching his breath.

Alfie nodded, and pulled something up on the computer.

The office phone rang, he leaned forward to get up, but Alfie quickly had the handset to his ear. "Singer Automotive, this is Alfie, how can I help you?"

Alfie's expression twisted quite a bit, and he spoke slowly, "I, uh... I don't think that's a service we offer."

"What do they want?" Dean asked.

"Um, no," Alfie continued, after a pause, "I haven't heard of that. How does it work?"

Dean raised eyebrows, listening carefully.
"Oh!... Wow... Uh, no... I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to, though." Alfie said quietly with a rather curious look on his face.

"What the hell? ... Is it a prank call?" Dean asked.

"Um... what?... Oh. A uniform shirt and jeans, why, what are you...? Really?" Alfie asked in disbelief, turning toward the wall.

Dean bolted off the couch and grabbed the phone, only to hear hysterical laughing. "Okay, look--- What's... Claire?"

"Are you, uh..." she paused to fight another round of laughter, "You going to rethink that no-texting policy?"

Dean rubbed his forehead and pressed his lips together. "...Fine, fine. Just keep this crap off the damn work line, this is still a business."

Dean passed the handset to Alfie, taking a few steps toward the hallway before changing his mind and going back to the desk, taking it back, and hanging it up.

Alfie slipped his phone out of his pocket and discretely sent Claire one more text.

'We're doing that for real later, though, right?'

Kevin sat down next to Claire in the cafeteria and nudged her with his elbow.

"Nope." Claire answered automatically.

"I didn't say anything yet." Kevin whined.

"Whatever it is, it's nope."

"So you don't have a problem with me signing you up for a hidden camera show?" Kevin asked with a grin.

Claire looked up with raised eyebrows.

"Okay, so, I have a date tonight, and my mom's working late, and I wanted to see if you could give Sandman a ride home after work."

"I guess I could." Claire answered.

"Awesome," Kevin said, "He hates asking Dean, he tries to keep kind of a boss/employee disconnect there. Even though Dean would totally do it."

"Might have something to do with the whole dropping out thing, and calling him a jackass." Claire mused.

"Hey..." a voice came from behind them. Claire turned to find Chaz standing close by.

"What's up, you get lost, or just lonely?" Kevin asked.

Chaz shook his head, and directed his words to Claire, "Will finally said yesterday that when he came in with that bruise on his face, it was from your dad's boyfriend."
"My dad doesn't have a boyfriend." Claire answered.

"That guy from the restaurant? Not Alford, that big guy?" Chaz asked with mild confusion.

"That's my neighbor, who's also my boss. I know this might be hard for you to get, but gay guys can have guy friends who are just friends."

"Whatever... What'd he do, though? Will, I mean." Chaz continued, looking around as though he didn't want to be noticed.

"First off, Dean didn't hit him, I did. And I only did it because he grabbed me." Claire answered with an eye roll.

Chaz was quiet for a moment. "Yeah, I knew something didn't add up. I just figured if you had your dad's, um, friend, I guess, hit him, he would have called the cops unless he... Well, he wouldn't have gone out there anyway, right? His truck is fine."

"If you're trying to figure out if he's harassing Claire," Kevin piped up, "It's yes. Why did you think he left the prom early, and his date had to have her mom pick her up?"

Chaz shrugged, "Yeah, no, I know, sorry. I told him going to your house was a bad idea."

"Doesn't matter, I wasn't there." Claire said, inadvertently getting Kevin's attention.

"Anyway, I just wanted to find out what was going on. Your side, I mean. Me and Jim are trying to get him to stay away from you anyway, so..."

"Right, because him showing up at her house, and where she works totally lines up with that rumor he started." Kevin said, irritated.

Chaz shrugged again, "Sorry... Listen, if he gets any weirder about this, I'll let you know."

"How?" Claire snapped, "I changed my number, my email, and every time someone puts a note in my locker, I turn it in at the office, I don't even read them anymore."

Chaz hung his head, "Yeah, I heard about what about few of them said... I gotta go..."

Claire turned to Kevin, "What the hell?"

"Forget that, you didn't go home?... Where were you guys?"

"Testing out the car. I wanted to see how fast it would go."

"Is that what they're calling it now?"

"That's not what they're calling it now, that's literally what we were doing," Claire replied.

"Right, so you weren't taking advantage of him?"

"I'm not having this conversation with you."

"Is it because I'm a guy?" Kevin wheedled, "Because that would be sexist. Don't be sexist, Claire... C'mon, spill the beans. What happened?"

"The car goes really fast, we didn't even kiss, and he took my picture. Satisfied?"
"He what?" Kevin asked, his entire tone changed to one more solemn, "He took your picture? Why?"

"I don't know, he said it was for raw materials, and it would take a few weeks. Wouldn't even let me look at it." Claire answered.

Kevin almost looked alarmed. "Um... he doesn't do portraits... Like, ever. That's really weird, actually."

"Looks like he does, now." Claire responded, "Even posed my eyes by telling me which star to focus on. It was kind of weird, come to think of it."

Kevin said nothing, returning his attention to his lunch, deep in thought.

Claire hopped into the passenger seat, and buckled in. "Kevin asked me to drive Alfie home later, is that okay?"

Cas nodded. "I don't need the car tonight. In fact, you two could even go catch a movie or something, it is a Friday."

"Right, um, he's getting a lot stronger, but at the end of the day he's still pretty worn out, so, I don't know."

"Well, it never hurts to ask... Speaking of which, did you talk to Dean about Bobby's car?"

Claire shook her head. "I just think that would be a weird conversation, asking if I can fix it up, I mean, who's going to drive it? He has that black Chevy, and Alfie's got... I don't know what he has, but he had it before the bike that he wrecked..."

Cas nodded, "Dean seemed to be of the opinion that you might want it."

Claire shifted uncomfortably, and went silent.

Cas glanced at her, "What?... Is something wrong?"

"I can't ask him for the car..."

"Why not? It's of no use to anyone, he doesn't want to sell it off to some stranger. You knew Bobby, and a car would be useful to you."

Claire shook her head and stared out the window. "Chaz came to talk to me today. He's one of Will's friends."

"How did that go?"

"He said Will is acting weird, and they're trying to keep him away from me. He said Will's story isn't adding up."

Cas nodded, "So, positive?"

"Yeah, I guess so... And also, they seem to think Dean's your boyfriend. I told him you guys hang out but you're not dating... I don't know if he believed me."

Cas nodded as he turned the car, but said nothing.
"You're not, are you?... I mean, everyone knows you're out, but, if you were dating him, you could tell me."

"I'm not dating Dean. I'm pretty sure he's straight. He's become a good friend, though."

Claire scratched at her nose, "I'm not a hundred percent sure on that."

Cas stopped in the driveway and turned to look at her, "What, about him being a good friend?"

"No, about him being straight."

"Claire, his wife died last year, I'm fairly certain."

"Yeah, well, you were with mom for a while, I don't know. But when I was going through stuff with Will, he sounded weird, it kind of stuck out, like 'did your date hit you,' and 'did you hit that person back,' so, maybe..."

"Maybe he's just someone who doesn't make those kinds of assumptions."

After a pause, Claire replied, "Isn't that what you're doing?"

Cas opened his door, "How did we get to this from Bobby's car?... Anyway, you have your answer, I'm not seeing him, we're friends."

"Hey, um... the engine in that van..." Claire said, leaning against the doorframe of Dean's office as he sorted through paperwork, "Is it supposed to be..."

"Sideways. Yeah. And technically, because of the transmission, it's a truck." Dean replied.

"No... No, that is a soccer-mom minivan, that is not a truck."

Dean shrugged.

"How the heck does anyone label that thing a truck?" Claire asked, shaking her head, "This is probably one of those things where the expert messed up, then couldn't admit they were wrong... Pretty sure that's what happened when they decided that the seahorses that carry the babies are the males."

Dean chuckled quietly as Claire made her way back to the garage, then went for the front desk.

"Call Officer Evans and let her know her car is done." Dean said, taking a stack of paper from next to the computer. "This everything?"

"Yes... Until next week, anyway." Alfie answered.

"And that gift, how's that coming?" Dean asked quietly.

"It's nearly finished. I don't want to print it until I have the frame ready, that way it can go in flat, never rolled." Alfie replied. He leaned back in the chair, "Also, I've sent some stuff in to a place in Dallas. It's a chance to get my work seen by the kind of people who'd want to show it. Worst case scenario, people will have seen it and heard of me, so, I can't really lose. Is it okay if I take off for about a week and a half?"

Dean looked at him skeptically, "You have family there, right? That Nancy person?"
"Naomi, yeah. My mom's older sister."

"You staying with her?"

Alfie nodded, "Well, yeah... She's the only reason I'm going. She says people will want to talk to me, but that she can coach me on some vocabulary words, make me sound tortured and brooding."

Dean chuckled, "Right. Well, leave the tortured and brooding stuff in Dallas, no room for it here. But, yeah, you gotta try. Can't make it big in the world if you don't get out in it. It'll give Claire a chance to learn the desk stuff, anyway."

Alfie nodded, and pulled a trifold information pamphlet out from under the keyboard. It's edges were worn, but the imagery and lettering were perfectly clear. "This has the dates on it, my aunt wants to make it a full two weeks, but I might get back early. And the, uh, thing, it'll be done before I leave."

"How are you getting there?" Dean asked.

"I've got a ride to the airport, and if I win, Naomi's buying me a new bike and gear, so, I guess I'd ride that back."

"She sent you the suit, right?" At Alfie's nod, he continued, "Why would she buy you a new bike when she didn't want you on the first one?"

"To get me to go in the first place. She admits it, you know, she's good at manipulating people. I guess she figures if I don't win, she's off the hook, if I win, then die in another wreck, I'll be really famous right away."

"You don't think she wants you dead?" Dean asked, a hint of a serious question in his otherwise joking words.

Alfie shrugged, "Not so much wants, as, if it benefits her, well, maybe she won't care. She's not going to try to kill me, if that's what you mean."

"Man, your family... Okay. I mean, if you figure you're safe enough. But you think you'll be able to ride back?" Dean gestured to the crutches.

"Yeah. I got my car out yesterday. I'm only getting a ride from Mrs Tran still, because she's insisting."

"That's moms for you."

"I don't know, mine wouldn't..."

Dean nodded and tapped the desk with the papers before heading back to his office.

"Cas, have you got a second?" Leslie asked, as he came out of his office.

Leslie was fussing with the hair of one of the kindergarten students who'd had a pigtail come undone, and currently had one high ponytail on one side of her head, and the rest of her medium brown hair flowing free in Leslie's hands.

"How do you... You know, I only have boys, maybe you can get this to work?" Leslie said, attempting to pass him the elastic.

"I'm sorry, I'm not sure what to do, either." Cas replied, moving to one of the large filing cabinets,
"I've only had Claire around before she had hair, and after she could manage on her own."

Charlie came in holding a large box and set it on the counter to sign in.

"Charlie, can you fix a pigtail?" Leslie asked.

"Sure!" Charlie answered chipperly, digging into her bag and retrieving a compact that opened into a small hairbrush, "My last girlfriend had a little sister, and we had her for a week while their parents were on vacation. Kids are so much fun."

Charlie rounded the end of the counter, and made a few careful strokes through the child's hair to get it into place before reaching for the elastic.

"What's this?" Uri's voice came from the hallway.

Leslie turned in her chair, "Betsy's pigtail fell out. I'm really no good with long hair."

"You could have taken the other one out and sent her back to class. There's really no call for this." Uri gestured toward the spot on the girl's head where Charlie made the last loop of the elastic, pulling Betsy's long locks through to hang down.

Leslie looked rather surprised, "It's just a pigtail, Uri."

Uri frowned and continued out of the office, soon followed by the kindergartener. Leslie reimmersed herself in her computer as Charlie picked up her large box and made for the door.

Cas quickly followed her, and caught up to walk next to her in the hall.

"Great, looks like I'm on his list, right after you." Charlie muttered.

Cas shrugged, "I think if that list were brought to light, it wouldn't take much to make a complaint to the district."

"Yeah, but... I don't know, and you know..." Charlie paused as Cas opened the door of the larger computer lab, and they both ducked inside, "It would get lawyers involved, it could turn into a lawsuit, and... what a suit would do, it would take money out of the schools, that takes it from the kids, the whole town gets a crappier education, we don't move forward, it's not right."

"So, we stay quiet, walk with our heads down, and perpetuate the cycle?" Cas asked.

Charlie took a deep breath. "I'm sorry, Cas. And I know it's probably worse for you because you're here all the time, you don't jump around between all the schools like me, but... I don't think I could be part of something that could take money out of the schools. Not in this state, we're, what, the ninety-seventh percentile?"

"Fourty-third on the list." Cas said.

"Close enough." Charlie replied, lifting a heavy machine out of the box.

"What is that?" Cas asked with a tilt of his head.

"A 3D printer." Charlie said, obviously pleased with it.

"How did we manage that?"

"Most of it was printed by the kids at the high school on the one they have. Each of the middle
schools got one as well." Charlie answered.

Cas watched for a moment with curiosity as she began to set it up, plugging in cables.

Claire pulled the car up to Alfie's driveway, and stopped.

"Dean said I should run you through the vehicle records and inventory lists tomorrow. I'm going to be out of town for a bit, so someone needs to be able to help at the desk." Alfie said softly.

Claire looked concerned, "Is everything okay? Not like a funeral or something?"

Alfie shook his head. He gave a genuine chuckle, "No, nothing like that, I'm just not looking forward to it."

"So, what kind of trouble has you skipping town?" Claire asked.

"No trouble. Just a pretentious bunch of jerks want to decide if I'm enough of a weirdo to get the password to their clubhouse."

"I have no idea what that means." Claire responded with a hint of a giggle, "But, yeah, I have time tomorrow, I'll plan on hanging out with you in the office."

"Okay, but I should warn you," Alfie's grin spread, "I know I said you could sit on my lap any time, but, after that stunt with the phone the other day, Dean might complain."

"What if you sit on my lap?" Claire asked in a teasing tone.

"Well, that might confuse him." Alfie replied, leaning a little closer to her.

"Why?" Claire asked, still smiling.

"Because as far as he knows, I'm Kevin's girl."

Alfie had leaned in just a smidge more, but Claire was laughing too hard to notice. He bit his lower lip and looked down at his lap.

"Does Kevin know I'm taking his place?"

"Well, he said he's seeing some girl named Margaret, so I guess he's over me. But if you want, I'll let Dean know so things don't get weird."

"What are you going to say to him?" Claire asked, her demeanor sobered.

Alfie shrugged, "I figure I head in tomorrow and tell him I'm your girlfriend now. I think he'll understand."

Claire pressed her lips together in an attempt to hide her smile, "Yeah, okay."

Alfie leaned in closer as if to kiss her, but at the last minute, dodged and planted the kiss against her cheek. "See you tomorrow."

Claire pulled the car into the driveway, immediately noticing Cas sitting on the porch swing with Dean. Dean had a brown bottle in his hand and another sat on the railing in front of Cas near a black walkie talkie, and they seemed to be chatting happily over whatever subject had come up.
As Claire got closer, it became evident the discussion was on home repair, and at some point involved an amusing anecdote about Ben.

Cas had a somewhat reserved smile on his face when he turned to her as she came up the steps. "Claire, I wanted to ask yesterday, those notes, are you starting to get fewer of them? Seems like they should start to taper off, right? I mean if even that Chaz fellow isn't so sure."

"Um... I don't know. I'm not exactly keeping a spreadsheet." Claire answered, heading for the door.

"I take it Alfie wasn't up for a movie, then?" Cas continued.

"Oh, no, we still went out. Threw rocks at an orphanage, had a blast." Claire answered, going inside.

From indoors, just as she went up the stairs she could hear Dean mutter quietly, "Yeah, I see what you mean... Is there anything she wouldn't joke about?"

"You should hear the stuff she says to get a rise out of the therapist." Cas replied, "I'd feel sorry for the guy, but he didn't exactly get off on the right foot with her, and, I have to admit, it's funny to watch him squirm."

"Is it helping?" Dean asked, still keeping his voice low.

Cas shrugged, "I don't know if it's the therapy sessions or not, and I suppose it's really too soon to judge, but, she does seem calmer. And she's opened up a bit. Outside of the appointments, I mean. So, something, maybe therapy, maybe the job, whatever it is, she's doing better... Somehow, despite the death threats, and all of her friends turning their backs on her."

Dean emptied his beer and set the bottle next to the walkie talkie. "Couldn't have been very good friends if they ditch her that fast. She's better off without them... What about you? How are you dealing?"

"Somehow I keep talking myself out of calling her mother and demanding an explanation, recording the whole thing, and taking it to the authorities." Cas replied, "She should be in prison. Him, too."

"Burden of proof, though, huh?" Dean nodded, "And it's been a couple years, makes it harder."

"I just keep thinking 'he got away with this.' How's it fair to ask her to pick up and move on without any kind of justice?... And then there's the question of whether it's ethical to let it go instead of finding him and pressing charges, knowing that he could do it again. I mean, it would spare Claire the further trauma of reporting it, going to court, talking about it to a million people who might not believe her, victim-shaming, but how do I know it's not letting him run free to hurt some other little girl..."

Betsy and her fallen pigtail suddenly flashed through Cas' mind, as did the look of despair and betrayal on Claire's face that night in the rain, tearing and clawing at his heart from every angle.

"Damned if you do, damned if you don't... Let her decide, and maybe wait a bit, you've got some time before the clock runs out." Dean said quietly, "But don't listen to me, because, basically anybody that says 'if it were my kid,' is full of shit. Because they don't know your kid like you do."

"I don't know my kid like I'm supposed to... If I did, it never would have happened to start with." Cas stated glumly.

Dean shook his head, "That's bullshit."
"How's that?"

"Say you got visitation before her mom ditched, right? I worked with a guy who had kids in another state, he would take off to go get them, you would have gotten her for a week each month until she started school. Then, pretty much, you'd have her in the summer, and sometimes Christmas break. She still would have been with her mom more than half the time, because fifty-fifty custody only works when the parents are in the same school district. So, evil bitches being evil bitches... Of course, if that was how it had happened, maybe her mom would have just convinced her not to tell you, which would have been even worse. Just don't do the 'what if' game, you can't win, it just drives you crazy."

Cas nodded, deeply considering Dean's words. "I suppose you're right, there's no way of knowing, and this could very well be the best possible outcome..."

"It doesn't matter anywhere near as much as what happens going forward, right?"

"Right... going forward."

"She still hasn't said anything about Bobby's car, you know?" Dean said, "I thought I'd wait on her to bring it up, but she hasn't said a word."

Cas shook his head, "I think she's still mulling it over."

"What's to mull over? It's sitting in yard getting rusty."

"Don't ask me to explain the reasoning behind the mind of a teenage girl." Cas replied with a hint of amusement.

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Chapter End Notes

(A/N: Okay, I know if it were me, I'd be dying to know Claire's side of the phone call right now, and I won't leave you hanging....

"Singer Automotive, this is Alfie, how can I help you?"

"Hey, make it sound like an obscene prank call... But really, we should make a robot that makes sandwiches."

"I, uh... I don't think that's a service we offer."

"Have you ever used one?"

"Um, no, I haven't heard of that. How does it work?"

"It shoots the bread and cheese and stuff out of a cannon, hits a wall, and falls on a plate... You never did that?"

"Oh!... Wow... Uh, no... I mean, I'd be lying if I said I didn't want to, though."

"Well, to make it look cool, we'd have to dress it up, what do you think it should wear?"
"Um... what?... Oh. A uniform shirt and jeans, why, what are you...?"

"I was thinking I'd just put it in my prom dress."

"Really?"

;)  

Thanks for reading! FW)
Chapter 15

Dean sat down with his cup of coffee, and groggily looked over the table at Ben, who was flipping through a comic book that lay flat on the table as he munched on his cereal.

"What's up then?"

"Justice League."

"Nice mix... You remember your uncle, right?"

Ben looked up, "The real tall guy, Sam?"

"Yeah... That lady he brought with him to the funeral, they're getting married. So, Jessica is going to be 'Aunt Jessica."

"That's cool... I liked her, she didn't look like she was going to cry when she hugged me."

Dean nodded. He recalled a rough conversation a few days after the funeral when Ben had been having a difficult time putting his feelings into words. Essentially, he was tired of the constant pity he had been receiving from his friends and their parents.

"Was she the one that took you to get pizza on the corner, or was that one of mom's friends?" Dean asked. Despite the occasional feeling that it had been only yesterday, the entire week of the funeral had been something of a haze.

Ben shrugged. "I think that was her... No, wait, it was her, because she told me Uncle Sam's favorite knock-knock joke."

Dean smiled, glad to hear that not only did Ben recall his uncle and soon-to-be-aunt, he already had a fond memory of one of them. "They're going on a vacation this summer, her parents have a cabin on a lake. They thought you might want to go with them, spend some time and get to know them better. What do you think?"

"Are you going, too?" Ben asked.

"Nah, I have a lot going on with the shop right now, no vacations for me until I can get more people working. But you'd get some time with family you don't usually see. And, you know, if something happened to me, you'd go to live with them, so, that would be easier if you already knew them, and they knew you." Dean watched Ben's face, trying to be careful not to upset him.

Ben nodded silently.

"And, you know, Sam and Jess could take you fishing, you could go swimming, hiking, I think he said there's a boat dock close to the cabin." Dean continued, hoping to get some hint of excitement from the boy, "Of course you don't have to, and if that's not what you want to do, they said they'd stop in for a visit on the way there, so you would still get to see them."

"I guess it would be fun. Kind of like summer camp." Ben said.

Dean nodded, "Right, like summer camp. And if it turns out Sam still snores as bad as he used to, or you can't eat Jess' cooking, you can call me, and I'll come get you. Okay?"
"Okay." Ben answered, "But, dad...?"

"Yeah?"

"If you died, and I had to go live with them, I would have to move again, huh?"

Dean nodded slowly, "Well, yeah, I guess. But that's just a backup plan, Ben. I'm probably going to live a good long time, and get old and cranky like Bobby."

"Yeah, but, if I had to move, I would miss our friends here."

Dean looked at little confused, "You mean like at school?"

"No, like Claire and Mr Novak, and Alfie and Kevin. I don't think Claire even likes kids, but she's still nice to me."

Dean shrugged, "I think I've got Claire figured out, she likes to pretend she doesn't like anybody."

Claire quietly slipped into the front office of the shop only to find it empty. The desk chair was oddly still, and no crutches leaned against the filing cabinet.

Making her way toward the garage, she stopped in the doorway of Dean’s office. "Alfie said you wanted me to learn the computer stuff today, but he's not here yet?"

"He doesn't usually come in till eleven on Saturdays." Dean answered, not looking up from his papers, "But don't forget to clock in."

Claire nodded, "Okay, I'm going to get back to that van while I'm waiting."

Dean nodded, shuffling several pages onto a different stack as Claire continued to the garage for her coveralls.

After noticing several items seemed to be in the wrong place, Claire looked at the spine of the book and noticed that the years of manufacture the guide was meant for were off for the particular vehicle.

She headed back in to find the right one in the bookshelves behind the desk, finding the copy she needed on a low shelf.

Claire pulled it out, verified that it covered the van, and was about to put the wrong one back in place of it when she felt a firm hand grip her waist above her right hip.

Her whole body gave a jolt as she stood, turning quickly and effectively slamming herself back into the shelves.

"Sorry," Alfie started, guilt washing over him, "I wasn't-"

"Get the hell away from me!" Claire said loudly.

"I didn't mean to scare you."

"Back up!" she growled.

"Claire," Dean said firmly, suddenly appearing in the opening of the hallway, "Go to my office."

Claire ducked past Alfie, shaking, leaving the fallen repair manuals abandoned where they'd landed
on the floor, quickly retreating into the dark hallway.

Dean turned to Alfie, "What happened?"

"I parked out back, came in through the bays. Snuck up behind her to say hi... I won't do that again." Alfie said quietly.

"See that you don't." Dean warned, and waited for Alfie's startled nod before turning around and going back to his office.

The door had been swung mostly shut, and he closed it behind him quietly, finding Claire backed against one wall in the tiny room, her hands cupped around her mouth and nose, still breathing hard.

"Any chance he did that on purpose?" Dean asked softly.

Claire shook her head, but didn't drop her hands.

"Um..." Dean couldn't think of anything else to follow it, but seeing Claire look up, spread his arms slightly and gave her a questioning look, not surprised at all when she stepped forward to let him embrace her.

Dean put his arms around Claire snuggly. "You can stay in here until you calm down, go home if you need to, or stay in the garage all day, but he's not leaving the office."

"It's not his fault, should've been totally normal, but I freaked out." Claire mumbled against him before starting to pull back.

"That's not your fault, either. And he's still not leaving the office."

Claire had spent at least fifteen minutes trying to find the oxygen sensors on the van after Dean had left with the tow truck, when she gave up and crept down the dark hallway.

Alfie had his laptop open and was leaning sideways against the desk, using an electronic drawing tablet and stylus. The image on the screen looked to be a city skyline at dawn.

"If you're going to sneak up on me to get me back, you need to be quieter." Alfie's voice was barely a whisper, but the echo of the bare walls and tiled floor carried it. Claire stopped in the hallway.

Alfie sat up and turned in his chair, "I'm really sorry I scared you."

"I need the manual." Claire answered firmly.

Alfie nodded, "Which one?"

"It's an '03."

Alfie pulled the 2001 to 2004 manual from the shelf and wheeled the desk chair just to within her reach, holding it out for her. "I know you're probably mad at me, but are you okay?"

"I'm fine."

"You hit that shelf really hard."

Claire looked away, staring to turn back to the garage, "Yeah, I hit a lot of things really hard, so don't worry about it."
"Was it Will?" Alfie asked.

"What?... Yeah, I've hit Will, you know that already."

"No, I mean..." Alfie took a deep breath, "Did he do something to hurt you?"

Claire shook her head, "Will's a worthless piece of shit, but nothing I can't handle."

"So basically, you've been through worse?"

Ignoring him, Claire went back to the garage. Not much later, she could hear the phone ring.

"Singer Automotive," Alfie's voice carried down the hall. "Well, if I'm allowed in the hallway... yeah, I got it..."

She could hear the sound of the desk chair squeak as Alfie stood, his quiet footsteps coming closer. "Dean's picking up lunch, burgers okay?"

"Sure. No tomatoes."

"Yeah, no tomatoes on hers... They have cherry pie, apple pie, and brownies."

"Brownie."

"Brownie." Alfie said into the phone, "He wants to know what you want to drink."

Claire rolled her eyes, "Whiskey."

Alfie's grin returned for a moment, "A coke will work... Fries or onion rings?"

Claire heaved a sigh, pulled the socket from the bolt and moved to stand in front of Alfie, gesturing at her hands which were currently well-soiled. He held the phone up to her ear.

"I'm really not this picky, can you just pick something?" Claire asked.

"Yeah, okay. You okay?" Dean asked.

"Yep."

"Bust his chops yet?"

"Nope."

"If you're going to, do it before I get back, because if I'm there, I'll have to shut it down. And no tire irons."

"Got it." Claire nodded, moving away just enough that Alfie could take it as a cue to resume his place on the call.

"Okay, got all that?... Yeah, kosher vegan plate with extra bacon... Okay, bye." Alfie pressed the button to end the call, and looked up.

Claire hadn't backed away. Hints of a smile threatened at the corners of his mouth.

"Kosher vegan with extra bacon?" she asked.

"Maybe you're wearing off on me. And you're a bad influence... Asking older men for alcohol, bad
"idea." he teased.

Claire scoffed, "I used to drink with Bobby."

Alfie chuckled, "Bobby didn't drink."

"Maybe not with you around."

"Okay." Alfie said quietly, "So are we good again?"

"Well, Dean said if I was gonna bust your chops to do it before he gets back. So, why the hell would you sneak up on me like that?" Claire asked.

"Actually," he gave a small shrug, "I was just trying to get past Dean so I could snag a kiss before I clocked in."

Claire nodded, "So you thought you were going to come up behind me and I was going to turn around and kiss you?"

He shrugged again, his smile playful, "Always worked on Kevin."

"Then save it for Kevin." she said, moving back to the van.

Claire had removed the part Dean had asked her to pull, and set it on the work bench before she realized Alfie was still standing in the end of the hallway, leaning against the wall.

"What?" She asked.

"Nothing."

"You're being creepy."

"Well, I can't get any closer, since Dean put a shock collar on me when he left."

Claire set the ratchet down. "I don't see any shock collar."

"Yeah, that would be because it's...um..." Alfie looked at the floor and started to laugh, "Nevermind."

"No, say it. What?" Claire walked back over to him.

"It's an invisible shock collar." Alfie replied.

"No it's not, you were going to say it's somewhere other than your neck."

Alfie fought his grin and looked away, "I wasn't going to say that."

"Yeah, you were. I don't know how I feel about Dean handling my girlfriend like that."

Alfie's face twisted, trying hard to keep from laughing, "It's on my neck, I swear. I was just going to say it's invisible, and you can check for yourself, but your hands are a mess, so..."

"Oh, I thought you were gonna let me take it off you. But I guess that would kill your little game with Dean, huh?" Claire asked.

"I should get back to the desk before he gets back."
Claire gestured to the utility sink, "I'm done, so, I'll clean up and come in there, you can start showing me the computer stuff."

Dean parked the tow truck, grabbing the large take-out bag and drink carrier before circling the back corner of the shop, and going through the front door, Ben tagging along behind.

"...and then the numbers update automatically for inventory, so we just spot-check one random item every now and again to make sure it's accurate." Alfie said, clicking through a program on the screen.

"What about the reserves file?" Claire asked.

Dean set the drink carrier and bag down on the desk as Alfie moved his laptop, "That's the unofficial list, stuff we have, or probably have in the yard that we'd have to dig out."

Claire looked up, "'Probably have?' So it's a guess?"

"Not exactly," Dean explained, "If you were looking for a muffler for a '71 Chevelle, it would tell you if we have any in the yard, where they are, and if they had already had the muffler pulled."

Alfie shot Dean a look, but Claire barely noticed before he continued, "That's where you want to check if someone comes in looking for a part."

"You run her through the cameras yet?" Dean asked.

"Yeah, he showed me that. Especially the one pointed at my bedroom window." Claire answered sarcastically.

Dean jerked his head toward Ben, who, bored, had flopped onto the couch. "Not funny."

"Not kidding, you can actually see my window." Claire said, somewhat quieter.

Alfie took a large cup Dean passed to him, "You know Dean can access the camera feed on his phone, right?"

"That sounds even creepier."

Dean shook his head and started digging burgers out of the bag. "The cameras have to cover the whole place for insurance purposes, if it happens to see where someone could break into your house as well, it could come in handy, but realistically, nobody's ever going to see it, and the windows are covered, right?"

Dean turned around and passed a burger to Ben, who righted himself and came closer, waiting on french fries.

A buzzing sound alerted Dean, who pulled his phone from his back pocket. With an amused look he started a reply almost right away.

"I thought there was no texting at work?" Claire asked.

"That was no texting about work, which you managed to get overturned. This is personal, and I'm on break, so it's completely appropriate." Dean answered, "Ben, Cas is doing the porch railing if you want to help him after you eat."

Ben nodded, silently chewing, and Claire looked up from her burger. "Cool, so you can just log in
and check on him, huh?"

"Sure," Dean replied, "And I can give your dad the log in, in case you sneak out."

Claire nodded, "Fair enough."

Echoing in from the garage, Claire and Alfie could hear the bay doors rolling down into place with a metallic rattle and clang.

"Looks like we're done." Alfie said.

"Hang on, which program does the fax function?" Claire asked.

"It's in the printer stuff, right here," Alfie hovered the cursor over it, "So, all in one spot... Anything else?"

"Yeah, where are your crutches?"

"In my car." Alfie said, leaning back, "Mrs Tran wasn't going to let me out of the driveway without them."

"Kevin's mom?"

"Yeah, well, mine is in Paris, so... Haven't seen any adoption paperwork yet, so it's still informal."

Claire chuckled, "So, do I get to see your car?"

Alfie nodded, his expression tinged with embarrassment as he hauled himself to his feet, using the desk to support him as he got his bearings.

Claire, recognizing he'd worn himself out over the course of the day, stepped closer, motioning to her shoulder, "C'mon."

Alfie reluctantly put his arm over her shoulders, turning to call over his shoulder, "Dean, we're headed out."

"Yeah, go ahead." Dean's voice came back from the other end of the dark hallway.

Ben set his brush back in the paint and took the can of soda Cas handed him, content to stay seated on the porch floor as Cas sat down in the swing.

"I'm supposed to go on a vacation this summer with my uncle, but my dad isn't going." Ben said quietly.

Cas nodded thoughtfully, "What kind of vacation?"

"It's at a lake. My dad said I should spend some time with his brother and my new aunt because I don't know them very well. But he can't go because of the shop."

"I take it you haven't really been away from home like that before?" Cas asked.

"No. My mom took me camping one time when dad had to go out of town, and he was really grumpy when he got back. That was when his dad died." Ben fidgeted with the tab on his can, "But he was more angry than sad, so it was weird."
"Well, it's a big world, and there's a lot of good things out there to do, interesting people to meet. If you stay home all the time, you'll miss out."

"I guess so. I mean, it's not like a month, and it's family, so it's not strangers." Ben looked toward the shop, "But my dad is going to be here by himself the whole time. He hasn't been all by himself like that since my mom died."

"You think that might be a problem for him?"

"Well, I just keep thinking what it would be like if he left for a week and I had to be alone at home after school, and I don't think I could do it... I don't know, maybe it's different for adults."

Cas nodded, "Don't worry, I can check in on him for you."

"Thanks... I figured you would do that if you knew, since he comes over here sometimes, but I didn't know if he would tell you."

Claire steered the dark purple Monte Carlo onto another county road. "This thing sucks."

In the passenger seat, Alfie let his grin take over his face, "That's why I wanted the bike."

"It's not fair, this thing looks like it can really get out there, but... I mean..." Claire shook her head.

"It's a go-cart in the body of a real car. I know. I said something about maybe racing, and this is what Bobby came up with." Alfie said, leaning back in his seat.

Claire continued to drive awkwardly for some time before coming to a stop sign at one of the larger roads. This one was only two lanes, but at least had striping. "Okay, where are we?"

Alfie shrugged, "Go left."

Claire turned left, looking for any familiar landmark. "So, you're a serial killer, and your ax is in the trunk, huh? Just have to get me out here to wherever you dump the bodies?"

Alfie stared out the window. "I wouldn't do that."

"Really? Huh... I could have sworn you were the psycho murderer type... Someone said it's always the quiet ones."

"Am I really that quiet?" he asked.

"You did kind of pop up out of nowhere earlier. I don't know if that's ninja training or teleportation, but it's kind of creepy." Claire shrugged.

"It's occult, actually. I learned it from my black cat."

"You have a cat?"

"Not anymore. Smudge was really old, so..." Alfie trailed off, "Anything you want me to bring you back from Dallas?"

Claire shook her head, "I don't need anything from Dallas."

Dean stepped through the low gate and came up the front walk. Cas was standing on a chair close to
the steps, reaching above his head to get the top of the post, close to the roof of the porch. Ben was several feet away, sitting on the plastic tarp, painting the underside of a low horizontal board.

It was evident when Cas greeted him that Ben was absorbed in his task, as he turned quickly enough to accidentally smack himself in the face with his brush.

"Looks better on the porch, bud." Dean said with a chuckle, "You missed a spot, though."

Ben looked at the railing, then back to Dean, who motioned to his own face, "Right on that side."

"I don't see you helping." Ben answered, wiping at the paint, but only succeeding at smearing it.

"You're not going to, either, I just wanted to see if you were ready to head home."

"But we're not done yet."

"I wish you'd get this hyper over doing your chores." Dean turned to Cas, "You got a minute?"

"Yeah." Cas climbed down, and set his paint and brush down, leading the way inside.

With the front door shut, Dean turned to Cas with a more serious look than the one he'd had for Ben.

"I hope I'm not keeping Ben over here too much, I'm sure he has homework and-" Cas started.

"No, no, it's not that." Dean gently interrupted, "Hell, it's a lot better than having him sitting around on his video games all day. No, it's, um, Claire had a little panic attack this morning, because Alfie snuck up on her."

Cas rubbed at his forehead and tried to piece together a question, but Dean continued, "She seemed fine after a few minutes, and yelled at him, but nothing he didn't have coming. I don't think he meant to, but, you know how it is, that pattern, where a girl breaks up with an asshole, turns around and starts dating another asshole? So I figured you might want a head's up."

"Yeah... thanks for telling me." Cas answered, "Is she already done for the day?"

"Yeah, they both went off in his car a while ago, he drove himself today."

"She left with him?" Dean nodded in reply, "I suppose that's not too unexpected."

Dean shrugged, "Well, maybe a little, after that, and I made it clear he's wasn't leaving the office, sent her out to the garage. But I went out for a tow, and when I got back they were both at the desk going over the computer stuff like nothing happened."

"I'll ask her about it later, but it sounds like it was just an accident."

Claire pulled the car over, blocking the gravel road. "I gotta get the mail... Are you okay to drive home?"

"Yeah, I can take it from here." Alfie said softly, popping his door open.

Claire got out, leaving the engine running, and went to the passenger side to help him stand.

"So, when do you leave?" she asked, as they crossed the front of the car.

"Tuesday morning... Are you going to miss me?"
"Probably... So, I guess we've only got Monday afternoon to make fun of that song..."

"I guess... Too bad neither of us thought to look it up, huh?" Alfie sank into the driver's seat carefully, not letting go of Claire's hand.

"Am I going to get to see that picture on Monday? Or are you still busy hogging it?"

Alfie nodded, "I'm only hogging it until it's done. Then, you're going to see it all the time."

"All the time?"

"Yeah, I'm getting one of those big billboard trucks, and putting the picture on it, so I can park it outside your house." Alfie grinned harder.

"How much is the fine for setting a vehicle on fire? It only counts if the cops come, right?"

Alfie pulled at her hand gently. "You want to go out tomorrow?"

Claire stepped closer at the pull, but made a face, "I can't, I'm going to be a hermit tomorrow. Monday, I have three different tests, it's ridiculous. Don't let me text you, either, I'll get distracted."

"Am I distracting?" he asked, his grin hopeful.

Claire put her unoccupied hand on the door frame, leaning in closer to kiss him. "Yep. You weren't at first, but now, you have definitely gotten distracting."

"I'll see you Monday."

"Bring the picture?"

Alfie shrugged, "If it's done, I'll bring it."
Chapter 16

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Nothing horribly graphic, but it has to get worse before it gets better, and also, we get a little more background on Alfie.

Currently dealing with some upcoming love and violence, some of that stuff is going to get very graphic, but unlike the stuff in my FFN account (same screen name) I'm trying for a slow build, with a real story, and it is most certainly coming along...

tl;dr: sex scenes later. Oh, yeah.

Bless you all, my lovely reviewers, I know you're having a good time when I get several reviews right after I post! Love you guys!

FW)

The garage door stood open as he worked, meticulously trimming the edge of the printed paper to the exact size of the sheet of glass that lay on top of it. The cuts were even and smooth as he handled the crafting blade with practiced precision.

The warm afternoon air was heavy, even inside the garage, making everything still... except for some quiet footsteps moving around within the house.

Alfie grabbed the ruler again, to be absolutely certain where the edge of the image would begin, the width of the border, and the start of the frame.

The quiet footsteps came closer, stopping at the doorway. "Do you realize dear Rachel has an entire wardrobe loaded with clothing from two years ago that still has all the price tags?"

Alfie nodded, "Sounds about right."

"I think there are some more recent purchases she wants to claim, perhaps from early last year, but I doubt she'll collect them. Any chance you could get some of your friends together, have a good romp with a garden hose, and let me write off the Gucci museum as water damaged?"

Alfie carefully lowered the frame gently onto the glass. Crowley took a few slow steps into the garage to take a look at the image.

"That's not very practical. It would damage a lot more than the clothes." Alfie replied, "Personally, for water damage, I'd just throw them in the pool."
"Yes, but the chlorine would give it away."

"Yeah, well, you leave your kid alone for a weekend, they throw a party, things get damaged, right?... How much damage do I owe them by now?"

"And you don't sound the least bit bitter about it." Crowley answered, "Lovely girl. Does she actually exist?"

"Yeah, she's real." Alfie replied.

Crowley nodded in approval. "Does she visit much when I'm not here?"

"No." Alfie said quietly, "But I see her a lot at work."

"Repairing her car badly so she'll keep coming back?"

"She works there, she's the one doing repairs. I'm stranded at the desk." Alfie replied.

"Hm." Crowley looked at the print a bit more closely as Alfie closed the frame and raised it from the table.

"What?" Alfie asked.

"You like her."

"Yeah... We're kind of dating."

"Kind of?" Crowley raised his eyebrows, "Are you, or aren't you?"

Alfie chuckled, and looked away, "We are. Or, we will be, after I get back from Dallas."

"Well, that's better than kind of." Crowley gestured to the picture, "But do yourself a favor, and her, too... Date her because you like her, not because you're lonely. She should be fixing cars, not fixing you. It would be an unfair expectation, and only hurt you more in the long run when it turns out she's no miracle cure."

Alfie was silently contemplative as Crowley retreated into the house.

Alfie looked up when the door opened. "Claire?... Did you cut school?"

"No, some new burnout prevention thing they're trying, they cut us loose at two. I got a ride from Kevin."

Alfie nodded and moved from his laptop to the desktop, opening the window to clock her in as Claire snuck around the end of the desk quickly, trying for a glance at the laptop.

"What's that?"

"A river and some trees."

"It looks like a snake."

"It started as a snake. And it's not done yet." Alfie replied.

In the garage, Dean's cellphone began to ring. Vaguely, they could hear him speaking into it from below a vehicle.
"Not done yet... So, you finished the other one?"

"Almost. Like, ninety-nine percent. There's only one thing left to do, then you can see it." Alfie said, smiling up at her.

Echoes of something very heavy falling or being slammed came through the hall, followed by Dean swearing loudly.

Claire made for the garage quickly, finding Dean climbing up from the floor where he'd tripped on a dolly, rammed it into a toolbox, and scattered the contents across the bay floor. A few items had even wound up in the gravel outside the bay door.

Dean got up, his phone clenched in one hand, a large scratch on the other.

"Are you okay?" Claire asked.

Dean gestured to the mess. "Do me a favor, throw what you can find back into the box, lock the place up, stick a note on the door, 'closed, family emergency,' and head home."

"You're bleeding."

"Good thing I'm heading to the hospital." Dean answered, walking quickly toward the garage of the house.

Claire chased after him, snatching a brand new red rag from a shelf as she went. "Wait!... Is it Ben?... What happened?"

"Didn't catch that part, just that he left school in an ambulance and he's at the emergency room."

Dean said, barely paying attention.

Claire caught up as he was opening the garage door. She shoved the clean, new rag at him in a voiceless command that he take it, which he begrudgingly did, immediately scrambling into the Impala. Claire backed out of the way as the engine roared to life and the car quickly sped out of the yard, kicking up a few rocks and a cloud of dust that soon settled.

Pulling out her phone, she shot a message to her father. 'Is Ben ok?'

Claire looked at the garage, standing wide open, forgotten entirely. Noticing an obvious, large button by the interior door, she walked in, pressed it, and left again, carefully stepping over a sensor near the ground as she went, closing it.

Making her way back to the shop, she scanned the ground for shiny metal sockets and small wrenches as she got closer, picking up the ones she could see.

"What happened?" Alfie asked from the first bay.

Claire shrugged, dumping a dusty handful of small tools into the box, and picking up the dolly to hang it on the wall. "He said he got a call about Ben, and to close up. He said put a note on the door, and go home."

Alfie looked concerned for a moment, "It's probably nothing, right? I mean, Ben doesn't exactly run around doing dangerous stuff."

Claire gaped at him. "He climbs roofs for fun. The first time I ever saw him, he came out of nowhere on a dirt bike and slammed into my dad's car. He fell off a ladder the same day as prom. He's never
sitting somewhere safe, twiddling his thumbs unless he's… I don't know, figuring out how to get roller skates onto a live alligator."

Unable to argue, Alfie moved to the door of the first bay, and closed it. Claire continued to pick up each tool she found.

"I'm sorry, I guess I just mean, he doesn't seem like he has a death wish, or anything."

It came back to Claire, as clear as bell, what Ben had said to her as they sat at the coffee table roughly two months before, when she had suggested falling from the roof could lead to his death.

"Maybe. But I might not, I might die from cancer like my mom did. So, I'm not scared."

"Oh my god, he might..." Claire mumbled.

Her voice had been drowned by the large metal door rolling downward and shutting with a clang. She tried to shove it to the back of her mind, and focus on the task at hand.

Claire moved to the door of the third bay, fussing with the unwieldy contraption as Alfie closed the second.

Alfie came closer, and waited until Claire gave up and stepped back to close it himself, as she gathered up the toolbox and took it to it's place on a shelf against the long wall.

As Claire set it down, her phone chirped. She pulled it out right away. "My dad says it's a broken arm... What do you think? Lock up, or just work on what's already here?"

Alfie shrugged, moving into the hallway, leaning on the wall. "There's really nothing in here we can get done, I mean, Dean was getting ready to pull the engine out of that Mustang, but I can't, and you shouldn't. Dean had me spot check the inventory this morning, orders are all placed, nothing's coming in today."

Claire nodded and shut off the lights for the garage following Alfie toward the front office, "Okay, how about if we give it an hour, in case anyone comes in, and lock up if no one shows? Clocked out and just hanging out. I don't think Dean will mind, you know, in case there's a customer."

Alfie reluctantly agreed, and sat down, reaching for the computer, clicking several times. "Okay... Okay, we're now off company time. So, anything Dean says not to do on company time is fair game."

"So now I can write limericks about annoying customers and gossip about celebrities." Claire replied, dropping into the couch.

Alfie smiled and nodded, "Yeah, and I'll use the business line to prank call the library."

Claire looked up, "Did you really do that?"

"Kevin did. Kept insisting he was trying to reach his friend Herman. Finally he told this poor little old lady he sometimes tells people to call him Ishmael." Claire shook her head, listening raptly, "He was banned for two weeks."

"From the library?" she asked, surprised.

"From the shop." Alfie spread his hands to indicate the building they were in, turning softly side to side as the chair reclined a few inches, "I don't think Dean was really that mad, but he wanted to get him to stop, and it worked."
"When did you start working here with Bobby?" Claire asked quietly, shifting to make herself comfortable.

"About a year and a half ago. Bobby was filling in when the autoshop teacher was out, and I got talking to him after class." Alfie shrugged, "I had a lot of time on my hands, he needed the help, and I knew it would irritate most of my family, so I went for it... Of course it was never this busy, not like it has been since Dean reopened."

Claire nodded, "Yeah, I remember it being quieter. Sometimes two or three days with no customers, right?"

Alfie smiled, "A whole week, one time."

"You and Bobby didn't get bored?"

"No... No, most of the time we were working on projects. My car, his car, my bike. Maybe a special order for a collector from out of town. He had some interesting connections."

A prolonged, but comfortable silence settled over them.

Claire's phone chirped. She checked the screen, but set it down next to her thigh. Alfie gave her a hopeful glance. She shook her head in response.

Alfie turned his chair, looking up at a clock on the wall. "As much as I want to know what's happening, I don't think this is the time to call Dean and ask."

"Yeah." Claire agreed.

"So, you had three tests today, right? How'd it go?" Alfie asked.

"Boring, stressful, and nailed it. For all of them." Claire answered, "I don't exactly have perfect grades, but this is going to be better than last year... So, um... Why did you drop out, anyway? I mean, everyone knows, but I've never heard why."

"When I woke up, about six hours after I wrecked... I had lost about two weeks of my memory, except I knew that I had been cramming, staying up way too late, not sleeping, and I had been in a hurry to get to school. I mean, I was exhausted, distracted, speeding, and I was a mess. I shouldn't have been driving. And I remember just looking at the window in the hospital room, and... Well, something Bobby said just kind of popped up, 'there's such a thing as life after high school, you just can't see it, because it's like a tunnel. But once you're out, you're too busy with life to remember being in that tunnel.'"

"Seriously? Bobby said that?" Claire leaned on the arm of the couch, resting her cheek in her palm, "I don't know... of course there's life after high school, but you need high school to get college, and college to get a good career."

"That really depends on the career, though. What if you hit twenty-five or thirty and realize you're wasting your life with something you hate?" Alfie asked.

Claire rolled her eyes, "Work isn't supposed to be fun. It's supposed to keep the bills paid. Fun is what hobbies are for. C'mon, look around. Dean can't be happy here, or he wouldn't get on your ass for dropping your education. You want to be here, doing this until you die of a stroke on your front porch like Bobby?"

"I tried, okay? I went back for a month after the crash, but I was too far behind, and I couldn't keep
up." Alfie's usual smile was gone, leaving not even a faint trace of it's existence, "I needed to find another way to do things."

"Like a tutor, or a G.E.D.?” Claire asked.

Alfie shrugged, "I'm not sure if I'm going to need them yet. I'm still working on what I want to do. I was hoping this trip to Dallas would make it a little clearer."

"Well, I'm going to college. I'm going to major in business, and I'm going to be able to run places like this- chains of places like this. I'm going to hire and fire people who are at the level we're at now, and I could go anywhere and find decent work, so money is never going to be a problem for me again."

Alfie seemed to be locked in silent agitation, but recalling her reaction on Saturday morning, he made a conscious decision to stay seated, even though his body was screaming at him to get up and move. "I guess some people can just sell out everything they care about, everything that makes them happy, all for a good career, but I can't. I almost died, I'm not going to waste my life doing something that's going to make me miserable just to keep a roof over my head."

"...At least I'm not an aimless drifter with no goals." Claire answered him quietly, her tone harsh.

Alfie looked shocked and hurt as Claire scooped up her phone and walked out.

He leaned back further in the desk chair, not entirely sure how they'd gotten into the disagreement. He considered his words, and tried to understand whether something he said had upset Claire, or why she'd say what she had.

He looked around the empty, quiet room and pulled a piece of paper from the printer. 'Closed - Family Emergency’ he wrote in thick black marker, pulling a roll of cellophane tape out of a drawer.

After Alfie taped the sign to the front door, he circled the corner of the building, passing a mangled and rusting piece of metal with patches of orange. He opened the driver's door of his car, withdrawing a large frame wrapped carefully in heavy brown paper, and carried it inside.

Looking around again as he moved through the building, he settled on stashing it behind the door of Dean’s small office, leaning it against the wall.

Walking out, he set the lock on the doorknob of the front door, pulling it closed behind him.

Dean rounded the edge of the curtain, and resumed his seat.

Ben sat on the hospital bed, looking miserable, his cheeks still streaked with tears from the pain. "That cop looked mad."

"Yeah... Yeah, well, unfortunately most of the time if a kid needs x-rays twice in the same month, it's because they don't have decent parents." Dean explained.

Ben nodded. "So, he thinks you hit me?"

Dean shrugged, "Don't worry about it, it happened at school, so that's plenty proof right there. You just worry about staying still, and relaxing."

Ben carefully stretched out to lay down. "Do I have to go to school tomorrow?"

"You'll have to be at the school tomorrow, but only while I'm there." Dean answered, "Obviously
you're not safe going to class."

"Hey dad?... Who's Mr Garrison's boss?"

"The superintendent. And he answers to the school board." Dean leaned forward, elbows on his knees, face in his hands. He looked up a moment later, "You pick a color for your cast yet?"

"Yeah, the nurse came back while you were talking to the cop. I'm getting black."

"Nobody's going to be able to sign it if it's black."

"I'm gonna stick a Batman sticker on it." Ben replied, "It's gonna be sweet."

Cas got out of the gray Honda, exhausted, and started for the door. Briefly, despite the knowledge that the Winchesters were still at the emergency room, he glanced toward their home and the shop. Dean had been keeping him apprised through text messages.

Coming up the front steps, he spotted Claire on the swing, slouched in place, rocking the swing slowly.

"I thought you might be at work." he said softly.

"Dean said to lock it up and go home."

"And Alfie?"

"I'm sure he's got better things to do."

Cas nodded, "Well, you did say he's leaving in the morning."

"We had a fight... I think." Claire said quietly, "I'm not really sure why."

"It's been a stressful day. I wouldn't worry about it too much." Cas said, continuing into the house.

Claire stared at the gravel road for a while longer before something crossed her mind. Quickly she stood and went inside. "Dad?"

"In here," Cas called from his office.

Claire went upstairs quickly, "How can you tell if a kid is depressed?"

"Who are we discussing?" Cas asked, looking up from his computer.

"Ben."

"Ben?... He certainly didn't break his arm on purpose."

Claire shook her head, "That's not what I mean. He likes climbing on roofs, right?"

"Most children like to climb things." Cas replied.

"But when I watched him that time I said he could die from falling off, and basically he said he wasn't scared, because he could die like his mom did, like it meant he wasn't scared to die."

"I think I understand your concern, but I'm not sure the two are connected."
"Well, Alfie's bike crash? Dean said he was lucky to be alive, well, I walk around the bend in the road all the time, and... I'm not sure Ben hit the car on accident. We couldn't see him from that angle, but he should have seen the front end of the car."

Cas nodded thoughtfully, "I suppose that's possible, but he didn't hit very hard, and we don't know how far he was from the bend, or if he was trying to stop."

Claire smoothed a strand of hair that had worked loose from her ponytail. "I heard Dean on the porch, you know. About Ben waiting with his dead mom?... And now the kid at the school won't leave him alone."

"Claire, he really doesn't act depressed, I highly doubt the time with the dirt bike was anything but an accident." Cas said calmly, "But you're obviously very concerned. Maybe you'd feel better about it if you spent some time with him, and talked to him, just be careful you don't plant any ideas that weren't already there."

Claire shifted anxiously, but nodded before heading downstairs.

Alfie locked the front door behind him, his large backpack hanging from one shoulder, both crutches under one arm as he turned to cross the street. He stopped for a brief text to Dean.

'Hope Ben's ok. Picture is behind your office door'

Crossing the street, he came up the Tran's porch steps. Linda opened the door, jumping a little to find Alfie about to knock, "There you are! Is that all you packed?"

Alfie shrugged, "My aunt isn't going to let me go to any of her events the way I dress, so I know there's going to be a shopping trip when I get there."

Linda smiled and nodded, "Okay. You didn't skip breakfast, did you? You don't know how long it'll take to get through security, you need to keep your energy up."

"No, I ate." Alfie replied.

Linda nodded again, closing the door behind her and heading for her car. "Is your aunt picking you up when you get there?"

"No, I'm taking a taxi." Alfie replied, following after her.

Linda put the key in the ignition as Alfie strapped himself in. "I know you're not very close with most of your family, but this could be good for you. I'm sure your aunt has your best interests at heart. Maybe you would both get along better if you try to connect as adults."

"Well, you met her before, she's not exactly friendly." Alfie said quietly.

"Her nephew had just gotten scraped off the pavement and bolted back together, that would make anyone tense... And I still have no idea what your uncle said to Kevin in the waiting room, he won't talk about it."

Alfie looked at the floor, "You know, I really appreciate you and Kevin being around... Helping me out with stuff... Naomi said I could start over in Dallas, that she'd help me get set up and move there, but, I don't know."

"You should think about it. You'd be close to family, it could be good for that art thing you do... But
mostly you need to be somewhere you have support, and folks who care about you. Do you have any other family members in Dallas?" Linda asked.

Alfie shook his head, "Just Naomi. But Crowley spends some time there, too, I think... I don't know if either of them would have come outside in a bathrobe to get my drunk ass to stop kicking over trash cans in the street at three in the morning, and let me crash on their couch for a month, though."

Linda chuckled, "That was a long time ago."

"I don't even remember what you said to me, but I don't think I ever cared if anyone was disappointed in me before that." Alfie looked out the window. "So, what happened to the box of stuff you took out of my dad's liquor cabinet?"

Linda shrugged, "It's still in my garage. Most of it, anyway."

"Most of it?"

"Hey, I picked you up instead of the cops, they owe me for that." Linda replied.

"I owe you for that." Alfie said.

"Yes, you do... And you can pay me back by making something of yourself."

Of course, when Alfie said he didn't recall what Linda had said to him that night, he lied.

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Two years prior -

The door shut harshly behind Linda as she hurried, slippershod down the front steps.

"Samandriel!" she hissed loudly as she rushed across the street, caddy corner, to where Alfie had stumbled with his last frantic kick of the metal trash cans at the curb outside the Nelson home, "What the hell are you doing?"

Alfie struggled to his feet, inebriated. "Hey, Mrs Tran."

"You can't do this, people actually call the cops in this neighborhood! Go home and go to bed, and don't think I won't have a long talk with your parents tomorrow!"

"Oh, you going to Paris, too?" Alfie asked belligerently, "Because that's where they are. Fucking Paris."

"What?"

"Yep. Mom just, um, just signed a lease... Dad's leaving her there with her boyfriend, and they're... getting a divorce." Alfie shook slightly, and shrugged, "But he can't come back right now, because he has... business."

Linda looked up as the motion sensor for the Nelson's garage security light picked up movement.

"Come on, get in the house."

"I'm not going anywhere." Alfie said with a hint of amusement.

Linda quickly grasped his ear well above her head, and marched him across the street, not letting go until they were in her living room. She thrust an adamant finger toward the couch, "Sit!"
Alfie dropped himself onto the sofa.

"Who are you staying with?"

"I'm not."

"Who's supposed to be checking on you?"

Alfie scratched at his face, "My uncle came by last week for a couple days, I don't know."

Linda's movements spelled out fury and frustration, "Are you even old enough to drive?"

"Got my license last month." Alfie slurred, "But I can't use it right now, because I'm... wasted... right now."

"So no one is taking care of you? Nobody?"

Alfie looked up, "I don't need my hand held to cross the street, you know."

"How long have your parents been gone?" Linda asked, her voice slowly softening.

"A week... I think... they said it was a vacation... liars."

"Did they leave you grocery money?"

"I have a credit card."

"A credit card?... Why do you have a credit card?"

Alfie shrugged.

"And they expect you to buy vegetables instead of a top of the line stereo?" Linda asked.

"I already have one, it was to shut me up when they bailed on me for Christmas." Alfie slumped toward the arm of the sofa.

"Okay, look..." Linda said, moving to stand directly in front of him, "You can't control what they do. You can't make them come back. But getting yourself arrested for underage drinking, drunk and disorderly conduct, vandalism, property damage, juvenile delinquency, that's not going to hurt them if they already don't care. Do you understand? The only person that is going to hurt, is you. It'll ruin your life. You're better than that."

Alfie wobbled a little where he sat, "But why should I care?"

The question wasn't sarcastic, or arrogant, it was genuine, and it left a wound. Linda wanted to hug him, tell him it would be okay, and call his mother to bitch her out for three hours, but knew in her heart it wasn't what Alfie needed.

"Because the saying is right, the best revenge is a life well lived. I know that for a fact. And if you give up on yourself the way they have, if you throw your life away, and treat yourself the way they treat you, they win. You're not a loser by nature, Samandriel, you're a good person, and you have your whole life ahead of you. But you won't be able to live it if you're too busy turning into a scumbag hoodlum. And this? Getting drunk and tearing up the neighborhood? This is where it starts. So shut that down, because I am not having it!"

Alfie, having been quiet and reserved throughout his childhood, had never had anyone speak so
harshly to him before, and was taken aback.

"You have school in the morning, try to get some sleep." Linda said firmly, heading upstairs.

A few moments later, she dropped a folded quilt from the linen cabinet over the railing, letting it land on the seat next to Alfie as she called down, "Do not throw up on my carpet."

As they reached the airport in the next town, nearing the passenger loading lane, Alfie turned to Linda, "Do you think I'd be better off in Dallas?"

"Not necessarily. If you're not happy there, if the people there don't appreciate you, then, no. But you're the only person who'll know for sure. And it's not like you can't afford to hop back and forth if you need to, if places there want to display your work. So go, see what's there, give it everything you've got, and then do what makes you happy."

Alfie nodded. "Okay."

Linda pulled the car up to the curb. "Have a good flight, And stay safe, I mean that."

Alfie leaned across the car to give her a quick half-hug, "Thanks, mom."

He quickly climbed out, backpack, crutches, and all.

Linda waited until he was safely through the doors before pulling away, continuing her drive to work.
Cas was standing in the office speaking to a small, elderly woman with dark skin and short gray hair tightly curled against her scalp, when Dean came to the counter to sign in.

Ben walked straight up to the elderly woman and gave her a hug, clearly still adjusting to his cast. Dean joined them a moment later.

"Superintendent Keller is already in Uri's office, if you're ready. Ben can wait in my office." Dean gave a nod and followed Cas and Mrs Hamish into the hallway, with Ben following close behind.

"So, vent echoes...?" Dean asked in a hushed tone.

"Handled it." Cas replied, equally quiet, as they reached the door.

"Okay, bud, go sit down, don't mess with Cas' stuff, okay?"

"I left a deck of cards on the chair for you, Ben." Cas added, pulling the door closed, "This might take a while."

Filing into Uri's office, Uri was seated at his desk, Superintendent Keller stood nearby behind the desk, leaning back on a filing cabinet, watching something on Uri's monitor. Mrs Hamish carefully took a seat, and Cas stood near the wall, waving Dean toward the remaining seat.

Uri clicked something on the screen and sat back, as the three finally seemed to merit some attention and Superintendent Keller looked up as well. "Mrs Hamish, thank you for sitting in with us, I understand this most recent incident occurred while you had the boys in art?"

"That's right." she replied.

"Did you happen to see what might have set the other student off?"

"I don't care what set him off, Uri. A normal, healthy child doesn't strike his classmate with a chair." Mrs Hamish didn't have to stand to suddenly seem intimidating, "That child is a nuisance, and needs assistance I can't give him."

"Jack Lytton has been at this school since pre-k, and-"

"And he's been a terror the entire time. And he's getting worse! He gave another child a bloody lip a week before Ben Winchester started here, and you know it. Cas told me about transportation suddenly misplacing the video, thankfully Charlie was able to get to it anyhow. I'm sure you don't mind, I've already given Mr Winchester a copy for his lawyer."

Superintendent Keller straightened at the last word. "Is that right, Mr Winchester? You're looking into bringing an attorney into this?"

"Well, I said I'd get my brother's opinion... did I not mention...?" Dean asked with a hint of a smirk.

"I stand by my offer yesterday, on the phone, about covering Ben's medical bills, do you have that information with you?" Superintendent Keller asked.

Dean produced a large envelope, carefully pulling a few stapled pieces of paper from the back, setting them down on Uri's desk.
Superintendent Keller lifted the papers, studying them carefully. After flipping through a few, he came back to the top of the stack, "These aren't from yesterday, and they seem to be for a facial injury."

"Oh, right," Cas nodded with a false smile, "That must be from the bus incident, when Uri left Ben to sit in the hallway, bleeding instead of sending him to the nurse's office."

"The nurse was out." Uri growled in a warning tone.

"Then it's a good thing he didn't have a broken arm that day, or I suppose you would have had him sitting in the hall then, too?" Mrs Hamish seemed, from Uri's expression, to dig her claws in.

"Right, here are the ones from yesterday," Dean said, putting some more papers on the desk.

"If you don't mind, Mr Winchester, what's in the rest of the stack?" Uri asked with fake politeness as Keller picked up the second round of paper, eyeing the exchange with interest.

"Notes from his counselor." Dean offered with a shrug.

"Our school counselor, Joan?"

"No, the one he sees concerning the trauma with his mother's death." Dean leaned forward with a fake whisper, "Jack hasn't been very nice about that. Not doing much good for Ben's recovery."

"I am very concerned about this behavior." Mrs Hamish continued, "The violence is escalating at an alarming rate, and Ben is not safe with Jack around. Also, we need to consider why he might be having these outbursts in the first place. That has to be handled for the safety of the rest of the children in the school, after you remove him from Ben's class."

"Remove him from the class? His father-" Uri started.

"Ben hasn't been violent repeatedly. He had one occurrence in the cafeteria. Having heard what Jack said from Gail, and considering I'm about to retire, I'm not sure I would have held back, either." Mrs Hamish waved her hand, "And Richard Lytton doesn't scare me. He's all bark."

"Mrs Hamish, please, this is a serious matter." Uri said firmly.

"I had you for second grade, did I not?"

"Yes, but-"

"And even then you were too big for your britches, Uriel. There is always a bully. You had one, and you were one, and I'm sure there have been many throughout your life. But what are you going to do about this one?"

Uri turned the screen around to face Dean and Mrs Hamish, and pressed a button. Video footage from a security camera facing the playground showed Ben being pulled off of Jack's back, and Gail speaking to him, with Ben's resulting body language quite aggressive in response. "I am considering placing Ben in our alternative program."

Dean was immediately too angry to speak, and his face reflected it well.

"Back the video up thirty seconds." Cas said, his voice hard.

"Why?" Uri asked.
"Why not?" Cas asked, "Unless there's something you don't want Keller to see?"

Mrs Hamish turned her steely gaze back to Uri. "I have to agree with Cas, you seem awfully guarded over something as innocuous as thirty seconds of video... But, I'm sure Charlie can dig it out later, you know. She's very gifted with machines. Of course, if you go to the trouble of making her dig it out, I'll be making another copy for Dean, here."

Keller stood and spun the monitor back, "Humor them, back it up another minute..."

With a look of stifled fury, Uri backed the video replay up by a little over a minute, well aware he'd been caught in his own trap.

Keller walked around the desk, turning the screen as Uri started the video. Gail and the second teacher were in plain view, talking and ignoring the children. Ben stood nearby, mainly looking invisible, and kicking at the ground. Every now and again, he'd look up.

"Goodness, he's such a social creature." Mrs Hamish commented.

Dean barely recognized his son on the video, but he knew the behaviors and mannerisms all too well, having long ago perfected them himself. The child was avoiding an abuser. It was painful to watch.

Jack ran into frame as Ben attempted to get away, his fist connected with the back of Ben's head before tackling him to the ground. Ben made use of Jack's momentum, and quickly pinned the other boy, without hurting him in the process.

Keller looked over the monitor, "Garrison...? What the hell is this?"

Claire didn't notice Ben was in the room until she sat down at the desk to clock in. He was hanging over one arm of the old leather couch, arms, one in a cast, dangling toward the floor.

"Are you helping today?" she asked, finding the right screen.

"I can't get the cast dirty. Or wet. Or oily. And all my video games are two handed... I'm gonna be bored forever." Ben bemoaned his fate.

Claire shrugged, "At least the Batman sticker looks cool."

"It keeps falling off. I think maybe some glue will work better." Ben twisted into an odd angle, "Did you ever get a broken bone?"

"No... but don't jinx me."

"My dad said he had a broken leg and a broken arm, but when I asked how it happened he didn't want to talk about it." Ben shifted a bit more to sit normally, "I guess it would have to be pretty embarrassing. Maybe he fell out of a tree, I don't know."

"So, how long until you get your hand back?" Claire asked quietly.

"Six stupid, rotten, lame, dumb weeks." Ben answered, "But before I go for a vacation with my uncle, so I'll still get to swim."

"Well, at least it's your left. I mean, you're right handed, right?"

Ben nodded, "Yeah, but you can't ride a bike with one hand."
"Maybe not a dirt bike, but a regular bike, you could." Claire answered, getting up and heading for the garage, "And you could read, draw, kick a soccer ball. I don't know. Just do whatever you would do if it got chopped off for good."

Ben sat quietly for a few minutes before following Claire to the garage. She was zipping up her coveralls.

"If you got your hand chopped off, would you get a robot hand like in Star Wars, or stick a chainsaw on the end like Bruce Campbell?"

Claire looked horrified for a moment. "Somebody let you watch Evil Dead?"

"No, Army of Darkness. Dad said I can't watch Evil Dead until I'm thirty."

"Huh... Okay. I would go with the chainsaw." Claire answered, moving to the Dodge Ram in the second bay.

"Me too!" Ben answered, getting a little too excited about the conversation, "But only if I couldn't get a way to switch back and forth, because that would be even better. Laser fingers, then, boom, chainsaw! I wouldn't even care that my hand got chopped off."

"Nobody is getting their hand chopped off." Dean said firmly, walking into the first bay, which was empty, carrying a muffler he'd pulled from the yard.

"And anyway, Luke didn't have laser fingers." Claire said.

Ben shrugged, "Well, I would get laser fingers."

At the sound of the office door, which Claire and Ben didn't seem to notice, continuing their conversation regarding fictional prosthetics, Dean went through the hallway to find Cas in the office.

"How'd it go after they kicked me out?"

Cas gave a heavy sigh, "You wouldn't believe a grown man could throw a fit like that, but... Keller was going to run an inquiry, and Uri was going to get to keep his position for now, but..."

Dean motioned for him to continue, but Cas began to chuckle fairly hard, "Well, now I know how Mrs Hamish has lasted, teaching all these years. But, he's been asked to step down, and we're getting the assistant principal from Carson Elementary to come in as interim, and he may be taking over starting next year."

"Wow."

"Basically."

"And that Jack kid?"

"Different class, effective tomorrow."

"And the new guy from Carson?"

Cas shook his head. "Unfortunately, I went to college with him."

"Why is that a bad thing?"
"Okay, listen up, Jack-wagon," Cas rolled his eyes, wishing he'd been able to accomplish his dream of zero-post-graduation-contact with him as the other man slapped a file down onto the desk in front of Jack, "You're done. This is over. As far as Ben is concerned, you no longer exist. If you so much as say 'hi' to him, I call your folks. Three calls, and I'm going to make a prison camp in Alaska look like a fun vacation."

"What if Ben comes after me?" Jack asked.

"Run," Gabe said with a wild-eyed nod, "Because I've seen the letter from his counselor, and the way he turned that tackle around on you, and once that Winchester kid snaps, and he will, you're toast."

Gabe pulled a single piece of paper from the printer tray and held it out to Jack. Jack took it, the concern growing on his face.

"Take that with you, give it to your new teacher, Ms Fernando, and have a very uneventful day."

Jack scurried out of the room.

"I'm not convinced that actually helped the situation." Cas muttered as the door swung closed.

Gabe leaned back in his chair, putting his feet up on the desk. "Relax, Cassie, I got this."

"And when the term 'Jack-wagon' comes up in private, between school board members?"

"He misheard me. Who would ever speak to a child like that?"

"You would." Cas replied.

"Yeah, but those flaccid desk jockeys are too busy yanking their ties with one hand and their-"

"I have work to do." Cas made for the door.

"Hang on." Gabe said, causing Cas to begrudgingly turn around, one hand on the doorknob.

"Look, I was an asshole in college, and guess what?" Gabe spread his hands, "Still an asshole. But there's a difference now. I'm channeling it to the right places, and screwing over the right people. That stunt on the quad...? You didn't deserve that. Hate me if you want, I can't undo it, but I regret it."

Cas didn't answer as he left the room.

Claire was vaguely aware of Ben throwing a football through an old tire he'd hung on one of the barbed wire fence posts as she topped up the fluids of a tan Explorer.

Just as she finished the wiper fluid, and made to close it up, Ben ran in, straight for the tool bench.

"Where's the tape?"

"No idea. Why?"

"My sticker fell off." Ben held up the logo sticker, which had somehow become quite tattered. The back of it was coated with the debris of anything it had fallen on, which by this point seemed to be plenty.

"It's just going to keep falling off." Claire objected.
"Yeah, but it's the whole reason I got a black cast, it just looks stupid without it... Hey, do you think staples?"

"Don't! Don't staple your cast. Look, I'm done, I'm getting out of here, and I'll help you out. I just have to get a couple of things first."

Less than an hour later, Claire carried a medium sized box up the steps of the Winchester home. Ben had the door open for her before she got to the top, trying to get a look in the box as she passed him.

"What is that?"

"A Wii. It's been sitting in the garage for a while, but most of the games are one handed." Claire replied, setting the box on the coffee table.

Digging below a pile of cables, she retrieved a bottle of bright yellow nail polish.

"Um..."

"Where's the sticker?" Claire asked.

Ben pulled it out of his pocket.

"You're really lucky I hated this color, the bottle's still full." Claire said, shaking it to mix the contents, and getting Ben to sit on the couch, holding the sticker up to his cast.

"Is that going to keep the sticker on?"

"Nope, even better."

"I don't want that on my hands."

Claire didn't reply, instead looking closely at the sticker design, before tearing a piece of it away. She used what was left to complete the logo in bright yellow nail polish before tearing away another small piece, slowly working up to the entire yellow oval, still in good proportion. "Don't touch it, don't bump it on anything, don't even breathe on it. When it's dry, I'll put another coat on."

Ben nodded, and started cleaning up the shredded sticker as Claire started hunting for a free set of ports on the back of the TV.

Dean came inside a little later, nearly tripping on the coffee table that had been moved in front of the door. Looking up, he found Ben and Claire in the middle of some kind of video game that looked like sword play.

"Why is the coffee table over here?" Dean asked, "That's not one of those things with the motion sensor where people hack into it, is it?"

"No, it's older than that, and it's not online." Claire replied, taking another set of swings at Ben's character before blocking. "This one only picks up the controllers."

"Okay... Why is it here?"

"Claire said I can borrow it, since you can play with one hand." Ben answered.

Dean watched for a few more minutes before picking up the coffee table and maneuvering it through the kitchen and out into the garage.
Dean was under the powder blue Toyota, cursing cheap plastic, when Claire started humming again. He wouldn't normally have cared, but it had been the same song, sometimes hours at a time, for three days. He was grateful at this point that she was preoccupied with school for the majority of the day.

And it was off key... Normally he wouldn't judge, due to his own lack of ability, but after three days...

"Okay, seriously." Dean said firmly, rolling out from under the car and sitting up, looking toward the next bay, "You miss him that much, just call him. But the humming has to stop, or I'm gonna put my head through a damn wall."

Claire looked up from under the hood of a gray sedan, surprised. "What?"

"You've been humming for three days. Get a radio or something in here. Or call him and get it out of your system."

"Call who?"

"Alfie... You guys are going out, right?"

"Um, we... What does this have to do with him?"

Dean wiped the back of his hand across his forehead, "Unchained Melody? Most well-known love song in the English language is carving itself into my skull, I figured it has something to do with him."

Claire stared at him for a moment, "You sure that's the name of it?"

"Yeah."

"Sounds dumb."

"Don't care. Is it going to stop?"

"Sure."

Dean was about to slide under the Toyota again, but stopped. "Okay, I gotta know, why?"

"Why what?" Claire asked, still fiddling with something out of his line of sight.

"Why that song? For three days?"

Claire shrugged, "I don't know, I heard it, but when I went to look it up, I couldn't remember the words... Who sings it?"

"Who doesn't?" Dean asked, shaking his head, "Everybody's covered that one."

The office door shut loudly as Kevin announced his presence, "Where my greasemonkeys at?"

Dean looked at the Toyota and opted for his office, his headache building. He met Kevin in the hallway.

"Hey, Dean, what's the biggest spoiler you got?"

"Old Yeller dies." Dean answered, not stopping, swinging the door shut behind him.
Kevin made a quick pawing motion at the glass in the door until Dean gave him a glare, and continued to the garage.

Claire pulled a twisted piece of rubberized belt from the car, "What's up?"

Kevin shrugged, "Uh... Sandman says hi... except he didn't... and, did you guys have a fight?"

"I don't know." Claire answered in a non-committal tone.

"Okay, then I guess it's not important that he might decide to move out there." Kevin prodded.

"Oh yeah? Huh." Claire replied, pulling out another chuck of the shredded belt.

"Yeah, his aunt wants him to live there. But his family sucks, so..."

Claire shrugged.

"Oh, shit, you did." Kevin said, "Same thing as the Maggie thing. God, Claire..."

"I'm out. Go home." Claire said.

"Okay, fine, dropping it... And Will got in my face today." Kevin said, "You know Chaz and Jim were trying to get him to quit being a creep? Well, Jim tried to warn me about something, but Will came around the corner, and he couldn't say what it was. I get home, and I get this message, look," Kevin held up his phone. The textual chicken scratch and slang were painful to disseminate.

"The short version?" Claire suggested.

"He went looking for your schedule on a teacher's computer, he called the shop under a fake name, asking Dean about you while you were at school, and he managed to find out from Abigail which school your dad works at. It's creeping out his friends. You need to tell to your dad."

"My dad has enough to worry about."

"Okay, what if I tell him?"

"You won't."

Kevin shifted nervously. "You don't think he's losing it? Assholes who try to control people lose their shit when someone won't let them be controlling. That's why domestic violence shelters are a thing."

"Right... And the minute my husband starts beating me, I'll go to one."

"Claire!... It's not a joke..."

Claire gave a heaving pull, dragging a huge length of the broken belt out. "Whatever."

"Fine..." Kevin watched, stifling some kind of comment as she dropped the rest of the belt to the shop floor, "Okay, one more thing, can I ask you something personal?"

Dean looked up from his spreadsheet as something moved quickly past his door. It took him a moment to register that it had been Kevin.

Watching the glass, aware Claire was yelling angrily about something, a large repair manual flew
past, pages loose as it spun through the air.

Dean calmly removed his phone from his pocket and tried Cas' number. It went to voice mail as Kevin loudly replied something about his question coming out wrong and not being a pervert.

"Hey, Cas. Listen, I'm currently barricaded in my office due to a sudden flood of teen hormones, and about half them are your problem. So, if you could swing by and- shit!" Dean dropped the phone on his desk, bolting for the door, throwing it open, "Claire! Gimme the goddamn wrench. Stop it."

Dean grabbed the wrench from her hand, blocking the hallway, and pointed back toward the garage as she continued to yell at Kevin, and Kevin yelled back. "Why the hell would you even bring that up?! You know damn well I'm not into you! And if this is because Alfie left-"

"Hey, I said it's not like that! I love your friendzone, GOD, I LIVE in your friendzone, that's where I'm at! It's a mutual friendzone and you know it! Maybe the psycho screaming is why he left!"

"You just forget it, I'm not even talking about this with you! And I didn't scream at him, I never screamed at him!"

Dean, observing Kevin's retreat, took Claire's shoulders and backed her into the garage. "Go home."

"But he-!"

"Are you hurt?"

"No, but-"

"Then I won't kill him. Now go home."

Claire was still seething as she turned and left through the bay door.

Dean nearly tripped over Kevin trying to get back into his office, checking the call had ended, and put his phone away, dropping back into his chair. Kevin was trying to explain, he was certain, but he wouldn't stop talking long enough to take a breath.

"Shut up." Dean said without looking up.

Kevin closed his mouth... finally. If only for a few seconds.

"What set her off?" Dean asked.

"I just asked her a question, I just need some help with this one thing, and I can't ask a guy my age, because I know I'm just gonna get bad info, so I figured, 'Hey, Claire's cool,' well, guess not." Kevin said, angry and bewildered as he sat down heavily in the only other chair.

"Try again. Less words." Dean said.

"Okay, so I have a girlfriend now." Kevin replied.

"Congratulations."

"And, well... I cannot ask my mom about this."

"Uh-huh."

"And... I had this date the other night, and-"
"Okay, stop. This is a sex question, right? No details, just yes or no."

"Yes."

Dean nodded. "You got Chris Hansen stashed around here, too?"

"What?"

"Okay, and you can't ask your dad or somebody, you had to go and ask Claire?"

Kevin scoffed. "I don't have a dad... But, you know, you have Ben, and he's gonna ask questions at some point, so..."

"Okay, fine. What?"

"Okay, well, um..."

"Euphemisms. Disney-rated euphemisms. I mean that." Dean said, trying to pretend the conversation wasn't happening.

Kevin shifted in his seat, "Okay, so, I don't want to be some kind of jerk that just does stuff, but how do you know if a girl wants you do stuff before you do the stuff? Like, you go to, um... 'hold her hand,' well, what if you do, and that's not something she wanted you to do, but you already did it? Then it's too late, and you're a horrible person."

Dean shrugged, "Ask her first."

"Okay, but, how do I do that without sounding like a total loser who doesn't know what he's doing?"

Dean took a deep breath and rubbed at his forehead, "Okay, let's say you give this girl a hug, right?"

Kevin nodded.

"Just whisper in her ear, 'I want to hold your hand, is that okay?' And even if she says no, she'll probably think it's hot, and she won't break up with you for moving too fast, because you didn't actually do... whatever. Just remember, there's a verbal yes, and a physical yes, anything else, figure it's no, and change the subject fast."

Kevin's eyebrows nearly met. "Wait, verbal yes and what?"

"If... if she's one of those really quiet girls, she might be too embarrassed to say it, but if you ask her if you can, um, 'play with her hair,' and she doesn't say anything but she puts your hand there herself when you ask, then she's telling you it's fine. But anything else, that's a no."

"Okay, so, ask. Whisper-ask... and that doesn't make the guy sound like an idiot?"

"Would you rather sound like an idiot or grab something you're not supposed to, and scar her for life?" Dean asked, exasperated.

Kevin's shoulders slumped, "Idiot. Definitely."

"Then you'll be fine." Dean answered, dismissively.

"It's just this whole thing is awkward."

"You're a teenager. It's supposed to be awkward."
Claire, still in her coveralls, climbed the porch steps and sat down on the swing just as Cas opened the door.

"Are you okay?" he asked, "I got a voice mail from Dean, I was about to come get you. What happened?"

Claire shoved her hands deep into her pockets and stared at her boots. "I mess everything up."

"No, you don't."

"I do. I'm cursed or something, everything around me just gets ruined. Now Kevin's mad at me, and Alfie's not coming back, and I keep messing up my life."

"Alfie's not coming back from Dallas?" Cas asked, "And you think it's because of something you did?"

Claire shook her head, "Kevin said he's thinking about it. And I said something the last time I saw him, when Dean went to get Ben, and... Well, he hasn't texted, and if it were me, and he said it, I don't think I'd come back."

"What did you say?"

"I called him an aimless drifter with no goals."

Cas stepped past her to sit down. "Is that really what you think about him?"

"No... well, he kind of is, but he's nice, and I only said it because I was pissed off."

"So, normally you're fine with the fact that he's an aimless drifter with no goals, but you said it to hurt him?" Claire nodded, "Why?"

"I don't know. I was angry."

"What were you angry about?"

Claire took a deep breath, "We were talking about school and why he dropped out, and I said I was going to college, and... I don't remember exactly what he said, but something like, 'some people just sell out everything they care about to keep a roof over their heads.' So, I called him that."

"Claire, I don't know how close you are with him, but, does he know what happened to you?"

"No."

"So it wasn't on purpose."

"What?"

"You don't see a parallel?" Cas asked, "If he had known, I don't think he would have put it that way. At least, not if he's a decent person."

"Because the one thing sounds like the other thing."

Cas nodded, "That may have made you uncomfortable without realizing it."

"So he didn't know, and I blew up at him anyway. Just like the other day."
"What happened today with Kevin?" Cas asked.

"He's a creep... Maybe... I don't really want to talk about it."

Cas looked toward the shop for a moment, "Well, I don't feel much like cooking, why don't you go get cleaned up, and we can run into town for dinner?"

"Noodle place?"

"Noodle place."
Chapter 18

Claire had barely shut the car door and turned around as Cas pulled away, when Kevin suddenly took her elbow, making her jump.

"What?" Claire barked more than asked.

"I need you to chill, please... Just for today, okay?"

Claire gave a weak attempt to shake his hand off. Kevin turned to face her directly. "Look, I wasn't trying to be a jerk, or hit on you. But I made you really uncomfortable, and I'm very sorry. I won't ask you questions like that anymore, I swear. Especially because Dean will kill me if I do."

Claire gave him a critical look.

"Chaz called me." Kevin blurted.

"Okay?"

"Don't go anywhere alone."

"Right. How?" Claire asked.

"Stick with me and Margaret. Reese and Kelly are going to follow you around, too."

Claire shot him an irritated look, "Oh-em-gee, totes my bad, Claire. Be part of my harem?"

Having moved closer to the building, Kevin physically dragged her around a corner. "I'm not messing around. Will told his friends, his fucking friends!- that he wants to kill you. It got... graphic. He's freaking them out, and you seem to think it's nothing."

Claire rolled her eyes, "Big fucking deal, I've been through worse."

"Please?... Please call your dad, go to the office with me, make them drag Chaz and Jim in, please?"

"Fuck off, Kevin." Claire tried to push past him, but Kevin shoved her back.

"You know he found Mr Singer, right?... Who's gonna call and tell him you're dead? Oh, well, I guess that'd be me, huh?... Don't put him through that, don't put me through that... Claire..." Kevin begged.

Claire was about to go off on Kevin for pushing her, but someone else's words surfaced in her memory. Her father's. "I love you, and I want you to come home safe."

"Fine!" Claire snapped. "Security detail, but that is it. And if you call Alfie about this, I swear, I'll-"

"Yeah, I know what you'll do to me."

"I don't really want to be around you right now."

"Okay." Kevin replied. He pointed to a girl digging through her bag on a nearby bench, "Kelly's
Dean was waiting when the bus came to a stop at the corner, and took Ben's backpack for him. "How'd it go today?"

"Good." Ben answered, "Jack was outside at recess, and I know he saw me, but he didn't say anything, he just walked off."

"Did you say anything?"

"No. But I didn't run away, either."

Dean nodded. "Just remember, he might have it coming, but he's probably not feeling too great right now. Kids change fast, so if you get a chance, try to be nice."

Ben made a face.

"Hey, if you can't be nice, just don't be mean. You can pretend he's not even there." Dean said quietly.

"I don't even look goth, I look dead." Alfie said, looking at his reflection.

"Hm..." Naomi looked up from her phone for a split second, then back to it as she waved the shop employee over. She didn't look up at all, only pointed toward Alfie, "We're going for new and edgy, not corpse-like."

"You did ask for black."

"Let's try a different black. Samandriel, your hair... What can we do differently...?"

"Why not skip the hair, and I can wear a big hat instead?"

"Maybe an earring..." Naomi mused.

"Yeah, because it's not like I have enough holes in my head already."

"Save the sarcasm for the champagne meet and greet, Samandriel."

Alfie pulled the tails of the black silk shirt free, unbuttoning it, rolling the hem up, tying the free ends in front of his sternum leaving his white undershirt showing, and took a quick selfie, sending it to Kevin with the caption, 'They said I could be anything, so I became a panda.'

Watching Naomi continue to stare into her phone, he sent it to her as well, which caused her to finally look up for more than the time it took to blink.

"Do you find this funny, Samandriel?... I am trying to help you create an image that will carry you as a product, and make you interesting. Don't embarrass me."

Alfie untied the shirt tails and wandered out in the main floor, texting Kevin asked he went. 'She doesn't like it'

Kevin sent back, 'You need something fierce. Maybe like a shirt with a t Rex & pink fishnet sleeves'

Looking up, something caught his eye.
The jacket was not exactly red, but somewhere in the red and orange spectrum. Somewhere close to a shade he'd want to see if he dissolved the colors of several dry autumn leaves into one tint. It was a tone that made him consider pale skin and blue eyes. He grabbed it.

Alfie went back to the dressing room, and intentionally stood uncomfortably close until Naomi looked up.

"Is that a women's jacket?"

"Yeah. I thought we could match-"

"Samandriel."

"But I couldn't find a stick-up-your-ass in my size."

Naomi only narrowed her eyes in response.

"You wanted me in something edgy that looks good. It's edgy, and looks good, right? Mission accomplished."

"The jacket is fine, the slacks... No." Naomi turned back to her phone, "Black jeans, and some heavy black boots."

"They have boots at the Harley shop."

"Unless you mop the floor with the other artists, you're not going near the Harley shop."

Alfie nodded and walked off in search of black jeans, muttering to himself under his breath. "At least, unlike you, I know what a mop looks like, so I've got a chance."

Claire stepped into the doorway of Dean’s office, "Cleared bay three, called the customer for pick up, nothing else on the agenda. So, we ran out of cars, now what?"

Dean set down the file he was looking at, and pulled a set of keys from his desk drawer, "Bring Bobby's car in and see what it needs."

"You're getting rid of it?"

"Nah, I figure I had to take away something Bobby gave you, and since it's not doing anyone any good where it is, you may as well take it instead."

Claire shook her head, a stutter becoming evident in her voice, "I don't want the car."

Dean looked up, confused, "Look, Claire, I know you had to have some kind of connection with Bobby to tell him what you did, but if you want the gun back, that's gotta wait until you're an adult, and only if you're doing okay then. In the meantime, it would make things easier for-"

"I don't need a car, okay?" Claire avoided looking at him, shifting nervously, and looking down the hallway, "I, um, I need to go."

Dean didn't have time to speak before she started for the front office, but he did get up and follow, calling after her, "Claire, wait, what's... why are you running off?"

Claire had stopped at the computer to clock out, but now shrank into the space behind the desk, acting cornered. She kept shifting as though she wanted to pace, and backing away from him.
"Okay, this is... This has to do with...?"

Claire stilled.

"Okay." Dean stepped back a little, "Okay... But you know that I don't... I don't want anything like that from you, right?"

Claire refused to meet his eyes, but nodded.

"Maybe this isn't the time, but, you know, you're not throwing stuff, or punching people, so... good progress. But you... you don't want to talk about this right now?... That's fine. But can you talk with your dad and the therapist about this? And if you change your mind about the car, let me know."

Claire hardly moved except to begin chewing at a thumbnail.

"I'm sure Cas wouldn't mind coming down here to walk you home, you want me to call him?"

Claire shook her head, and said, in a quiet, shaken voice, "No, I'm okay."

"Bullshit." Dean answered softly, "I'm sure you'll get there, but right now, you're not."

"Yeah, but I can get home."

Dean nodded, and headed slowly back to his office, "Okay..."

He listened until he heard the front door close quietly. He took a look at the brown paper-wrapped frame that still sat behind his office door, and pinched at the bridge of his nose, taking a moment to clear his head, and remind himself he was still doing all he could reasonably do to make sure Claire felt safe at work. He couldn't be expected to know every single thing that might be a problem for her.

Hoping she was already out of earshot, he picked up Bobby's keys and went out through the garage to bring Bobby's old Chevelle into a service bay.

Dean winced at the loud creak as he opened the driver's door. The air inside was stale, and he left the door open as he cranked the ignition, trying to get it to start.

After several tries, he slammed his hand down on the top of the steering wheel. "C'mon!..."

He tried again, but the engine wouldn't turn over.

Frustrated, he leaned his head back.

"What the hell were you thinking, anyway, Bobby?" Dean snapped, "Giving the kid a gun?... Did you even tell her to talk to her dad?"

Dean looked around for a moment, then leaned forward and tried the key one more time.

Almost as if in response, the engine turned over, and settled into a smooth purr.

Claire's work boots sounded noisily as she went up the stairs. Cas heard it, and turned in his chair to look through the open door as Claire appeared, shoulders slumped, with a sour expression on her face.

"Everything okay?" he asked.
"Just tired... it's been a long day." Claire replied, moving slowly, but not stopping on the way to her room.

Reaching her door, she turned around and went back to the doorway of Cas' office. "Okay, look, if I don't tell you first, Kevin's going to come over here, and then you're going to get mad at me for not telling you first...."

Cas turned back to the door looking slightly alarmed, "Tell me what?"

"Will told his friends he wants to kill me. One of them got scared and called Kevin, and I've been stuck with him and his girlfriend crew tailing me around school all day, getting paranoid about some moron who couldn't find his own ass if you pulled his head out of it. So, yeah..." Claire shrugged.

Cas looked taken aback, "...But you think it's just talk?"

Claire shrugged, again, "Well... I still have that bolt."

"Claire-"

"I know, stay away from him, don't go anywhere alone, live in a bubble. Trust me, Kevin's paranoid enough for everybody."

Cas couldn't find the words to reply as Claire made her way to her room, closing the door.

Fighting through a fog of disorientation, Claire barely made out the shape of Alfie, sitting in the desk chair from the shop, tilted back slightly in his usual position, staring at the screen of the computer on her desk.

The screen was off, but he continued to watch it diligently, making small motions with a stylus on an electric drawing tablet.

"Alfie?" she whispered, adjusting the blankets, "I thought you were in Dallas?"

Alfie didn't answer, or even seem to hear her.

Claire sat up, looking around her room. Everything was in it's place, but in the dark, she couldn't make out specific details. Her door stood wide open, the upstairs hallway slightly brighter, lit by the moonlight coming through the uncovered picture window. That was odd, because normally she couldn't sleep if the door was open.

Somehow, it didn't cross her mind that Alfie's presence was an odd occurrence, and she got out of bed to close the door.

Putting her hand on the wooden edge of the door, Claire attempted to close it quietly, and nearly succeeded, before someone suddenly shoved it open, forcing their way into the room.

Jumping back, Claire squinted, trying to figure out who it was.

"Dean?... What the hell? Get out of my room."

"You wanted the car, though." Dean answered.

"I said I don't want Bobby's car."

Dean shrugged, "Well, somebody wanted a car."
A woman's voice came from the bed behind her, "But it's a Lexus."

Claire looked at her mother, disgusted. "Everybody needs to just get the fuck out, right now, I'm not messing around here."

"You're making a big thing out of nothing, Claire. Everything I've done for you, you can't help me?" Amelia asked.

Claire shook her head, backing away, "You don't deserve anything from me..."

Dean was suddenly standing directly behind her, and she bumped into him, turning to round him quickly as she tried to get to the door, but he threw an arm around her waist, stopping her.

"DAD!" Claire yelled.

"We've been over this, Claire." Amelia said, as Dean started to move closer to the bed, pulling Claire along.

Claire struggled and clawed at the arm that held her, continuing to call for Cas, until she managed to turn enough to face Dean directly.

But it wasn't Dean anymore. It was Mr Bartlett, her mother's landlord, and he suddenly had a tight, painful grip in her hair.

"Cash, grass, or ass, goldilocks. Nobody rides for free." Mr Bartlett said with a grin.

Panicked, Claire gave a hard shove against him, and was suddenly falling toward the bed, the last place she wanted to be, as she felt several grasping hands taking hold of her legs and lower body.

Claire hit the floor hard, and immediately began kicking out of the blankets that had tangled around her even before she sat up.

Vaguely, she heard quick footsteps coming closer, and the door swung open.

Claire, shaking hard, looked up from the floor, stricken with fear despite the fact that it was only Cas in the doorway, barely awake himself. "Are you all right?"

"I'm fine." Claire tried to respond, but hardly any sound came, "Just shut the door."

"You fell?"

"Shut the damn door, dad!" Claire growled.

Cas quickly backed into the hallway, pulling the door shut with a clear click as it latched.

Claire curled into a fetal position in her place on the floor, and as the sound of Cas' door, further away, past his home office, quietly closed, her entire body was wracked with silent sobbing.

Cas waited anxiously in the car, checking the time regularly.

He had tried to get Claire to talk that morning, but it hadn't worked. He barely got a nod when he apologized for not knocking when opening her door in the middle of the night, and asking her to stay safe at school when dropping her off had only warranted an eye roll.

Even with her usual ten minute gap, she was late.
The notes, the gun, the bolt she'd had in her hand, Will coming up the front walk on prom night, and what she had said the previous evening all ran through his mind, until the door opened, and he quickly looked up.

"You're sure?" one of two girls nearby asked Claire as she got in.

"Yeah, pretty sure. Or I've been living with a stranger the last two years." Claire answered sarcastically, and shut the door roughly.

"New friends?" Cas asked.

"Bodyguards. This sucks, they might actually be cool to hang out with if it wasn't a have-to thing... Anyway, sorry, I would have been here sooner, but somebody had to fix her eyeliner."

Cas put the car in gear as Claire buckled her seat belt. "I know you're unhappy about it, but I'm very grateful you're taking steps to stay safe, and that these other kids are trying to help."

Claire nodded and shrank into her seat.

"Is there anything you want to discuss before we get to Dr Thompson's office?" Cas asked.

Claire shrugged.

"That's fine, I'm sure you'll open up once we leave... Seems to be the way you prefer to handle things."

"Actually, I think I can do this alone today." Claire answered quietly.

Cas' eyebrows went up, "Well, that's certainly encouraging."

"Kevin said he's leaving for Dallas after school tomorrow, for that thing Alfie's doing... He thought I'd want to go, but..."

"Is his mother going?"

"No. And I told him I wasn't up for it."

Cas took a deep breath, "I don't think I could have allowed it, even if you were."

Claire shot him an odd look. "Why?"

"Traveling nearly two hundred miles from home? By yourself, with an equally underaged boy, to see the boy you're dating, overnight? That's hardly appropriate. And in a large city, too. The crime rate isn't exactly appealing."

Claire shifted in her seat, "Okay, Dallas aside, it's Kevin. We're friends. Just friends. If I liked girls, you might have a problem with me having a friend sleep over, but you wouldn't stop me from going to the mall just because I could be making out in the dressing room."

"The distance from home and the size of the city are what I take the biggest issue with, but you called Kevin a creep the other day, so how can you be-"

"I flipped out on Kevin the same way I flipped out on Dean yesterday, and I've done the same thing with you and Alfie, so that's nothing."

Cas looked concerned, "What happened yesterday?"
"Nothing... I didn't yell, or hit, or throw stuff, he knew what was going on, backed off, and I left."

"But you had a nightmare last night?" Cas asked, "Dean didn't say anything to me about this, I'd like to know what happened."

"Do we have to do this right now?"

"He's your employer, Claire," Cas said, slightly irritated at her avoidance, "That's a position of authority, and you're a minor. You may not even recognize warning signs, plenty of grown women miss them, and I am supposed to be the one keeping you safe. Now, he told me when Alfie startled you, he called when you went off on Kevin, but this involves him directly, and he hasn't said a word. That's concerning."

Cas pulled into a parking spot, and shut off the car, waiting for Claire's response.

"He didn't do anything. I overreact. You know that." Claire gestured to the building, "You know what, Dean asked me to bring it up with the therapist, and we're here anyway. But it's probably a matter of time before I go spaz on him too."

Dr Thompson looked rattled when he opened the door. Cas looked up from his phone, not expecting to hear it open so soon.

"Cas, would you mind coming in here, please?"

Cas gave a quick nod and got to his feet, following him in.

Sitting down, Cas looked over to Claire, and had the immediate sense something was wrong. Her body language wasn't closed down at all, but he had seen that look on her face before, and her eyes were fixed on some unimportant point as she likely considered her next move. This, experience told him, was her usual point to start throwing things.

Cas was about to ask her if she was all right, but Dr Thompson didn't wait to sit down before he spoke. "Claire has just been telling me what cinched her decision to call you, two years ago. It's something she's ready for you to know about, but it's probably going to be hard to say, and hard to hear."

"I would hope Claire knows she can tell me anything." Cas replied.

Dr Thompson nodded, "Claire, go ahead, take as much time as you need."

Kevin sat in his usual assigned corner for whichever booth at whichever burger joint was available. The times, locations, and many other variables changed nearly every time they would go somewhere, but some things always stayed the same.

Margaret sat next to him, and Kelly and Reese took the other side of the table. Occasionally others would join them, but the four of them all seemed on the edge of several cliques, and had found that socially, they had easily formed their own group after the prom.

"Well, she's not going, and I have space to get Sandman back to town if that's in his game plan, but he's still on the fence and I might be coming back by myself."

Reese's attention abruptly flew to the door, and suddenly a gap appeared between Kelly and herself.
Kevin, half turned in his seat to lean against the wall, threw a glance over his shoulder. He recognized the young college student, who had been the varsity quarterback during their freshman year. He also happened to be Reese's brother.

He carefully adjusted the arm he already had on the table so the movement wouldn't be noticed after the inevitable approach.

Sure enough, Reese's brother caught sight of her and wandered over.

Reese quietly reached across the table and took Kevin's hand as her brother's suspicious eyes settled on Kelly, who quickly struck up a conversation about 'Cody,' a fictional person they'd settled on as a group some weeks prior while making plans for prom.

Claire wiped actual tears from her eyes as she spoke, curled in a tight ball in her chair, and Cas tried to listen, but even air seemed to burn in his lungs.

"...I thought... I thought they were joking, about making me do that, because they stopped talking when the Lexus commercial went off, but then she went out the next day and she came home with a webcam and a wax kit... so I called and I told you about the drugs, because I knew that was the only thing the cops would be able to prove." Claire said quietly, "I guess I was lucky she was too busy shooting up... The stuff was still on the kitchen counter when you got there."

Cas dragged his hand away from his face, "But it didn't get that far? She only planned it?"

Claire nodded, "So when Dean said yesterday that I should just have Bobby's old car... I don't know."

"Claire," Dr Thompson interjected, "You mentioned Dean recognized your reaction, and even said you were doing well not yelling or throwing things, did he say anything else?"

"Yeah, he said, um... he said he didn't want anything like that from me."

"Did it help any to hear that?"

Claire shrugged.

"There was something else... Cas, you still don't have a formal arrangement for Claire's custody, do you?"

Cas, everything about him screaming 'weary,' braced himself and shook his head. "No... But at her age, there doesn't seem to be much point."

Cas turned to look at Claire, who wasn't meeting anyone's eyes.

"Claire, would you be comfortable waiting outside for a few minutes?" Dr Thompson asked.

Nodding, but seemingly in a daze, Claire got shakily to her feet, and slipped out of the room before Dr Thompson could get up.

"Even an attempt to get custody would give you a paper trail in case her mother suddenly attempted to come back into her life. Right now, you have nothing, her mother could appear on your front porch tomorrow with a visitation order, and you'd be forced to comply with it, or risk being arrested. And if that happened, it would bolster her mother's side. Luckily we live in a small town, and I've got a golf buddy on the bench."
"How could she possibly force Claire to get into a car?" Cas asked.

"Considering what else she's forced, do you really want to risk putting that past her?" Dr Thompson asked, "Claire has had her body traded as currency, with no thought to her well-being, which, unfortunately, is having an effect on her relationships, and her thoughts on money. She's been living in fear of her mother coming back into her life, and rightfully so. Now, it may only be a piece of paper, but it's a piece of paper that could make a very big difference to Claire. Even if it's only something that helps her sleep better at night."

Cas rubbed his forehead with his hand, "I suppose that's preferable to whatever nightmare she had last night."

"I'm giving you my professional opinion on paper so you can take it over to the court house before they close. Judge Mitch Cavanagh is the guy you want. He may want to speak to Claire, but he's not going to be a fan of the wise-ass routine, so warn her to go with calm and quiet, facts only. Should take you all of an hour, tops... And anything your ex might have predating this will be laughed off in light of this one, with the trauma documented." Dr Thompson held out a piece of paper he'd pulled from the back of his clipboard.

"I can't believe you're going to do this," Margaret said with a smirk, "Think you'll live long enough to go get your B.F.F. back from Dallas?"

"Probably not."

"They sent her cousin to religion-camp when he came out... you know they have worse 'treatments' for girls, right?" Margaret asked, looking out the window as Kevin drove.

"Yeah, actually, I do know, that's why I asked if they actually said 'conversion therapy'... And it's sick, and it's why I'm going along with this." Kevin replied, slowing down to make a turn.

Margaret scoffed, "Like you'd have anything better to do than put the moves on a girl who isn't even into guys while trying to freak out her parents?"

Kevin shrugged, "Well, if you want me to get completely honest, I'd rather be putting the moves on you."

"How do I know you're not just saying that because you secretly like her, but there's no chance because of her horrible dick aversion?"

"I don't think I have a way to prove it to you, but it's true." Kevin answered.

Margaret went quiet. "Reese had an idea... I told her I was cool with it."

"Uh-oh. Do I want to know?" Kevin asked.

Margaret shrugged, "Well..."

"I still can't believe they care." Kevin muttered, "What was her idea, anyway? What am I supposed to be doing when this whole getting caught part happens?"

"Calm down, Kevin, it's-"
with this?"
"There's a line."
"Yeah?... I'm gonna get, shot, aren't I?"
Margaret shook her head, "Just go with it. And my folks already left for their weekend trip, so since I'm four houses down you have an escape plan. I'll leave the back door unlocked."
"And your neighbors won't call the cops when they see me busting into your house?"
Margaret shrugged. "If the cops show up, I'll tell them I heard a noise, I was scared, and too nervous to call them, so you came over to make sure I was okay, and they'll let you leave."
"If I'm not bleeding from Reese's dad's shotgun."
"He doesn't have a shotgun."
"That you know of."

Cas walked silently beside Claire as they made their way out of the court house, a thick stack of printed papers tucked under his arm.

Aside from whatever had been said privately to Judge Cavanagh, Claire had barely said a word since leaving Dr Thompson's office.

In the parking lot, Claire seemed to be on autopilot as she moved for the passenger side of the car, but before she could open the door, Cas stepped in front of her and pulled her into a tight hug. His footing didn't match with hers, and to keep his balance, he settled himself back against the car as her tears began to flow freely.

"It's okay." Cas said softly, "But if there's anything else, it might be best to just get it out now, if you can."

"When she called... I didn't hang up right away." Claire answered through her quiet sobbing, "She said she wanted me to come back, and tried to say something about some movie producer her boyfriend knows, but I figured she really meant..."

Cas shook his head and squeezed tighter, "I am so glad you're smarter than that."

"I hate her."

"Me too."

Chapter End Notes

(A/N: Omg, you reviewers are kind, and generous with your words. Kind of blasted through a couple new chapters, so I'm going to go ahead and upload another very soon... These notes are at the bottom, because I figure not everyone is as into dream interpretation as I am, so I'm going to spell out a couple of things.
In Claire's dream, the bedroom is an allegory for her body/physical contact, however (!) the nightmares and ptsd related nightmares and flashbacks that take place in the same location you actually sleep in are the most horrifying because you question yourself as you're waking up [unfortunate enough to have had this experience].

Alfie is doing what he always does, no big deal, so doesn't cross her mind to tell him to leave, because his unobtrusive, gentle, and mild contact is welcomed, and she trusts him. His back is to her because his attention is focused elsewhere, Dallas, and the screen is off because she hasn't seen the picture he's been keeping from her.

With Dean, she's surprised and mildly uncomfortable, but not at all afraid to tell him to leave because she expects him to respect her boundaries. This is why she gets angry with her mother right away, she associates her mother with harm, and shuts down, kicking everyone out, the way she pushes everyone away when she's having an episode.

Fairly obvious, but not just literal, also figurative, she calls for Cas because she knows he will step in and end the unwanted contact, because he (unknowingly) did before.

Whether Cas heard her call, or just her landing on the floor, and whether or not she actually vocalized her call out to him, or whether it was psychic intention that got through, I'll leave that up to the individual reader, as with a few sequences that are coming up, which I'll point out when we get to them.

Thanks for reading! Love you guys! FW)
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, I don't want to give anything away, some of this surprised me, but I was very happy with it.

But maybe brace yourselves.

Much love to you all! Thanks for reading! FW)

'Shit, man, I'm sorry. Good thing about the papers tho' Dean sent back in reply.

Cas turned off the screen quickly and put his phone away, taking another handful of popcorn from the bowl on the center seat of the sofa between himself and Claire.

"Dumb bitch just lets her kid run around D.C. with a total stranger. Great parenting... Guy could be some kind of pervert." Claire muttered.

Cas had thought The Day the Earth Stood Still would be a safe play, and now briefly wondered if anything else would have been better. Bambi crossed his mind, but only for a moment.

"I know you're right about this being convincing, because, let's face it, nobody would plan to get caught like this, but it's still weird." Kevin whispered.

"Yeah," Reese agreed, "But I really appreciate the help."

Their heads toward the foot of her bed, Kevin put one of his feet up on the shelf of her headboard, trying to get comfortable.

"I'm bored." Reese muttered, taking a look at the clock in the dim light of her desk lamp.

"I would be, if this wasn't so damn weird." he replied.

Reese scoffed, "What do you have to complain about?"

"Um, you're not my girlfriend, you don't even like guys, and your boobs are on me. I mean, this would be totally hot, if you weren't both totally into someone else and had a complete lack of interest in my entire gender, and I'm a hundred percent outgunned here, because it's not fair there's a hot babe half naked on me, and if I so much as look, that makes me a douchebag because it's not a sex thing."

Kevin answered, "And I'm not even sure that came out right, and I know Margaret was like, 'yeah, it's fine,' but what if later she isn't fine with it?"

"Then I can snuggle her topless, too, and we'll be even."

Kevin shook his head, "You can get topless around her and I won't care, because she'd be as into you as you are into me, but, I don't know how I'd feel about her getting topless with you. So do me a solid, and keep off my girlfriend."
The room went quiet.

"I have eyeliner in my pocket." Reese stated plainly.

"Knock yourself out." Kevin said, "What time does your mom check on you?"

"Eleven forty-three, almost down to the second."

"Is she going to scream?"

"Probably."

Margaret jumped when she heard the back door slam, and ran to the kitchen.

Kevin stood with his back to the door, doubled over, hands on his thighs, trying to catch his breath. His hair was a wreck, his shirt missing, and his eyes rimmed in kohl. "Holy fucking shit... That was insane..."

"Shotgun?"

Kevin shrugged, still breathing hard. "I don't know... Maybe?"

Margaret adjusted the clip loosely holding her reddish brown curls to the back of her head. "Where's your shirt?"

Kevin stood upright, glancing toward the window nearest Reese's house, "Oops."

Margaret started to smirk and moved closer, reaching for him, "My big brave hero... I like the eyeliner, I'll have to ask Reese later what color it is and get you some."

Kevin moved past her slightly, his hands automatically finding her waist, "No, nononono, don't do this right now, okay?"

"What?"

"Don't get all, y'know, close like that, I feel gross. Just spent like five minutes, and, look, I gotta go wash off the lesbian-boob."

"What?" Margaret asked, cracking up with a laughter that made her shake violently, "You're getting grossed out by breasts?"

"No!" Kevin replied, seemingly turning it over in his own mind, "It's just gross because I didn't want those breasts when there's other breasts I'd rather be hanging out with, and those breasts didn't want me either. It's weird. Forced boobage, Margaret. You could be a little more sensitive, you know."

Kevin hightailed it to the bathroom, closing himself in, and running the sink.

When the door finally swung open, Margaret was standing in the hall, trying hard to keep her composure. She held out a hooded sweatshirt to him. "It's the only one I've got that's big enough for you."

Kevin quickly slipped into it, not bothering to zip it up, "Yeah, well, you know I love rainbows and kitties..."

"Yeah, I know. They're badass." Margaret answered, "So, if you need to hide out, I promise not to
hit on you until you're okay with it."

"See, that is exactly what makes you the best."

Cas glanced at Claire, who had fallen asleep during the movie.

He had strongly considered slipping out and taking Dean up on the offer of a beer and a chat in order to wind down from the day, but decided to pass. It was late, and he wanted to be available in case she had another nightmare.

He picked up the bowl of popcorn and pulled the throw blanket she had over her down to cover her feet, and quietly moved about the downstairs, locking the doors and turning off lights.

Kevin slowly came around. Everything around him was the best combination of warm and soft, and there was a sweet scent close by. One soft fingertip was delicately tracing his earlobe.

Unfortunately, he'd fallen asleep in his jeans, and his body was unhappy with the constraint.

Unthinking, he pulled whatever pillow he had his arm over closer, pressing firmly against it, trying to provide some counter pressure so he could continue to sleep.

"Woah... Um, hi." Margaret's voice made his eyes pop open.

She was on her side, facing him, and with the thin fabric of her pajamas, there was no fooling himself that she hadn't noticed.

"Crap," Kevin muttered, backing up, "Sorry. Really, that wasn't, um, I wasn't trying to... you know."

Margaret started to giggle, and inched closer, "Where are you going?"

"Well, I was going out to buy you some roses and write 'Sorry I poked you with my boner' on the card, but if you're into that, I guess I don't have to." Kevin pulled his phone out to check the time.

"I think I could get into that, eventually." Margaret replied, "So are you past your lesbian boob trauma from last night?"

Kevin put his phone away, taking a quick glance at her chest, "Yeah, I think I'm past it."

"Do you want to make sure?"

Kevin grimaced, "Dammit, don't do this to me right now, I have to walk home and get my backpack, and that is the last thing that's gonna help."

"So you want me to keep my shirt on?"

Kevin struggled to find an answer for her question, but her giggling was the most adorable thing he had ever heard, and he was quickly losing his grasp.

"You know we've only got an hour before school, right? And I still have to get home, and you... you are so damn hot it hurts."

A sly look that nearly made him choke on his tongue erased the giggling, and turned his bones, well, most of them, to jelly. "Because I'm making things hard for you?"
"Fuck it," Kevin declared, "I give up."

Kevin rolled toward her, planting his elbows into the bed on either side of her shoulders, and kissed her gently, increasing in intensity as she wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

He kept his hips raised and well away from her, which he found to be no easy task as he fought his instincts.

Finding his hand at the hem of her shirt, even as distracted as he was, the advice he'd gone looking for came to mind, and he was determined to make use of it. Making his way to her ear, his voice a breathy whisper, he asked her, "I *really* want to touch you... Is that okay?"

Margaret shuddered at the feel of Kevin's hot breath against her ear, and the tone of his words certainly added to what she was feeling.

"Yeah," her voice came out somewhere between a squeak and a moan, "That's okay."

Kevin continued to kiss her neck as he slipped his hand up the inside of her pajama shirt, moving slowly, and coming to a close over her soft flesh, causing her to let out a quiet gasp, "Jeez, your hand's really warm."

"Too warm?" Kevin asked, moving back to her mouth.

She shook her head against him as she closed her eyes to his kiss, and he relaxed a little, letting his thumb make a gentle, experimental stroke over her nipple, bringing about a moan in the back of her throat, when suddenly he felt her hand on his stomach between the open sides of the hoodie, and moving lower, far too fast.

Kevin grasped her wrist, yanking it away, losing his balance, and in an effort not to land on her slight frame, wound up pinning her wrist to the bed as he quickly disengaged himself from her mouth and her shirt as she jerked and gave a wordless sound of protest.

"Sorry... I'm really sorry, I'm not..." Kevin risked a glance at her face only to find a very startled expression with a hint of worry, "...not trying to get rough or anything, just... that was too much for right now... I can't... I mean, we shouldn't go that fast, right?"

"I don't know. I mean, you don't want to?"

"Uh, I think it's pretty obvious I want to, that doesn't mean I should." Kevin replied.

Margaret twisted her wrist, which was still in his now loosened grasp, "Well, I want to, too, but not like..."

Kevin shook his head as he sat up, letting go of her, "You caught me off guard. It's not gonna be like that, I swear."

"Okay." Margaret answered without any hint of suspicion, "...I guess I better get ready for school."

"I'll swing by after I grab my car, so you don't have to walk." Kevin replied, getting up from the bed, "I mean, if you want."

Claire wasn't in the best mood, having woken with a stiff neck from her position on the couch, hurrying to get ready to leave, and having to run back inside after she was in the car to get her homework. She didn't try to come off as sullen, but couldn't expect anyone to think otherwise.
And her father kept trying to talk.

"This event in Dallas, how important is it?"

"I don't know."

"Well, it sounds like a big deal, if Kevin is just going all that way to be supportive."

Claire shrugged.

"Is this something you'd want to attend?"

"Not exactly."

Cas nodded. "We don't have plans for the weekend, I'm sure I could find something else to do nearby, if you want to go without having me hovering around."

"You can hover. I'm not going." Claire answered in a dry tone.

"Have you heard from him since he left?" Cas asked.

"No."

"Do you think you'll be on speaking terms when he gets back?" Cas continued after a clear lack of response from Claire, "If you've decided not to see him anymore, I'd like to know, in case he comes to the house. You could at least tell me that much."

"I haven't decided anything. But if he wanted to talk to me, he could call."

"What about what you want?"

"Doesn't matter." Claire muttered.

Cas pulled over abruptly enough to startle Claire, and turned in his seat to face her, "There are many answers to that question, but that was the only one that could be the wrong answer. Especially in this context."

"Why'd you stop the car?"

"Because this is important." Cas replied. "You were seeing him, you were happy, you had a disagreement. That's normal. But what you want to happen next, that matters, and it matters quite a bit. Whether you want to keep seeing him is entirely your decision, and there's no shame in it either way. But he's your coworker as well, and if there's any chance of a repeat of Will's behavior, I think Dean and I should both be aware of your choice. If you want him to stay away from you, that matters, and if you want to keep seeing him, that's something you should let him know."

Claire picked at a stuck spot of dirt under a fingernail that she'd missed, but didn't answer.

"If he shows up, do I let him in or throw him off the porch?" Cas asked, still watching her face.

Claire shrugged one shoulder, "Don't throw him off the porch... Just... I would want to talk to him, I just don't know if he'd want to talk to me."

"Dean said it was obvious that he likes you. Why wouldn't he want to talk to you?"

"...I shouldn't have called him that."
"So apologize for calling him that."

"I don't know if I can." Claire replied.

"Clearly, you regret it." Cas answered, "But how are you going to let go of that regret if you don't talk to him?"

Claire sat back and looked out her window. "He shouldn't date me, anyway. I'm a mess."

"Everyone on the planet is a mess. That's a given. People are never perfect, only more or less broken... But even the more broken ones deserve to be happy."

Kevin gave Cas a small wave as Claire got out of the car.

"Um..."

"What?" Kevin asked.

"Nice hoodie." Claire answered, "And eyeliner?... That's new."

Kevin nodded. "Yeah, I've decided to finally come out to my mom, and everyone else. I'm a Brony."

"Those aren't ponies, those are kittens."

"One thing at a time."

"And the makeup?"

"Reese put it on me, and I can't get it to wash off, but Margaret likes it, so, I guess it can stay." Kevin answered with a yawn.

"Long night?" Claire asked.

"You have no idea."

Saturday afternoon, Alfie had been in the gallery adjusting the settings on his screens to display the digital versions of his entries, and making certain the lights on the printed versions were at the best angles available to him. Naomi had been in and out, leaving at one point for a short meeting, and again later for a lunch date with a friend, but Alfie's nerves kept him fine-tuning his work repeatedly.

Now that the doors had opened, and the first guests were starting to arrive for the function, he couldn't help but feel trapped.

"Sandman!"

"Oh, thank god." Alfie muttered, looking around.

It took him a moment to spot Kevin as the crowd seemed to be growing, but Kevin had already found him.

"So, where's your aunt?"

"I have no idea," Alfie looked around somewhat anxiously, "She's around somewhere, but I'm supposed to stay close to my stuff and talk to people about it."
Kevin nodded, "Yeah, well, start talking. Pretend I just asked you something you expect these folks to ask."

Alfie pressed his lips together and gestured toward the small freestanding wall that displayed his work. "It usually takes between three days and three weeks, depending on the amount of detail."

"And how long have you been doing this?"

"I started about three years ago."

"Where did you get your inspiration for the one in the middle?"

"A stray dog in a park, actually."

"Are you still talking to Claire?"

Alfie turned sharply at the sudden question, "What?"

Kevin shrugged.

"I..."

Naomi suddenly appeared at Alfie's elbow with a less than pleasant look at Kevin. "Samandriel, this is Morris Covey, and Karen Mullingar."

The two people she'd brought with her looked and seemed exactly as stuffy as he had expected.

Kevin backed away when people came to speak with Alfie, and would return as they drifted off, helping create an illusion of constant interest, although after a few rounds, the display was garnering quite a bit of attention on it's own.

Alfie, in desperate need of a break, had asked Naomi to hold his tablet for him and went with Kevin to get some air and a soda.

"How is she?" Alfie asked, the moment they'd gotten away.

"What do you mean?"

"You brought her up pretty fast, is she doing okay? Will isn't bugging her?"

"Will doesn't want her back anymore-"

"That's good."

"He wants to murder her."

Kevin wished he'd found a better way to bring it up to moment Alfie's face reflected that he'd registered Kevin's words.

"What?"

"Yep. Don't worry, we're keeping her close at school, and her dad knows. Summer's coming, and he'll find something better to do."

"And she knows, right?"

"Dude, of course, she was the first one I told, and she told her dad." Kevin answered, "She's gonna
stay safe, you don't have to run back and protect her, she's got this better than you would."

Alfie seemed convinced, and nodded.

"She's grumpy. Like, more than usual, but that might be because of the whole murder thing." Kevin drained his glass, and turned back to Alfie, "So how's this competition work, anyway?"

Alfie ran a hand over his face, and shook his head.

"Okay, forget I asked. Ready?"

"Yeah..."

Going back into the fray, they made their way back to his display, only to find Naomi flipping through the gallery of his tablet, which was displayed on one of the large screens that should have been a static image of lit, melting candle.

Alfie couldn't get to the display in time, and the piece he'd done of Claire in the convertible came up on the screen. He was livid.

Pressing the power button on the large screen, he rounded on Naomi, snatching the tablet from her hands, as his own began to shake.

An elderly woman set her hand on his arm, "Are you Samandriel?"

"Yes."

"You have such a gift. And that last one was just beautiful."

"Yes she is, but thank you."

Alfie stepped closer to Naomi as the black screen seemed to signal guests away, "What were you doing?"

"The judges are already done, so I was getting you some free publicity." she answered coolly, before walking away.

It was after two in the morning by the time the three of them made it back to Naomi's high rise apartment.

After Alfie had shown a particularly exhausted Kevin the direction of the guest room, he came back to the large open living area.

Finally alone, Alfie approached her. "What the hell gives you the right?"

"The gay rumor? I didn't start it, you did, by sticking next to your little friend all night. But don't take it personally, it's good for your image."

"Going through my files, putting them on the screen in front of everyone? How do you not understand how... invasive that was? That stuff is personal, and private."

"It's beautiful, and it's art, and exactly what needed to be seen." Naomi argued, "You know your little emotional fit may be what got you the win."

Alfie stared after her as she made her way to her room. The entire time he'd been in Dallas had been
a rollercoaster of strange and boring, and when he thought his aunt couldn't get more controlling, impersonal, or unfeeling, she stepped it up.

He felt sick thinking about how many people had asked him about 'the girl in the car,' knowing that Claire may not have seen it yet herself.

Still roiling, but completely spent, he went back to the guest room, where Kevin had sprawled over most of the bed, not even awake enough to kick off his shoes. Alfie nudged him over to one side, stretching out, considering his options. Should he take it if there were a way to repay Naomi for her lack of tact, or let it go.

Claire had spent most of Friday afternoon searching through various versions of Unchained Melody, listening with a critical ear. She had narrowed it down to the last three possibilities, and she was fairly certain which artist had performed the one they had danced to at the prom.

Saturday, with a single ear bud in, she had listened to them on repeat as she worked on Bobby's car, having nothing else to do. Dean had left her in the garage to hang out with Ben a bit, but kept coming in to check on her, at one point bringing in his Impala and doing an oil change where the tools were all readily available.

Sunday morning, she removed the last two versions of the song that she'd ruled out from her iPod, and her phone started to ring.

Seeing Alfie's name, she braced herself, and answered.

"Hi, Alfie."

"Hey... um, so, I won."

"Congratulations, I'm sure you had the best stuff there." she meant it, but couldn't seem to put her heart into her answer, and it was noticeable.

"Listen, there was a mix-up, in the form of my aunt, and... the picture of you, in the car..."

"The one that's not done yet?"

"Well, it's basically done, but I didn't want to show you until it was in a frame, and some other stuff... Anyway, she... she was going through my tablet, and now a ton of people have seen it, and... I just feel really horrible about this, I should have showed you, deleted it, something, but this shouldn't have happened. I'm sorry."

Claire took a deep breath and tried to process what Alfie was telling her. "So... a bunch of people saw a picture of me in the car from prom?"

"Yeah... I'm so sorry, you didn't give permission for that, and it was never supposed to be seen at the gallery, and then all these people started asking about you, but... I let my aunt take my tablet and she started flipping through the gallery on this big tv, and it came up before I could get through the crowd."

Claire tried to push past her feelings, and remind herself he hadn't done this on purpose. "Sounds like your aunt is the one who owes me an apology, not you."

"Well, you'll never get one from her, because she doesn't care who she hurts."
Briefly, Claire's mind drew a parallel to her father's advice to apologize for her words before Alfie had left.

"Okay... But it's not that bad, right? I had clothes on... unless you drew something..."

"No. I wouldn't... It's just a really enhanced picture, nothing like that, I promise."

Claire was quiet, she could hear it in his voice that he was genuinely upset - a wreck, even - about the situation, and while she wanted to apologize for her own actions, she couldn't find a way to make the words come out.

"There's one more thing, um... Kevin said that Will... um..."

"I'm fine." Claire answered.

"Good." she could hear Alfie swallow hard, "I miss talking to you."

"Same." Claire admitted easily, "Kevin said you weren't sure if you were coming back, or moving there."

"Yeah, well, that's the truth... Trying to get some goals, I guess..."

Claire nearly flinched. It certainly confirmed that she hadn't imagined the hurt on his face when she had left the shop. "Right..."

"I gotta go. I'm really sorry, though, I know what she did was just, you know, awful, and... Well, just... everybody said you're beautiful, if that helps."

"I'm not sure it does. But yeah, I have to go, too." Claire replied, quickly taking any excuse she could to end the call.

Claire dug through the computer, looking for the records on the car that had been brought in while she'd been at school, but they seemed to be missing completely.

She pulled out her phone three different times to send Alfie a text, and ask him about it, but three times, she'd put it back in her pocket.

She slammed her hand down on the desk in frustration, surprising herself at the hollow sound of the desk echoing off the walls, far louder than she would have imagined.

Dean came through the dark hallway quickly, "What was that about?"

"Sorry... can't find the maintenance records." Claire replied.

"So you punch the desk?" Dean asked, "Well, don't worry about it, Alfie's supposed to be back in a couple days-"

"He's not coming back." Claire snapped, "I was a bitch to him, and I couldn't even apologize when he called yesterday. So, he's probably gone for good because I can't even tell him I screwed up."

Dean shifted, "You wanna run that by me again?"

Claire turned around, "I'm a horrible person who can't even be nice to the nicest guy in the damn universe. So now he's gone, because I'm a bitch."
"Alfie's staying in Dallas?"
Claire nodded.

"What is it you think you did?"

"Called him a loser, but with big words."

"But he called you?"

"Yeah, he won, because he's really good at that stuff, and his aunt showed everybody some picture of me, and he called to apologize, when I'm the one who should have been saying that I was sorry."
Claire was angry, but with her last words, her voice cracked.

Dean scratched his head, "C'mere," he motioned toward his office.

"I don't need a fucking hug." Claire snapped.

"Get your ass in here." Dean growled, moving to the small room ahead of her.

Claire glumly followed behind.

Dean picked up the frame that sat behind his office door and stood it on his desk, ripping the heavy brown paper off in one go. He passed it to Claire.

"Holy shit." Claire breathed.

Claire wouldn't have believed the girl in the picture was herself, but the pose and the car were too specific for it to be anyone else.

"You see it, right?" Dean asked, "Maybe try to talk it out before you decide you're done trying?"

Looking closely, she noticed a perfect reflection of the stars she had been looking at balanced in her eyes.

"Why did he leave this with you?" Claire asked quietly.

Dean shrugged, "I bought it as a gift for your dad. I know about that wall in his office, and all those pictures with the fake smiles, and when I saw this, I knew he'd want it... Just haven't found the right time to give it to him."

Dean shifted awkwardly, "Tell you what, how about you go give it to him for me, and think about calling the loser back, okay? I have to get back to work."

Claire nodded, but didn't look up.

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Cas was on the phone, and clicking through a schedule when Claire came up the stairs.

"I understand... No, obviously tater tots more than twice in the same week is going to have the cafeteria menu spontaneously burst into flames, so it'll be corrected and ready for distribution on Thursday... Did you get the charity auction flyers?... No, I didn't see that one..."

Claire waited in the doorway as Cas took a thick stack of paper from the printer and set it on the desk, examining the top page.
"Right, well, just send me what you do have, and I'll see what I can do... Yep... Okay."

Cas got off the phone and leaned back in his chair.

"Dad?"

Cas jumped, turning around quickly.

Claire stepped into the office, and passed the large frame to Cas, "Dean got this for you."

Cas looked over the picture in the frame with a reaction similar to what Claire's had been, then looked back to her, "This is from your prom?"

Claire nodded, "Alfie made it. Dean saw it while he was working on it and figured you'd want it."

Cas looked back to the picture, "I can see why. It's beautiful, and you look... genuinely happy."

Claire risked a glance at the wall full of photos. No... still creepy...

"Do you want to help me find a good place for it?" Cas asked.

Claire shook her head, "No, I need to go call Alfie back. But show me later?"

Cas nodded.

Claire wandered out to the porch and dropped into the swing. She sat with her phone in her hand, his number ready to dial, until the screen had turned itself off several times, unable to sort out what she'd say if he answered.

She pulled her iPod out of her pocket, and went to the list of the most played tracks. At the very top of the list was one that had a play count well over any other song. 'Unchained Melody - Marty Robbins.'

Claire took a picture of the screen with her phone, and sent it with the words 'Dean showed me the picture.'

A few seconds later, her phone began to ring.
Chapter 20

(A/N: Okay, I said I'd point this out... part of this is memory. The rest could be picked up from other items already hinted at in the story, coming together, totally mundane. Or not. I like the idea that it could go either way, isn't set in stone.

Anyway... There's a bit of gore, angst, there's Kevin dealing with this stuff from both sides, because poor guy is caught in the middle, and also, a lie comes out.

Thanks for reading! FW)

Dean swung the door open to find Cas on his front porch.

"Any chance you could give me a ride to the hospital?"

Dean nodded, somewhat surprised, "Sure... you okay?"

"I'm fine, but apparently Claire has crashed my car, so I got a call from the sheriff's department... I don't get it, she's not a bad driver, but looks like I'll have to replace her phone again, since she didn't call me herself."

"Is she okay?"

Cas shrugged, "The deputy who called said she needed to be picked up, so I don't think they'd say that if she weren't."

Dean called upstairs, "Ben, grab your shoes... Yeah, well, at least you can have her fix the car, right?"

Cas chuckled.

_Claire felt disoriented, and between bright lights and loud noises, waves of pain came and went._

_She found herself sitting on Dean’s front porch, her face wet, and a nearly empty bottle in her hand._

"You're gonna be okay, sweetheart. You're strong enough, even if you don't feel like you are. You'll get through this."

_Claire knew his voice immediately, and looked up, "Bobby?"_

"But you're safe now that you're with your daddy, right?" Bobby asked, looking out toward the gravel road that led to her house.

"Of course you can come over here any time you need to, if you don't feel safe when he's not home, you could even jump the fence and come through there," Bobby pointed at a bit of the yard that would have been a shorter route than the road, "But, you know, the best thing you could do would be talk with your dad about this, make sure he knows what's happening."
Claire grimaced, "I couldn't do it then. I mean, he knows now, but this isn't now... Is it?"

Bobby nodded in response, not to what she had just said, but to the answer she gave him a year before. "Well, maybe you will, maybe you won't. But I suppose if you can't, you might as well take it."

Claire turned to refuse the handgun she was sure he'd be holding out to her, to protest and say she would talk to her father instead, but in Bobby's weathered hand he held a small golden brown teddy bear with a red bow.

Claire took it gingerly, and looked up to Bobby's kind, fatherly face to thank him as, with the same motion she'd made with the handgun, she tucked it under her off-arm, inside her loose over shirt where it wouldn't be seen, but no words could come as tears began to fall.

Cas and Dean stood near the entrance of the waiting area as Ben found a chair, discussing how bad the damage to the car might be.

"Are either of you gentlemen Mr Novak?"

Cas looked up to find a woman with short brown hair and dark eyes looking at him. Instead of the scrubs he'd been expecting, however, she wore a brown law enforcement uniform. "Yes."

"I'm Sheriff Mills, I need to ask you a few questions about your daughter, and get this out of the way before the doctor comes to speak with you."

Cas nodded, "All right."

"We already ran her license, no issues there, any alcohol or drug use that you know of?"

Cas shook his head as the non-alcoholic beers came to mind, "No."

"Where was she headed tonight?"

"She went out to get take-out for dinner. She wanted junk food."

"And one of the other drivers, Will Latimer, did she know him?" Sheriff Mills asked, looking up from the notepad she was writing on.

"He's her ex boyfriend... She said the other day that he's been making some comments to his friends... I'm sorry, you said, one of the other drivers? There were more?" Cas asked.

Sheriff Mills put away the notepad, shooting a quick glance at Dean. "How much did they tell you on the phone?"

"That my daughter had been in an accident, and I needed to come down here to pick her up, and that if I couldn't get a ride to call back and they'd have a deputy bring me."

Sheriff Mills nodded, and spoke carefully. "I'm sorry, there's been a mistake... Mr Novak, it was a particularly bad accident. As far as I know currently, your daughter is still alive, and they're working on her now... The driver of the oncoming eighteen-wheeler is expected to live, and was not at fault, and we are looking into what happened with the young man that was in the white truck... There's more I'd like to say, but I can't... If you're the praying type, that's what I would be doing."

Dean caught Cas' shoulder as he reeled, "Hey..."
Cas choked on his words, "They didn't tell me..."

"With any luck, someone will be out to let you know how she's doing soon." Sheriff Mills replied, "There's a small multi-faith chapel at the end of the hall if you need it... I was just there, myself. I'm very sorry, and I hope she pulls through."

Cas nodded mutely, and Sheriff Mills walked away.

"Hey," Dean asked, turning to Cas, "You need to sit down?"

Cas started to nod, then shook his head in confusion, "I just... Praying sounds like a good idea, I don't know if I can... Um... if I don't stay here, though, if the doctor comes out..."

Dean squeezed Cas' shoulder hard, "Yeah... I know what you mean."

"Mr Novak?" Ben's voice suddenly came from right next to them, and from the look in his eyes, he'd heard all of it. "I can wait here for you, and tell the doctor where you went, so you can go pray."

At a complete loss for words, Cas wrapped an arm around Ben's shoulders, deeply touched by the child's offer.

"Novak?" turning round, a woman in scrubs with a clipboard was standing in the doorway.

"Yes?" Cas choked out.

"All of you, or...?"

"I'm Claire's father."

She nodded, "She's out of surgery, and I'm going to take you to her."

Cas let go of Ben and wandered blankly after her as Dean motioned Ben back to the chairs.

Moving through the long hallway, the nurse continued to speak, "You need to know, she's not awake yet. If she wakes up, she needs to stay calm and comfortable. She didn't take as much damage as we first thought, but what there was, was serious. She lost a lot of blood, it took us a while to find where she was bleeding, and we still can't be sure it's completely stopped."

"So," Cas took a breath, "She might need further surgeries?"

"She might wake up at any time. Or she might not. But if she gets through tonight, she'll be out of the woods... Do you understand what I'm telling you, Mr Novak?"

Cas swallowed hard, "That my daughter is at death's door, and you don't know what's going to happen?"

"We almost lost her on the table. If she wakes up while you're in there, I suggest you make sure you say anything she needs to hear."

Cas nodded, and she opened the door for him.

---

Claire was drifting. Everything felt blank, except that someone was holding her hand, and a lock of hair was stroked back from her face.

She wanted to sit up and look around, but just barely managed to crack one eye. The light was
awful. Did she have school today? Did she miss her alarm?

Bobby had been talking to her, but that might have been hours ago. Probably a memory or a dream. She should have asked about Alfie, since they worked together. Or Dean's wife, maybe Bobby knew her since they were both dead.

"Claire?" Cas' voice seemed to be coming from somewhere muffled by water. But she didn't think she was in water. Claire didn't go swimming. "Claire, can you hear me?"

Claire fought to open her eyes, barely catching a glimpse of Cas' face, but she was sure that with him there, she was safe, wherever she was.

Claire recalled looking down into the passenger side floor of the Honda, as everything slowed down. Her iPod had a crack through the screen where it had flown from the passenger seat and struck the dashboard, and like everything else, had been splattered with traces of red.

"Claire?... What does that mean?... Listen, with the papers now, I was thinking," Cas' voice was getting clearer, "Maybe I should call your mother..."

"No!" Claire answered in a whimper.

"She can't take you, and you don't have to see her, but..."

"Don't... she'll tell you..." Just for a few seconds, Claire could almost make sense of the room.

Cas continued to speak as Claire fought for consciousness, but while his voice was a comfort, she couldn't make out the words, or stop herself from speaking. "...tell you you're not really my dad..."

Cas buried his face in his free hand for a moment, determined that this was not the time for the reaction he had to stifle. "I am, Claire. There was a DNA test, and even if... Well, I don't care, I'd keep you anyway."

Cas wasn't sure she'd heard him, but she mumbled again, and drifted off.

Dean looked up to find Kevin dropping heavily into the seat across from him.

"Did Cas call you?"

"No... My mom is friends with Will's mom, she came down here to help make arrangements..." Kevin replied, trailing off, "Why are you here?"

"Claire was in a wreck."

Kevin shoved himself shakily to his feet and started to pace.

"What arrangements?" Dean asked firmly.

Glancing at Ben, wondering how much he'd understand, Kevin shrugged pointedly.

Dean pulled a few bills from his wallet and sent Ben to the vending machines.

Kevin watched Ben walk off, before turning back to Dean, and asking in a broken voice, "She's alive, right?"

"Yeah, for now."
Kevin nodded. "Will's not... And he did this on purpose... Um... Samandriel was gonna be back Saturday... he already got his new bike, I'm gonna call him."

"Make it sound minor so he gets here in one piece." Dean warned.

Alfie had managed to avoid being seen snagging a bottle from Naomi's kitchen, and stretched out on an overpriced outdoor lounger on her balcony, only to have her pop her head through the door a moment later as he was about to open it.

Naomi didn't seem to care that he held a large bottle of what was clearly alcohol. "I'm going out, so you're on your own for dinner tonight. Don't wait up."

As Naomi closed the balcony door, he briefly considered tossing the whole bottle over the rail, but the possibility of it striking someone on the street stopped him.

Alfie set the bottle down in plain sight, almost in frustration.

He'd been sitting for about ten minutes, studying the lights from the surrounding buildings and the street below, when his phone began to ring.

"Kevin... What's up?"

"Dude, um... Claire knows you're coming back, right?" Kevin asked in a broken tone.

"Yeah. We talked for a really long time the other day, stuff is good, now, and she knows I'm headed back Saturday morning."

"Uh... Okay... How about sooner?"

"I guess I could, is everything okay?"

"Uh... no."

Alfie ruffled his hair with his fingers. "What's going on?"

"She was driving her dad's car, I don't know for sure, but looks like Will hit it with his truck... He's... He didn't make it."

Alfie nodded, but couldn't get his mind to form words.

"... You there?..." Kevin sounded as though he were walking outdoors.

"Yeah... Claire? Um..."

"Yeah, yeah, no, I just saw Dean, her dad's with her, but, you know, she's probably not going to want to talk about it just yet. Who knows if her phone is still working, even. But since Will's two knuckle-dragging pork chokers were telling me what was up, I'm going to go snitch on the whole shebang right now."

"But she's okay?"

"Uh... far as I can tell you."
his shoulder to check for any word from Cas.

The door of the waiting room swung open and Cas stepped inside. Dean only realized he'd gotten to his feet when he was hit with discomfort in his legs from having sat for so long.

Cas looked beaten down but hopeful. "She said a few things, but... I don't know. I'm staying tonight, but I don't want to keep you."

Dean nodded and grasped Cas' shoulder, "Yeah, okay. Ben's got school tomorrow, but if anything changes, either way, you call me, okay? I'll drop everything, I mean that."

"Who... I mean, if you're here, who handles the crash site?"

Dean shrugged, "The county handles this one, they're going to have to pick everything apart, log evidence..."

"Evidence?"

Dean took a deep breath, "Will didn't make it... And Kevin's been doing the bodyguard routine, so when he found out Claire was in the same wreck, he called Alfie to get him back here, then he said he was going to walk over to the Sheriff's office, and he left."

"Will's dead?"

Dean looked away, "Kevin said his mom was helping Will's mother make the arrangements, he had no idea Claire was involved."

Cas seemed to be in a deepening state of shock as he nodded, "Um... I need to get back to her, but... Any idea what 'Chain Melanie' means? I couldn't find anything clear online, but she said it twice."

"Yeah, that's... um, she was humming Unchained Melody for a few days. Kind of funny, it stopped when Alfie decided he wasn't moving to Dallas." Dean answered.

Cas nodded, and attempted a worried smile, "That's adorable."

"Yeah... I told Kevin not to tell Alfie how bad it was, but let's face it, he's probably going to be here in the morning."

Cas tapped gently on the door, and opened it slowly.

A tall, heavy, middle aged woman with a high toned, quiet but gritty southern accent was adjusting Claire's blankets. "There we go, sweetie... and your daddy's back."

Looking up across the bed, she smiled at Cas, "She's been asking for you. And her numbers are looking good, the bandages weren't too bad, but she's still nice and restful."

Cas nodded and sat down, reaching for her hand again. "I'm back..."

Claire's fingers gave a brief flutter of a curl as the nurse closed the door.

"...don't call her..."

"I won't." Cas answered. "Kevin called Alfie, looks like he'll be headed back sooner than we thought."
Cas watched her face for any reaction.

"Unfortunately the car was badly damaged... I'm not sure my CDs are going to be in any shape to play... Maybe it's a good thing that one fell behind your dresser."

Still nothing.

"When you're feeling better, I'll help you move the dresser, and we can listen to it, and you can find new ways to call me old."

Claire turned her head slightly, but didn't open her eyes.

Turning her hand over, Cas looked closely, searching for whatever trace of grime she might have missed last, but found none. Recalling the press on nails in the bridal shop, he looked closer at her fingernails, only to find faint traces of dried blood.

He could, regretfully, picture it. Claire, being brought in on a stretcher, torn to shreds from the accident, blood everywhere, the staff working fast to save her life, and still get her cleaned up before bringing him to her.

---

Kevin raised his head with a dark look when the door opened, and Sheriff Mills came inside, quickly taking a seat across the table from him in the small room, a large yellow pad of paper and a pen in hand.

"Okay, so your friend Claire is in the hospital, your buddy Will has just passed away in the same car accident, and you aren't home tweeting R.I.P.s for one, get-well-soons for the other, and making plans to have a big double vigil at the high school, because...?"

Kevin unlocked his phone, a message from Jim having been left on the screen, and passed it to her.

Sheriff Mills squinted and tried to make sense of it. "I'm sorry, despite this looking like English, I have no idea what this says."

"Okay, look, Will and Claire were dating."

"I have heard that, but it's a small town, not a huge surprise."

"Will treated her like shit, Claire ended it not too long ago. He started a rumor that she was starting rumors, and a bunch of idiots lost their minds. She was getting death threats, the high school can confirm that. He figured she'd had enough, thought she'd take him back if he gave her a chance, but by then she'd met somebody who wasn't a dipshit douche-canoe from shit creek with extra cakey paddles."

"You?"

"No. Just a really good guy that treats her right. Guess she figured out what she was missing... Took her knocking Will on his ass with a billion cameras around to get him to leave her alone, but he finally got the hint."

"At school?"

Kevin shook his head, "No, at her work. Anyway, Will starts acting weird, his cronies start freaking out, trying to get him to find anything else to do, then I get this phone call, right? Cronie said they were drinking, playing I Never, and it came out that he wanted to kill her... Then it was that he still..."
wanted to kill her, and he starts talking about ways he would do it. Rope, knife, gun, a brick... And... It got worse."

"How much worse?" Sheriff Mills asked, making a note.

"Sick worse. I mean, his friends are freaking out, couldn't tell me the rest, just said Will said whenever he did it, he was going to call her dad when he was done and tell him she cried the whole time." Kevin went silent, his expression uncharacteristically dark and heavy.

Sheriff Mills looked Kevin in the eye. "The kid is dead, you know? Not much this is going to do, except..." she shrugged.

Kevin nodded, "Hurt his family... I just want it out there if anything happens to Claire... If she dies, the guy who did it might already be dead, but that's still murder."

Sheriff Mills nodded thoughtfully, "And if she lives?"

Kevin shrugged, "I'll shut up."

Sheriff Mills took a long look at Kevin's face, "You've been carrying this around for a while...? Why didn't you tell someone, at the school, or here?"

"Because nobody believes teenagers. It's just high school drama, right? It'll blow over in a week, and quit being so damn angsty."

"You did tell someone. Who was it?"

"Exactly who I was supposed to. The school counselor." Kevin answered, "Supposed to be a spot to get help confidentially, y'know?... Now, because he ignored it, this kid I was in the same class with all through middle school is dead, I got to see my mom cry, which she hasn't done since my dad left ten years ago, and Claire... shit."

"Yeah... I got there right as they were getting her out of the car... To be honest, I thought she was gone. Or, I did until she tried to hit one of the paramedics."

Kevin gave her a level look, "You're really lucky, you know. If she wasn't so straight laced and looking for the upstanding citizen award, she'd be the biggest pain in your ass in the whole town."

---

*Claire found herself on the old leather couch in the front office of the shop. The room was dark, but the blinds of the window above her head were open, letting in slats of light from the yard lights. It was clearly the middle of the night.*

*Claire rose and made her way to the side of the desk, watching Alfie working, transfixed on his laptop. His eyes met hers with a shy smile that quickly turned into a larger, happier one, which she found infectious.*

*Just as she was about to speak to Alfie, she was startled by Bobby's loud voice in the hallway. He stood looking into Dean's office, which had the light on, as he spoke roughly.*

*"He'll be fine!" Bobby said, seemingly punctuating each word, "You're using him as an excuse, because you're scared."*  

*Bobby?" Claire came closer.*

*Bobby turned away from her, and walked quickly out to the garage.*
The doors to the first and third bays were open, it was pitch black outside, and the interior of the shop was brightly lit. The black Impala sat in the first bay, gleaming in the artificial lights, and Dean was working on it, completely ignoring them both. Claire would have assumed Dean was in his office, the way Bobby had been speaking.

Claire followed after him as he moved to the third bay, where his old green Chevelle sat. She noticed the second bay sat empty, the door of which had been bricked up, and in the middle of the new wall was a closed door. But as Bobby started to speak, she was distracted.

"Well... You did a good job, darlin', but the paint is still crap."

Claire wasn't sure he was speaking to her, as he hadn't seemed aware of her yet. Bobby turned to look at her directly.

"Um, okay... What color do you want?"

Bobby fixed her with a critical look, "What about what you want?"

Claire shrugged.

Bobby looked over his shoulder at Dean, then back to Claire, who was distracted by the door in the brick wall again. "Hey... Let Dean give you the car. It's Dean, he's not gonna hold it over you... And be good to Alfie, he's more of a mess than you know, but he'd let you walk all over him, and you know that ain't right."

Claire nodded in response to Bobby's gentle plead, trying to keep her focus from wandering to the door again. But it was too much for her, and she started walking toward it. Bobby caught her by the hand and pulled her back. "No... No, Claire, it's not your time yet."

Realizing the purpose of the door, she clung tightly to Bobby's hand as she was suddenly drawn hard toward it by some unseen force.

Claire gripped tightly, startling Cas, who had been on the verge of sleep in the odd industrial looking armchair next to the bed. "Claire?"

Cas turned to get a better look at her face, noting a couple of tears on her cheeks.

"Claire? Are you awake?"

"... can we go home?" her voice was weak and shaky, and her eyes didn't open.

"No, not right now."

"I wanna go home."

"I know." Cas replied, watching carefully as Claire began to come around.

"What happened?"

"You were in a car accident."

Claire slowly looked around the room. It was clear she was still out of it, and possibly unsure she was even awake, herself. "I was never going to tell you. But I said it, didn't I?"

"Said what? You said several things. A minute ago you were talking about Bobby."
Claire looked away, "Nevermind, you would have remembered this."

"That I'm not really your father?" Cas asked, "Only one person would say that, and I can't think of a reason you'd actually believe her."

Claire went unnervingly still. "She would know, right?"

"We can discuss it later. You need to rest."

Claire's face fell, "I was never going to tell you."

"Why?"

Claire looked as though she wanted to shrug, but was too drugged to move well. "I didn't want to hurt you."

Cas nodded. "There is a fireproof box in the back of the closet in my office. Inside is a copy your birth certificate and the DNA test that the hospital required before they'd list me on it. Of course, you send away for that, so it was provisional, if the test came back negative or inconclusive, I would have been able to remove myself from it, easily, but even then, I had already made my decision."

Claire gave him a long, sleepy, and very confused look. "So... you already knew I wasn't your kid?"

"Claire, she lied to you. But I was going to claim you as my child anyway. She was fairly certain you weren't, when she was pregnant, so it was actually something a of a surprise when it came back positive... Maybe she used her copy to light a crack pipe and forgot what it said."

Cas wasn't exactly sure what he was hearing, but Claire started shaking slightly, a few tears coming to her eyes.

"I'm sure it's a relief to you, but you really should calm down, you have stitches."

"My mother's a crack-ho." Claire replied with a chuckle. "You could have gone on trash TV with this."

"Are you really laughing about this?"

"You know what she said?... She said I had to come back because you weren't my dad and I was just using you the same as she did for child support." Claire's giggling calmed, "She tried to make me feel guilty. All the shit she did, she put me through, and she..."

Cas squeezed her hand, and carefully glanced at his watch. It was only a few more hours until dawn. "You need to get back to sleep."

"I wasn't going to tell you... I thought you were happy about being a dad, so if I could just be a good kid it would even things out. But when she said it, I still felt bad about it... the whole time."

Cas shook his head, "You shouldn't. You didn't ask to be born, and you certainly don't get to choose your parents."

"I kinda did, though, I picked you over mom."

"Claire, you really do need to rest."

"I still have my arms and legs, right?"
Cas nodded, "They said you lost a lot of blood, they had to give you quite a bit, but mostly you're still in one piece."

"It was everywhere... I think."

Cas frowned, "Try not to think about it."

"I know I saw Will's truck behind me..." Claire was getting paler.

"Try to sleep, I'm sure you'll have some folks checking in on you in a few hours."
Chapter 21

One year prior

Claire slammed the phone down into the base on the kitchen counter and unplugged the cable that ran to the wall. She was shaking hard, and felt as though she would never get enough air to catch her breath.

She hurried down the front steps and onto the gravel road wondering what Cas' reaction would be should her mother manage to get a message through to him. She was afraid.

Claire found herself staring at the highway before she had noticed how far she'd gone from the gate. Vaguely she recalled seeing their neighbor sitting on his porch, his folding table out, spread with newspaper, several brushes, and an array of firearms, always with one in several pieces. That was nothing new.

Making her way to the mailboxes, she noticed a brown box was keeping the second box from closing, and after collecting a sale ad and water bill for her own address, pulled the brown cardboard container free.

Claire picked her way carefully across the muddy yard from the gravel road, and stopped at the bottom of the steps. "Mr Singer?"

"Usually it's just 'Bobby.'" the man replied, still focused on his task.

"Okay," Claire replied, "You had a box wedging open your mailbox door, and it's supposed to rain more, later."

Bobby waved her closer, and she came up the steps, holding the box out to him as he wiped his hands on a rag. He moved to take it, and noticed her hand was shaking.

"What's got you all rattled?" Bobby asked.

"Nothing." Claire answered a little too firmly.

"I may've been born at night, but it wasn't last night." Bobby replied, "You got problems with your old man?"

Claire shook her head, trying not to stare as she eyed the guns. "No, my mom... I haven't seen her in a long time, but I think she might try to get me to come back."

Bobby gestured to the second chair as Claire started to shake harder. She sat down slowly.

"She knock you around?"

Claire shook her head. "She let somebody... um..."

"So you're better off without her." Bobby replied, "Whatever it was."

Claire nodded. "It's just, she called a little while ago, and my dad had to run in to town, and he's not back yet... Is it okay if I wait with you?"

"That's what front porches are for, ain't it?"
Claire nodded, still distracted by the many pieces on the table.

"I take it you haven't seen many of these before, or not up close." Bobby said, gesturing to a couple of guns he'd already cleaned.

"No." Claire answered.

"Well, they don't go off on their own, you know, so you don't have to be scared of them just sitting there."

"Guns don't scare me." Claire answered.

Bobby shrugged. "Well, something does... You mind grabbing me a beer? The cooler's right next to you."

Claire opened her eyes, and was sure she was still dreaming. It would be a good dream, too, because Alfie was sitting next to the hospital bed, in heavy black boots, snug fitting black jeans, a thin white cotton tshirt, and a padded, armored motorcycle jacket that hung open. He had a helmet in one hand, and white rubberized plastic dotted his black leather gloves. His hair was a damp mess, and she wanted to make it worse.

"Hey..." his usual soft smile graced his face, "Your dad just went to get some coffee, he'll be right back."

"I missed you." Claire replied, her voice rough from sleep.

"Same." he answered. "But, actually, I thought about what you said, and... Well, it's not college, but I think I picked up a few goals."

With a knock, a nurse came in with a small cart. "Okay, sweetie, as long as your dad's out, I thought it would be a good time to get your bandages changed."

"Bandages?" Claire asked nervously.

"Oh, I was hoping you'd remember, but I suppose you were still pretty sedated. That's okay... You got torn up a bit along your left side, and on your arm, right here." the nurse shifted Claire's sleeve and elbow to show her the tape and gauze, making her flinch and pull away, "I'm sorry, sweetie, did that hurt?"

Claire shifted away from her, her words quiet and beginning to run together, "No, just, I want some space right now."

"Um, I can wait in the hall, if you want." Alfie suggested softly, only to be met with a look of fear from Claire, "Or, uh..."

"If you sit down on the floor, you won't see anything." the nurse spoke up, turning then to Claire, "You know you can have whoever you want with you, right? Or we can wait for your dad."

Claire shook her head, as Alfie slipped out of the chair, stretching his legs out alongside the bed, "Uh, are we good?"

Claire let the nurse help her roll to her side, and opened the back of the gown. Looking down over the edge of the bed, she watched as Alfie grabbed the tip of the middle finger of his glove with his teeth and pulled his hand free, tossing it into the helmet before offering her his hand.
"We're good... Did you come back early for me?" Claire asked.

"Well, Kevin missed me, but, you know, when your girlfriend is in the hospital..."

"My girlfriend's never been in the hospital." Claire replied.

"Well, I have, but I wasn't your girlfriend then." Alfie replied with a grin.

Cas was about to head back upstairs when his phone began to ring. The screen displayed the information for the elementary school, reminding him he'd forgotten to call in.

He pressed the screen and held the phone up to his ear.

"Cassie! Did I run you off, or you abandon your post?"

"Gabriel... my daughter was in a car accident last night, I won't be in today or tomorrow."

"You have a kid? I thought you were, y'know... living up to those old rumors?"

Cas rolled his eyes, and wondered if there was a possibility of a repeat of Uri's attitude, "Not that it's any business of yours, but yes, I've been out publicly for several years. I also happen to be the father of a very smart, sweet young lady who nearly died last night, so if you're about done...?"

"Woah, sorry. Not trying to pry. You at the County General, or did they have to move her?"

"...County General." Cas admitted reluctantly.

"Okay. You don't worry about work, I'm going to tell everyone not to call you, you just do what you need to and take care of your little munchkin. We'll hold down the fort until you get back."

"Thank you, Gabe."

"She doesn't have a peanut allergy, does she?"

"What? No." Cas replied, puzzled, "Why?"

"No reason. Take care, now."

Cas heard the phone click as Gabe hung up, and put his phone away just as he spotted Dean and Kevin coming through the main entrance.

The door shut with a click as Alfie dragged himself back up into the chair.

"So, now I'm all scarred up like Frankenstein's monster, I guess. I can't really see most of it." Claire said quietly.

"At least you were in a cage, probably safer that way."

"Cage?"

"You had a car around you, you didn't... well..." Alfie looked somewhat embarrassed, "I shredded my last jacket, and a good chunk of skin, too. From what I heard, you mostly just got sliced into, and that leaves a different kind of scar."

"What kind do you have?" Claire asked.
"Well, I've got a deep cut on my leg, but mostly it was road rash. Pretty shallow, but basically the pavement tore a lot of my skin off." Alfie said, standing up and taking off his jacket.

The simple white undershirt fit his narrow frame perfectly, and he turned his back to her, reaching over his shoulders and pulling at the shirt, gathering the fabric into a bunch at the base of his neck, baring the skin of his back.

"See? Sort of turned me into hamburger." Alfie said softly.

His skin was a mixture of two distinct types of pale, some areas slightly pink, two textures as well. It formed a pattern, wide and rounded around his right shoulder, narrowing as it reached his waist, but continuing past his belt, into his jeans. His left side had less damage, but was still marred.

Without thinking, possibly because of the painkillers in her I.V., Claire reached out and dragged her fingertips gently over an edge. "Kind of looks like a wing."

Alfie gave a tiny flinch at her touch, and chuckled. "That's what Kevin said. Of course he also said I should get wings tattooed over it, but... I don't think I will."

Claire leaned back into the pillow as he turned around, unable to avoid a glance at his stomach as he moved before his shirt fell into place.

"What would you get? For a tattoo, I mean."

"Um... probably a butterfly, actually."

Claire started to giggle.

"What?" Alfie asked softly, "It's about transformation, and metamorphosis."

"Or you're a sorority chick who had too much Kahlua."

Alfie smiled, "So, you'd make fun of it if I got a butterfly."

Claire attempted to straighten her face, and almost managed it.

"Okay." Alfie replied, "Then I'll just get it somewhere you won't see it."

Claire gave him a sly look, "So you wouldn't take your clothes off if I asked you to?"

Alfie shrugged, "Inside my lip, maybe. Or on my scalp and let the hair grow back."

"That's not a no." Claire smirked, "But what's the point if you can't see it?"

"I'd know it was there." Alfie replied, pulling his buzzing phone from his discarded jacket pocket.

"Naomi," he answered, reaching for Claire's hand with the one that wasn't holding the phone to his ear, and leaning back in the chair, "Of course I'm still considering moving. I was just looking at a high rise underwater condo in rural Montana. It's got a great view of the pyramids. What do you think?"

Claire gave his hand a squeeze as his eyebrows went up, and he held the phone a little further from his ear. Claire could pick out a few choice phrases.

"Yeah, well I'm not on drugs, and my girlfriend's in the hospital... No. No, I'm not driving back out there tonight." Alfie rolled his eyes, "So take them out of the frames and burn them. I can print them
again later... Yeah, actually, she is...

The door cracked open and Cas came in looking worse for wear, sparking a twinge of guilt in Claire's heart. Dean and Kevin followed in after him, Kevin setting down a vase of flowers on the counter as he went.

"No, you can't talk to her... No. She doesn't speak English... Because she's a supermodel from Norway... Okay, fine, she's in a coma." Alfie dropped Claire's hand and waved Kevin over, hurriedly.

"Please tell me that's not your parents." Kevin muttered.

Alfie mouthed Naomi's name, and Kevin snatched the phone from his hand.

"Heeeey, Aunt Gnomey. How is, uh, I don't know, all of those people you introduced us to?... No, I'm not his Norwegian supermodel coma girlfriend. But Dean's here, you want to talk to Dean?"

Dean, who'd just settled into an uncomfortable looking chair, gave a look of irritation.

"How does she know Dean?" Claire asked quietly.

"When I wrecked she showed up at the hospital, and so did he. My family didn't believe me when I said I had gotten a job at a car repair place, and when she got here, and Dean shows up, introduced himself as my boss, she flipped. Then, later, she tried to hit on him, and... Well, she's not used to getting told no, about anything." Alfie explained.

Kevin had put Dean on, and he sat with the phone to his ear. "No, she's not from Norway... She's not a waitress, I don't know why you'd think that... Well, that's not a very nice assumption to make about waitresses, they work hard... Yeah, well, she's a good kid, college plans, straight a's, I don't know... Yeah, I've seen it... Basically, yeah."

Cas sat down on the foot of the bed, being careful of Claire's feet. "I'm sorry I wasn't here, how are you feeling?"

"Kinda loopy." Claire answered.

"That's the morphine. They're taking the dose down a little at a time." Cas said.

"Yeah, we heard he won. Heard the pipes on the bike, too, when he came into town. Said you bought it for him..." Dean nodded, "Yeah, not sure how that seemed like a good idea to you."

Kevin wandered over to the window, and the door opened once more. An older man with white hair, a white coat, and a clipboard in his hands entered the room. He hadn't knocked.

"Ms Novak? And one of these fellows is your father?" the doctor asked.

Claire pointed at Cas as Dean hurried to get off the phone, glancing at the door.

"Well, congratulations on staying alive last night, to be honest, I wasn't sure you would. But with all that blood everywhere, we just decided to throw a bucket under the table and run tests on it later." Claire looked unnerved at the obvious joke.

Dean ended the call, and got up to pass Alfie his phone as the doctor continued speaking.

"Good news, though, no drugs in your system at the time of the accident, your test for HIV was negative, and you're not pregnant. Long term, you will have some scarring around your left ovary,
and in your left breast, you'll want to talk to your gynecologist about that." the doctor stopped flipping through the chart as he came to the end of his words, and looked up.

Claire was hiding her face in her hand, and Cas had fixed him with a hard stare.

"Now, about the injury to your arm, wh-"

"Go back outside, hand my daughter's chart to someone who's actually heard of HIPAA, and don't come back." Cas cut him off.

"Sir, please, if she can't be an adult about this-"

Dean, still standing, pointed to the door, "You heard the guy."

The room was silent as the doctor left, and Cas turned around only to find the edges of Claire's face visible around her hand an obvious shade of red.

"Chill, Claire," Kevin spoke up from across the room, "Nobody thought you were on drugs anyway. But congrats on not being knocked up."

"Okay," Dean said firmly, gesturing mostly towards the three teens, "That, um... that never happened. Kevin, aren't you supposed to be at school?"

"Nah, my mom called me in," he replied, moving closer, "Because of this, and the other thing."

Dean nodded. "Okay. Alfie, I'm not liking this whole thing with your aunt, trade keys with me, I'm gonna take your bike to the shop and make sure it's fine, take my car, after Cas gets a word with a different doctor, give him a ride back so he can get whatever he needs at his place, then come get your bike. Kevin... just... I don't know, make yourself useful."

Kevin, staring pointedly at Claire in an attempt to get a smile, slowly raised his arms around Dean to hug him.

"Don't do that." his arms fell, "Cas, Claire, anything we can get done for you guys?"

Claire shook her head, and Cas, who had been through the wringer by this point, barely gave an answer.

Dean nodded and pulled his car keys from his pocket, handing them to Alfie with his phone. Alfie passed him the keys to the motorcycle and Dean turned to walk out.

"Hey, Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"Helmet."

With a hint of irritation, Dean accepted the helmet, and left.

"Dad, I'm fine. You're a mess. Go home."

Cas shrugged, "After that insensitive clod, I'm not sure how I feel about leaving you here by yourself."

"It's okay, I'm sure there's something around here someplace I can throw if he comes back."
"I'll stay." Kevin said, looking up from his phone.

"Besides, the nurse said I can kick anybody out. So I'm kicking you out. And anyway, I'm bored as hell," Claire whined, "So grab me a book or something."

Cas had dark circles under his eyes, and clearly wanted sleep. He nodded, relenting. "All right."

A short time after Cas followed Alfie out the door, making absolutely certain Claire had his cellphone number written down nearby, Kevin looked around the nearly empty room before letting his head tip back.

"So... how drugged up are you right now?"

Claire shook her head, "I have no idea. But I'm comfortable."

Kevin nodded, "You remember the accident at all?"

"I know there was a white truck behind me, then, I don't know what happened."

Kevin got onto the bed next to her, on the right, where she hadn't had much damage. "It was Will's truck."

"How do you know?"

"I got here last night with my mom, and had no idea you were here until I go to park my ass in the waiting room, and I look up and there's Dean. And since Ben was right next to him, I'm thinking, maybe Sandman, but he was still in Dallas. Anyway, Mrs Latimer was freaking out, Will's dad was in New Jersey for work, and my mom came down to help her make calls and stuff... Like picking a funeral home."

Claire's breathing picked up a strange rhythm. "His truck... It's a really heavy truck. That should've flattened my dad's car... How the hell is he the one who died instead of me?"

"Um... Yeah, after I called Sandman, I went straight to the Sheriff's office to spill my guts. So, this lady hears me out, says there's nobody to press charges on, and asks me not to make it worse for his family by pointing out that he wanted you dead. But she had this... this big semi had a dashcam, it was weird... So the Sheriff lady shows me this, and the front of Will's truck kinda goes pushing the back of your car, and then turns, trying to push you at the semi, but you sped up, it only clipped your back corner, and because you didn't turn hard, you didn't spin out, you just kept going more straight, she said you dragged along the trailer. Will was at a bad angle, though, and basically went right in front of the semi after you sped up."

"Who else knows?"

"That he's dead? Everybody."

"I mean, you told my dad and Alfie, right? And Dean, last night?"

Kevin nodded.

"Why didn't anyone tell me?" Claire asked.

"Because they don't know how you're going to take it." Kevin replied, "They don't want to stress out transfusion-girl and bring on another round of blood loss, or worse, hear that you're relieved that he's gone, because that would change how they think of you... Now, me, I spent the most time around
you guys when you were dating, so I know what's coming. And I know you'd feel weird about it in front of Samandriel, but he's gonna be back as fast as possible, so this was the best chance I have to help you get it out of the way."

"What is it you think is coming?"

"Claire, you were dating him, on and off, for almost half a year... He'd treat you like shit, and you'd get back together. He'd get with somebody else, and everyone knew, and you'd get back together. I mean, you still snuck out with him after he hit you... Fuck, if you weren't trying to make it work, I don't know. It was stupid, and thank God you moved on eventually, but at some point, you liked him."

"Yeah, but I don't anymore."

"I know." Kevin answered, shifting to put his arm around her shoulders.

"Treating me like shit, and expecting me to stick around like that... trying to kill me..."

"Sounds like you're almost at that point nobody wants to see."

"If he left me alone, he'd still be alive." Claire said quietly, "Or, I guess technically if I was still seeing-"

"No. Not that one. Don't do that one."

"Well, it's true, isn't it?"

"He tried to murder you. It came back on him. This is not on you, I swear. I mean, serious, we almost wound up with both of you dead, do you know how bad that would be?"

Claire wasn't registering her emotions as clearly as she normally would have, but tears came, unbidden. "Shit... I cannot believe this crap, the bastard only died because he tried to kill me."

"It's okay."

"I didn't do anything to him."

"Yeah, I know."

"But I didn't... You know, I didn't like, wish he was dead, or anything, not seriously."

"Hey, I played on the same soccer team when we were kids. The fact that he was an asshole doesn't change that was part of my life. Now, obviously, I'm not going to cry about it in front of you, but that doesn't mean I didn't cry about it at all."

Claire wiped at her eyes, "Don't you have somewhere else to be?"

"Nope." Kevin answered, resting his cheek on top of Claire's head.

Cas had gotten a quick shower, eaten a prepackaged salad, snagged a book from Claire's room for her, and had dug an old portable CD player out of a box in the garage. He was digging through his collection in the living room, looking for music she might like when he heard a car engine, and correctly assumed it was Dean.

With his own car a twisted, bloodied wreck in an official impound somewhere to be sorted for
evidence in the case of a death, he wasn't entirely certain how he'd get back to the hospital.

He was feeling better, even if he hadn't slept.

Dean knocked, and Cas moved to open the door for him. He had a smudge of grease on the outside of one wrist, a small bit of it graced the hip of his blue jeans, but if there was any on his black tshirt, it didn't show. He held a colorful bouquet of flowers and had a set of keys in his hand.

"Hey, I brought Bobby's old car over here, it's not perfect, but Claire's put a lot of hard work into it, and it'll get you back and forth just fine." Dean said, handing him the keys, and the flowers.

"Thank you, that's a big help. And I'm sure Claire will like these."

"Actually, um.. Those are for you." Dean replied, "See, I wanted to ask you out for a while, but somehow we keep winding up on one of the porches for a couple of hours, and... Anyway, I was thinking, a real date. After all this, when Claire's out of the hospital, and everything calms down... If you're up for that."

Cas, in his bewildered state of exhaustion, didn't hesitate enough to stammer. "But you're straight."

Dean chuckled, "No, actually, I'm not, um.. I'm bi. See, when my dad kicked me out and Bobby took me in, it wasn't a girl he caught me with in my room... And getting walked in on is why I had to leave the Army, too, before they repealed...

"Oh." Cas answered, not quite putting it all together, "Well, yeah, a real date sounds good."

"Well, I should let you get back to it, I'm sure you need to get Claire some stuff from home."

Cas nodded, and Dean slipped out the front door, closing it behind him.

He set the flowers down on the telephone table as he listened to Dean's footsteps going down the front steps. Finally, it clicked.

The door swung open just as Dean got to the gate, "Dean, wait!"

Cas came down the front steps as Dean turned and started back toward him.

"I am so sorry, I'm just very tired right now, but, yes, I would love to go out with you."

Dean gestured to the Chevelle in Cas' driveway, as he came closer, "You gonna be okay to drive if you're that tired?"

Cas nodded, "Yeah, I mean, well, I was surprised, too."

Dean gave a shrug and stepped closer, settling an arm around him, and giving him a tender kiss. "Go take care of your kid. I'll see you later."

Kevin snorted slightly and gave a small jerk when the door clicked closed, and Alfie, nearly silent, set a take-out bag on the counter next to the flowers.

"Hey." Kevin whispered, trying not to wake Claire, who'd fallen asleep again.

"Hey. Sleeping with some hot blonde, who's the hussy now?" Alfie chuckled quietly.

"You never had a problem with it before." Kevin replied, slowly working his arm out from behind
"How's she doing?" Alfie asked softly as Kevin carefully stood and came closer.

Kevin shrugged, "She's okay. I told her about Will, so, she knows."

"I remember seeing them around school. She always looked uncomfortable. Heard him call her something one time, but I kept walking... I was kicking myself for weeks for not saying anything, now I'm back at it, beating myself up for letting him get away with that." Alfie looked over his shoulder at her sleeping form as he handed Kevin a burger, "Her dad will get back soon, I think."

"What'd he call her?"

Alfie shrugged, "That doesn't really matter now, does it?"

"Don't hold out on me, man." Kevin prodded.

"I'm not..." Alfie shook his head, "I won't say it."

"Did it start with the words, 'just like every other lying tramp...'?"

Alfie looked up, "Were you there for that?"

"Nope. Got the play-by-play from the goons later, they thought he was some kind of badass."

"Why are you whispering?" Claire managed from the bed.

Alfie turned around, "So you could sleep."

Claire looked around, slightly dazed, "Is my dad back?"

"You kicked him out, now you want him back?" Kevin joked, "Make up your mind."
Chapter 22

Chapter Notes

(A/N: This was a fairly difficult chapter to write. There's some dark stuff, violent stuff, you're probably okay, but it gets into why Kevin is so hyper protective, who he tried to help, and who he couldn't save, and why his dad isn't around, but with this damage, he's a bit ahead of the curve in growth, compared to some other characters.

Now, as for the candy, this is kind of a two-fer.

Thanks for reading, this story is still developing, but I'm still a few chapters ahead of myself, which keeps me on track so I don't miss anything. You're all amazing! FW)

Cas finally had everything in hand and was about to leave when the house phone started to ring.

He set the bag down on the couch and went into the kitchen, picking up the cordless receiver. "Hello?"

"Cas?" he could hear a woman sniff loudly on the other end.

"Who's this? I don't recognize your number."

"Goddamn it, Castiel, you better tell me this crap I'm seeing online is wrong!"

Cas closed his eyes, "Amelia."

"These kids from her school are posting it on her old profile she's not using... Did she really get hit by a big rig? And her boyfriend died? ... I swear, I'll come down there myself."

"Don't you dare." Cas spat, "You're not coming near her."

"You can't keep me from my baby, Cas, I gave birth to her, nobody will ever love her more than I do!"

"Sorry, I don't have time for nonsense today. I'm hanging up." Cas replied.

"Wait! Is she alive? Just tell me that."

Cas heaved a sigh, "Yes... She's alive, and she's expected to stay that way."

"I wanna see her... She can keep living with you, but I wanna see her."

"Absolutely not."

"Fine," Amelia sniffled and blew her nose, "Fine, I'm just going to go to a judge and tell them you kidnapped her, and this is parental alienation."

"I already went to a judge. One that agreed with her therapist. The two of them said it was forced prostitution, you black-hearted bitch. And don't think she didn't tell me about what you were going to
"make her do on camera."

Amelia went silent.

"Obviously, I have no control over what you do, but should you step foot over the state line, I take it straight to the authorities, and press for the longest prison sentence possible."

"She's lying."

"Of course. She's faking it so well she's got her therapist convincing me to get emergency custody papers."

"She's not even your kid." Amelia whined.

Cas blinked, "You can't really have forgotten the DNA test."

"What DNA test?"

Cas rubbed his forehead, "It's a wonder you haven't perished from your own stupidity by now, though you've certainly made an effort."

"Look, I can be there in... uh..."

"Go ahead. The Sheriff's already taken an interest in Claire's accident, it wouldn't be difficult to throw this her way, but you should know I'll be right there to celebrate your incarceration."

Cas ended the call, and put the receiver on the base, dropping his elbows to the counter and burying his face in his hands.

Cas looked far worse than when he had left when he pushed open the door of Claire's hospital room.

Kevin was snoring softly, sideways in the large chair, with one leg hooked over the back of it. Alfie occupied one of the smaller plastic chairs, and was sketching something. An oversized candy bouquet sat on the rolling tray table.

Claire was leaning over a pillow to stare at whatever Alfie was creating on the white paper, but looked up when she heard the door. Her color had improved, but just by looking he could tell a recent dose of painkillers had just kicked in.

"Your new boss is nicer than Mr Garrison. He sent that thing instead of flowers." she slurred slightly.

"Gabe?"

Claire nodded, and waved him closer, "C'mere, you gotta see this."

Cas came close enough to peer over Alfie's shoulder.

The illustration was of Kevin, in the chair exactly as he slept, the only difference being his clothing. The pencil drawing, granted one of beautiful quality and detail, wore only women's lingerie. But taking it a step further, the lingerie sagged and bulged in the appropriate areas where such items would not be meant to conform to the male figure.

"That's... realistically disconcerting... Although it does bring to mind Rocky Horror."

Alfie chuckled and continued to work on his shading, as Cas turned his attention to Claire.
"Anything new while I was gone?"

"They want me to stay here tonight. And they let the morphine get really low so, that hurt a lot, but they said I should be on as little as possible."

Cas nodded in response.

Alfie stood and walked around the end of the bed, carefully taking his picture from the pad of paper, and slapped it down onto Kevin's chest with a firm hit from his hand before backing up and stretching, having been in the plastic chair for some time. He then moved to the window.

Kevin had jerked awake and slowly attempted to right himself. Once his eyes could focus well enough, he took a long look at the image on the paper, an amused and satisfied grin spreading across his still sleepy features.

"Right, well..." Cas looked at the two sides of the room, "Gentlemen, I appreciate your staying at Claire's side, but I really need a word with her."

Kevin gave Cas a firm pat on the back of the shoulder as he passed him, "Hey, I gotta go check on my mom, but, I'll be back. Drag him out of here?"

Cas nodded.

"You got it... C'mon, Sandman, I gotta see this bike."

Cas watched the door close quietly behind the two goofballs, and took a seat on the bed.

"Dean brought Bobby's car over for me to use for a bit. He said you've put a lot of work into it... That was interesting, because the whole drive back over here, I kept wondering what you'd fixed, and... Well, he said it still needs work, but I thought it drives pretty well."

"It was a piece of shit last week. You're lucky you have me around." Claire replied with amusement.

"I really am. You have no idea." Cas put the bag with the CDs, player, book, and hairbrush on the bed, "I have to tell you, there was a call on the house phone just before I left... It was your mother. Looks like some of your classmates were posting about the eighteen-wheeler... She wanted to know you were still alive."

"Tell me you lied." Claire deadpanned.

Cas pursed his lips.

"Dad, you had an out! You could've faked my death right there!" Claire whined.

"She made some legal threats, said she wanted to see you. I said no, and... I told her I knew." Cas shifted uncomfortably, "I'm not convinced she knows what kind of welcome you'd give her, or that she's smart enough not to come out here... I think we should discuss what to do if she does."

"Tire iron." Claire replied.

"Claire..."

"Dad, I can't think about it right now. I'm too tired to be that scared. If she comes out here... well, I already got one person killed."

"Don't say that."
"Yep. Killed my ex boyfriend."

"Claire, he caused an accident, the accident ended his life."

"It's not an accident if it happens on purpose!" Claire said loudly, "God, he didn't accidentally decide to murder me, or accidentally get his friends sending me death threats for weeks. And mom sure as hell didn't accide-..."

Claire's breathing seemed odd, and her face was slowly losing color.

"You need to calm down." Cas said quietly.

"I don't want her to come out here."

"I don't want that either. And I think with some careful planning, even if she did show up, you'd be safe."

Claire sank back into her pillows.

Cas patted the back of Claire's hand in an attempt to reassure her. He was about to make some suggestions, but there was a knock on the door. A male nurse brought in the small cart of bandage supplies, and Cas stood to get out of his way.

"Wait, where's Jenny?" Claire asked.

"Shift change, I'm Eli."

Even in her weakened state, Claire shot him a look that spelled out his impending doom.

"Claire," Cas said quietly, "If there's a problem, you really need to say so, nobody here knows there's something wrong unless you tell them. If you can't, I can tell them for you, but that still means speaking up."

Claire rolled her eyes, and turned to Eli. "A couple years ago I was raped. So, no offense, but you put a hand on me, I'm gonna snap it off and shove it up your ass."

Cas rubbed at the back of his neck, "That was a bit more than advocating for yourself, but I suppose you did get your point across."

Eli gave a sympathetic nod. "Okay, I'm going to go flag your file, and try to get a female nurse in here, but we are very short staffed today. Alternatively, whoever is going to help with your bandages after you're discharged could do it, but I would still need to be available to make sure it's done correctly."

Cas moved to the large chair as Eli quietly left the room. "Well, that brings up a good question. How are you going to manage when you get home? It's still going to be a few days before you can go without the bandages over the stitches, and considering your arm will be right over some of them, you may not want to."

"I'll figure it out." Claire replied.

"I was thinking maybe Charlie..."

"No... I'll just stand in front of a mirror or something."

"Claire, at some point."
"I have to stand up for myself? I'm doing that."

"At some point, you need to figure out who you can trust."

Ben was last to get on the bus leaving the school. The only seat left was directly across the aisle from where Jack sat with his backpack in his lap.

As the bus began to move, Ben pulled a Fantastic 4 comic from his backpack to busy himself. He didn't notice Jack trying to get a look at the page.

Ben looked up when he heard the zipper on Jack's backpack as he opened it, retrieving a Superman comic Ben had passed up, and hadn't been able to find again.

"Hey..." Ben said quietly, and waited for Jack to look up, "Is that one any good?"

Jack shrugged, "Um... yeah. But I read it a bunch of times, I need to get a new one."

Ben held up his comic, "I'm done with this one if you want to trade?"

Jack hesitated, but reached over to pass his comic to Ben.

Alfie walked in just as Claire went quiet.

"I'm sorry, there's no one else available. But it's been too long, you really do need the bandages changed... Are you comfortable with your father doing that for you?" the male nurse was asking.

Claire hadn't noticed Alfie was in the room. "I dunno, how familiar do you let your mom get with your tits?"

Alfie cleared his throat, causing Claire to stifle her bitter tone. He held up a burned CD. "I, um ... I was gonna make you a mix tape, but they were all out of cassettes at the antique store."

In spite of herself, Claire started to laugh.

"Are you a friend or a relative?" Eli asked.

"Girlfriend."

"She's your girlfriend?"

"Sure, yeah." Alfie replied.

"Okay..." Eli turned to Claire, "Are you comfortable with him helping with this?"

"Now, she's feeling really tired, maybe acting a little silly from the medicine, and I don't want you to get scared. Just think of it like she's got a flu she can't spread." Dean said, as they drove toward the hospital.

Ben didn't answer, choosing to keep staring out the window.

"You don't have to go in there, you know, I can take it for you. No big deal." Dean suggested, glancing at his son, looking for some hint of what was going through his mind.

Ben turned in the seat to face Dean. "She's awake, right?"
"Yeah. Well, most of the time. As long as her body is trying to put back the blood it lost, she still has to take naps, rest up and take it easy."

Ben nodded, "Well, can... When we get there, can you check if she's awake, first?"

Dean's heart wrenched, remembering Ben's startled voice on the phone that day, repeating that he couldn't get Lisa to wake up, and that she wasn't breathing.

"Yeah. Of course."

Kevin lifted his head from his notebook when Linda shook his shoulder firmly.

"MnYeah?"

"If you're that tired, go to bed. You won't learn anything by drooling on it." she said, stepping back into the hall, carrying her laundry basket toward the linen closet.

Kevin stood, still hazy with sleep and followed after her, "Is Samandriel still here?"

"No, he left two hours ago. Probably headed back to the hospital..." Linda shook her head.

Kevin checked his phone, "Yeah, well, his girlfriend almost died."

Linda shut the door of the linen closet a little too hard, making him jump.

"What the hell, mom?"

"Almost... She almost died, but she gets to live while Jane has to bury her son." Linda snapped.

Kevin looked away, his voice taking on a growl, "Yeah, well if he wasn't trying to kill her, he'd be fine."

"You don't know anything about it! Those other boys, they're liars. His mother told me he cared about her, and she got him killed."

"Mom... he cheated on her. He hit her. He made her walk miles in a cold rain because she wouldn't sleep with him. He was not a good person."

"Don't you dare take that tone with me." Linda replied, "Your friend is dead, my friend has to put her baby in the ground because of that girl and-

"My friend is in the hospital, mom! And the sick bastard that put her there got what he had coming!" Kevin yelled.

In all of a brief second his cheek began to sting, and in his sleep deprived state, he realized slowly that his mother had slapped him.

Linda was silent, but her tears began to fall as she avoided his eyes.

"Okay..." Kevin said softly, "You want to go that route, that's fine, but I don't have to stay here and take it."

Kevin spun around, heading back to his room, grabbing a gym bag from his closet and shoving clothes into it. Linda followed him in.
"Where do you think you're going?"

"Somewhere I don't have to see that look in your eyes when you think I might hit you back."

"Kevin-

"I'm not my father, you know. I've seen those pictures you keep in the attic, I know I look just like him, but I don't treat anyone that way, and I sure as hell don't throw pregnant women down a flight of stairs." Kevin set the bag down on his bed roughly as he gathered his backpack and school books, "But, I'm not you, either, I'm not gonna wait for it to get worse."

Kevin threw his backpack onto one shoulder, grabbing his bag, and started toward the doorway, but Linda didn't move.

"You remember that?"

"All of it... I was the one who called 911 when he left. I wore a blue suit at the baby's funeral because Aunt Molly couldn't find one in black small enough for me. She was my sister, and you didn't give her a name... Yeah, I remember. I was six, but I remember." Kevin answered, "But you're thinking about how your friend is hurting because she lost her kid, and you're not seeing that I'm watching my friend barely survive somebody who hurt her like he hurt you."

Linda stood frozen in place, to the point that Kevin wondered if she were even able to move at this point.

Kevin leaned in, wrapping his free arm around her tightly. "I still love you, mom."

In a sharp move, he turned them both quickly, reversing their positions, and darting downstairs.

Cas cracked the door, and spotting Alfie sitting in one of the chairs, proceeded into the room. Claire was sitting up, attempting to dismantle the candy bouquet as Alfie held it still.

"There's a bunch of the crispy rice ones... way to ruin good chocolate." Claire commented.

"Not your favorite?" Alfie asked, taking one.

"No, her favorite is anything with caramel in it. Haven't been able to keep any in the house in years." Cas said, crossing the room as he checked his phone. He took a seat next to the bed, "Looks like you might be able to get out of here tomorrow morning. Dean's on the way up with Ben."

"Poor kid would probably rather stay home." Claire muttered.

Cas shook his head slightly, "Actually, Ben asked to come see you."

Claire shrugged and continued to dig through the sugary treats.

Margaret wasn't entirely surprised to see Kevin's car at the curb when she got home from school, and him, sitting on the front steps, leaning against the railing.

She set her backpack down and moved to sit by him, but during her decent, he pulled her into his lap, burying his face in her shoulder, and wrapping his arms around her tightly.

"Everybody's saying Claire's in a coma."
"She's not in a coma." Kevin mumbled.

"But Will's dead?"

Kevin nodded against her.

"Somebody wrote on Claire's locker... I saw part of it before the custodian was done..." Margaret shrugged. "You know there's going to be a bunch of notes, maybe you should get her combo and get them out before she goes back."

"There's only like a week left anyway." Kevin answered, "Not sure she'll be in at all."

Margaret nodded, "What about you?"

"I'll be there tomorrow."

"Yeah? What about the bag in your car?" Margaret asked.

"I'm gonna chill with Sandman for a few days."

"Is he really taking it that bad?"

"No, my mom is."

Margaret looked concerned, "Did she kick you out?"

Kevin shook his head, "No, but she pretty much said it should've been Claire, not Will. And after all this crap we all went through trying to keep her safe, and he still..."

"Hey." Margaret shifted carefully, wrapping her arms around him, "We didn't fail. Every single day, from the minute her dad dropped her off, to her getting back in the car with him, at least one of us was by her side the whole time. Even when she tried to ditch Kelly. Nobody could've seen this coming, but at school, she was safe. We all did a great job."

Dean ducked his head in through the open doorway before motioning at Ben to head inside.

Ben approached slowly, but seeing Claire sitting up, wide awake, and munching on a candy bar, he relaxed. Claire patted the foot of the bed to invite him to take a seat among the organized chaos the bouquet had fallen into. Ben hopped up onto the bed as Dean shot Claire a quick smile, and started up a conversation with Cas.

Claire picked up a packet of peanut butter cups, offering them to Ben, who shook his head, and then gestured at the rest of the candy, "You should take some, otherwise I'm gonna eat it all and make myself sick."

Ben shrugged, and picked up one of the crunchy bars Claire had complained about, "Thanks..."

"You actually eat those?" Claire stifled a look of disgust.

"Yeah, but I don't like peanut butter and chocolate at the same time." Ben answered.

Claire raised her eyebrows, "Perfect. When Halloween rolls around, I can drive you into town and keep an eye on you while you trick or treat, and then we can split the loot."

She dumped the rest of the stack of crunchy chocolate in his lap.
"I can't trick or treat anymore, I'm ten now."

"No, the cut-off is twelve, thirteen if you're short. After that, you can only help with the younger kids. Too bad we didn't meet sooner, that's a bunch of candy we both missed out on."

Dean and Cas had gone somewhat quieter as they noticed the turn their children's conversation had taken, with a shared look, a quick smile, and a mundane change of subject.

Ben handed Claire a small black case with a triforce of power logo.

"You got some extra life points in here? I'm running low." Claire joked, opening the case. Inside was a 3DS, charger, and several games.

"I figured that since I can't use it right now, that you can borrow it, and then you don't have to be bored, either."

"Aw... thanks, Ben, that's really nice of you."

"Well, you let me borrow your games, so..."

"Still, I'm gonna trash your high score."

"Yeah, but I'll just say it's my high score. And maybe you can get me past some levels where I'm stuck."

Claire nodded in approval.

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"I'm sorry, this is awful." Margaret said, looking across the table at Alfie, "If I weren't completely creeped out by hospitals, I'd go see her. I'm gonna go see her when she's home, though."

"That'll be soon," Alfie answered, compulsively glancing through the window at the much taller building down the street, "Maybe even tomorrow."

"I heard she almost died."

"Yeah, from blood loss, but they topped her off." Kevin replied.

Margaret gave a confused tiny shake of her head.

Kevin shrugged, "I don't know, these mechanic people have me using car terms. And 'filled her up' didn't sound so good, especially after what the doctor did this morning. Came in and announced in front of her boss, her dad, and both of us that she wasn't pregnant."

"Well, that could have been worse. What if he had the wrong papers and said that she was?"

Margaret suggested.

"Then we'd be planning Sandman's funeral." Kevin replied, gesturing at Alfie.

Alfie chuckled and grabbed a few more fries from the combined pile in the middle of the tray.

Kevin raised one eyebrow, "Hold up... you have nothing to say to that?"

"Why would I have something to say about that?" Alfie asked blankly.

"Did you guys...?"
"None of your business." Alfie answered.

"You tell me everything else, even that time you hurt yourself getting off your bike."

Alfie gave an embarrassed smile, gesturing at Margaret, "And that was none of her business."

"Yeah, that was a bit much, Kev." Margaret agreed.

"All I said was he got hurt, I didn't say I ran over to his house to kiss it better." Kevin replied.

Alfie gave an exasperated sigh and started to blush as Margaret burst out laughing, "Gross! I'm done, I'm never kissing you again!"

"Yeah, I give that about five minutes." Kevin said sarcastically.

Leaving the restaurant, Alfie had given Kevin his house key, and was about start back toward the hospital when across the parking lot, someone got his attention.

"Hey, Alford! Get your pansy ass over here!"

Kevin, only a few steps closer to his car, and recognizing Jim's voice, was at Alfie's side immediately.

"What the hell was that?" Margaret asked quietly.

Jim started over, and Kevin passed Margaret his car keys, "Better safe than sorry, get in and lock the door."

Alfie passed her a large insulated take-out cup he was holding as well, moving to meet Jim.

"Sorry," he shrugged, "I left my pansy ass at home, just wore my regular white panties today. What's up?"

Chaz gave Jim a quick slap on the shoulder, "C'mon, this doesn't fix anything."

"No, he got involved, he had no business-"

"What's this about?" Kevin asked firmly.

Jim turned back to face them, "This shit head right here. You eighteen yet, Alford?"

"Not for a few more months."

"Well, I was hoping you'd get in deeper shit for this. But you had to go after Will's girl, huh? Rub it in his face at the junior prom, right? Like some dropout loser. He backed off for a bit to teach her a lesson, and you had no business getting with her in the first place. She used you to play him."

Alfie shrugged, "Okay, say that's true, that doesn't give him the right to try to kill her. She was done with him anyway, doesn't matter how he felt about that."

"Nobody else at school was stupid enough to go picking her up, because we knew they'd be back together after a while, but you had to butt in, and he lost it." Jim was getting louder, "This is your fault!"

Kevin stepped a little closer, "Will was a dick, and you were trying to keep him away from her yourself. Even when they were getting along, Will was an asshole. This has nothing to do with him."
“Bullshit! He didn't want to kill her until he found out she was seeing him!” Jim waved a hand toward Alfie.

"Do you hear yourself?" Kevin asked, "I mean, there's not thinking about what you're saying, and then there's talking out of your ass, like you're doing right now."

"Fuck you, Trannie-"

"He's not a 'tranny,' I can vouch." Alfie interjected with a patient smile.

"Last name play." Kevin quietly replied.

"Ah. Subtle." Alfie answered.

Chaz tried again to drag Jim away as Alfie and Kevin attempted to defuse the tense situation with banter, but this enraged Jim, who pushed Kevin to the side with his right hand, and landed a punch to Alfie's face with his left.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, fair warning... This is 23... 24 has graphic adult content of the fun variety. Warning you ahead of time. I will put in the description where to jump from in case you want to skip it, and purposefully ended the chapter with it to make it easy.

Claire may seem like her meds kick in too fast in this, but I was going off the way I reacted to tizanadine after a much, much more mild accident. That was a game of Uno I can't remember, and will never forget. Thankfully the child (my own) I cussed at in said stupor thought it was hilarious.

I had hit some writer's block, took a break, and made our rejects' 'dirt road' on Sims 3. Anybody want a tour? Thinking of making a quick YouTube video for it so you can get an approximate visual of what I see in my head. It was fun.

As always, your reviews are very encouraging, and keep me plugging away at my hardest, thank you for reading and sharing in this story with me. Love you guys! FW)

"Yeah, I think it stopped," Alfie said quietly from the back seat where he held several bloody napkins to his nose, his head tilted back, "Is her shake still cold?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it, but maybe you should wash up a bit before you take it to her." Kevin replied.

"Those guys are jerks. No wonder they were hanging out with him all the time." Margaret mused quietly. She passed Alfie the shake, and he started to get out of the car, where they'd parked close to the main entrance to the hospital.

"Well, I'll see you guys. Thanks for having my back, Kev."

"No problem. Thanks for vouching for my junk, I guess." Kevin answered, "I'll see you at home, honey."

Alfie chuckled as he got out of the car. He made his way upstairs to Claire's room, not at all surprised to find her talking quietly with Cas about the coming summer break.

He slipped into the room quietly, and took a seat, handing her the milkshake, "Strawberry, right?"

"What happened to you?" Claire asked in a slurred voice, far more groggy than the pained growling he'd heard when he left to meet Kevin and Margaret for dinner.

Alfie gave an embarrassed smile, "I walked into a door."

Claire gave a sleepy blink, "People are gonna think I hit you."

"No, you're right handed, and your whole left side is messed up, it couldn't be you."

Claire carefully took a sip as Cas checked his phone, "So, did Kevin...?"
"No. Just, don't worry about it, it was stupid."

"So it was Kevin."

"No."

"I'mma kick his ass." Claire replied.

Alfie chuckled, "It wasn't him. What did they put you on?"

"Some pills. Nor mor-morphine." she slurred.

Cas stood with a chuckle, "I'm going to go make a call, Charlie wants an update."

Cas got up and made for the hallway, pulling the door half way shut behind him.

Alfie leaned in to take Claire's hand in both of his own, finding it slightly cold, and flattening his own to it to warm it up, "Do you know if you're going back to school before they let out next next Wednesday?"

"I have no idea."

"Kevin and Margaret offered to clean out your locker for you."

"They're really nice... I wish I wasn't such a bitch to them, but it was just... days, and they were right there, all the time."

Alfie chuckled, "A little too much, huh?"

Claire answered with a nod.

He squeezed her hand gently, "I need to get home. Are you going to okay?"

"Jenny's back, so, yeah."

"Maybe I should come back in the morning."

Claire shrugged, "You don't have to."

"Call me if they don't let you out, okay? I'll come back."

"Then who's Dean gonna tell to get back in the chair?" Claire chuckled.

Alfie gestured to her side, "You don't really think he's going to let you back in the garage before those stitches come out, do you?"

Claire took a moment, her mind muddled by the painkillers, "Shit. This makes me the new 'jackass.'"

"No." Alfie laughed, "No, you heard him tell Naomi you had college plans, he respects that a lot. So, actually, you're basically done for the year and you have all summer to get back on your feet, couldn't have happened at a better time."

"Well, when the car fell on me, my dad said the next time to schedule it on the kitchen calendar, so..." Claire trailed off, resuming with an unhappy tone, "I have a lot more to do on the Chevelle."

"You've been working on the Chevelle?" Alfie asked, impressed.
"We ran out of repairs... My dad drove it back over here."

"Right, because his is-"

"Crunched up and super bloody, yeah." Claire replied, "Dean said I should have the car. But I want to fix it myself, so don't let him mess with it, okay?"

Alfie nodded in agreement, "What's your dad going to drive when you're back to normal?"

Claire shrugged.

Alfie glanced at the door and stood up, leaning over her to kiss her softly, teasing at her lips with his own before saying goodbye.

All the way back to his car, he could still taste her strawberry milkshake.

Dean pushed a pork chop out of the pan onto Ben's plate, and one onto his own before putting the pan back on the stove and sitting down.

"How'd school go?"

"Fine." Ben answered.

Dean nodded. He'd tried to get Ben to talk on the way home. "The teachers taking you seriously, now?"

Ben shrugged, "Jack traded me a comic on the bus."

Dean's eyebrows went up, "Why?"

"Because he already read it a bunch of times, and I was done with mine... Doesn't mean we're friends."

"Okay... Yeah, I know, trading baseball cards or whatever, I did that."

Ben was quiet again. Dean tried not to let it show, but the absolute lack of sound in the house bothered him. He'd learned, raising Ben, that the common assessment of a boy being a noise with dirt on it was mostly correct, and distrusted the silence.

He looked up from his plate to find Ben had stopped eating, and was clearly fighting back some kind of expression he didn't want Dean to see.

"Hey..." Dean said softly, "What's going on?"

"Is Claire really okay?"

"Would I lie about that?"

"No... But she was really white."

"She's not sick. She got hurt. The surgeons put her back together, and she's gotta heal, but she's gonna be okay."

Ben clearly was not convinced, and set his fork down, scratching at his forehead, but try as he might, he couldn't hide the tears. Dean slid his chair back, and motioned him over for a hug.
Alfie heard a splash before he'd even closed the door, the underwater lights casting ripples through the large, dark, empty living room from the wall that was more window than anything else. He continued into his room, quickly ditching everything but his phone, throwing on a swim suit, and headed for the back yard.

Setting his phone on the table by the door from previous experience, which had also involved Kevin, he got into the pool with far less fanfare.

"Kinda surprised you didn't bring Margaret over."

"Who says I didn't?" Kevin replied.

"Your face."

"Yeah, well, I never know when your uncle is gonna be here, I don't want to blow my chance with her."

Alfie smirked, "You know he was only joking, right?"

"Yeah, I don't think he was." Kevin answered.

"So, if he came through that door right now, what would you do?"

Kevin gave a weak splash, "Not a damn thing, I've got trunks on this time. Never doing that again."

Alfie started laughing, "Your mom is still asking, you know? Brought it up when she took me to the airport."

"God, talk about anything else, seriously."

"You're scarred for life."

Kevin shuddered, remembering the waiting room at the hospital, when he'd been looking at the street below, waiting on word about Alfie. Crowley had walked up next to him, commented on how he barely recognized him with clothes on, then asked, pointing to the window, if he was admiring the view. "I might be, yeah."

Alfie was quiet for a while, not intentionally ignoring his friend, but not paying him much mind either. "You know her dad knows her favorite candy?"

Kevin shrugged as he floated on the other side if the pool, "That surprises you?"

"My mom sent me a birthday card last week." Alfie said, somewhat amused, "All her astrology crap, and she forgot I'm a Virgo."

"I'd make a virgin joke, but seriously, she forgot what month she birthed you? That's harsh."

"That's stupid, but I don't know if I'd call it harsh." Alfie replied.

Kevin righted himself, pulling himself up onto the side of the pool, "Right, no, you heard harsh straight from the horse's mouth."

"What?"

"You know. Just like every other lying tramp, I'm gonna keep you around until-"
"Don't..."

"Shit, that really still bugs you?"

"It doesn't bug you?" Alfie asked.

"Hell yeah, but I've known her longer than you have." Kevin answered, "Okay, mental do-over, what would you do different?"

"What, then?"

"No, like, tomorrow. If that happened tomorrow. What would you do? Punch him? Tell him to go fuck himself? Or just get her out of there?"

Alfie considered it, "Tomorrow?"

"Yeah."

"Zombie asshole narcissist saying horrible things to my cornered girlfriend, after his friend punched me today? With that kind of, I don't know, beyond the grave possessive crap, I'd probably get all territorial just to push his buttons. And after the wreck, he'd have it coming."

"Territorial? You even capable of that?" Kevin asked skeptically.

Alfie shrugged, "You said mental do-over. I can be a badass in my own head."

"How badass?"

"Well, she was backed up to a wall, right?"

"I had not heard that, but I believe it."

"So, I guess, get in his way, start making out with her, and if there weren't a lot of people around maybe take it as far as she'd let me, totally about her, obviously, just to piss him off."

"I could totally see you doing that, except the whole treating a person like territory, thing." Kevin replied.

"Yeah, I know. But I could at least make myself available, if she wanted to, to mess with him."

"You'd hate every minute of it, too." Kevin laughed.

Alfie stretched out in the water, "You know, you were right. I really wish I'd listened to you the first time you told me to go talk to her."

"What?!... Dude I literally dared you to walk over to Claire and ask if she wanted to watch you su-"

"I just mean, I should have talked to her. I was a chicken, now look where we are..."

"And on that note, you're going to give me your Xbox, and the minute I get us some fake I.D.s, we're going to Vegas."

"So what's going on with your mom?" Alfie asked.

"Her best friend is burying her kid."

"Baby sister?"
"She thought I didn't remember."

"How could she think you'd forget?"

Claire leaned heavily against the wall in the bathroom, her left forearm on the towel rack, trying to get the gauze to stay in place. She had managed the lower areas well enough, in front of her hip, up her ribs, but one-handed and with most of her breast in the way, she was running out of energy.

Cas' voice came through the door, "Claire, if you're having trouble, you know you could put on a tank top, and I'll help you. Charlie said she's willing to help, or Dean can tell one of your friends how."

Claire wobbled slightly as the pills started to kick in, "Can you just not? Please? I can... ug..."

The door opened and Cas was met with a look he certainly didn't want to argue with. Unfortunately, parenting came first. "Did it work?"

"It's not taped, but it's not going anywhere, I'm just going to put on a snug shirt and it should stay."

"If it moves too much, you'll irritate the stitches."

"If you talk too much, you'll irritate me." Claire replied, starting for her room and missing a step.

Cas, right behind her, caught her elbows, careful of the bandage on her upper left arm that he'd applied himself.

"I got it."

"Sure, you do, and the earth is flat."

Entering Claire's room, she was getting more difficult to keep steady.

"All right, closet or bed?" Cas asked.

"Bed." Claire answered without hesitation.

Cas steered her toward the bed and made sure she was safely in it before looking to her nightstand.

"Still working on the same book?"

Claire gave a non-committal mumble, as the side effects began to take over.

"I didn't catch that." Cas replied.

"Nap."

Cas nodded, made certain that her phone, miraculously undamaged in the accident and sent over to the hospital at Sheriff Mills' request, was within her reach, before heading downstairs.

Alfie looked around the emptied area just outside the third bay, on the outside end of the building. "Might be a little weird not to have all the doors on one side."

"It'll make it easier for the crew to put the pit in bay five."

"But we're getting a lift, right?" Alfie asked, "If we've got a lift, we don't need a pit."
"So, you don't want an easy way to do an oil change and rotate tires at the same time?" Dean asked, with a hint of sarcasm.

"Got it." Alfie took another look at the markers on the ground, "So I get the part about keeping the shop open, but, how loud is it going to be while they're doing this?"

Dean shrugged, "It's a metal building, it's going to be right next to you, with an echo. Only thing we can do is ear plugs, over the ear muffs, and read the decibels to see if we need to wait somewhere else for a bit. Anybody needs to walk out for the worst of it, that's fine."

Alfie was about to ask something else, but his phone began to ring. Seeing Claire's number, he picked up. "Hello?"

Cas hurried down the stairs, half expecting Dean, or possibly Ben, instead finding Alfie as he opened the door.

"Hi... Claire just called and asked me to stop by."

"That's odd, I thought she was still asleep," Cas replied, "...It's because of that bandage, isn't it?"

"Um..." Alfie looked to be choosing his words carefully, "I helped with it in the hospital, when she didn't like the nurse. And I know how, since my own accident."

"My daughter is both injured and under chemical influence, and if anything untoward were to occur, it would bring only your own morals and ethics into question, do you understand that?"

"I... I understand that... absolutely. I also understand what it's like to feel helpless like that, I had to have somebody else change the bandage on my back for weeks. So... Uh..."

"So you have no interest in making her uncomfortable while she's vulnerable, and you're going to do your best to avoid that?"

"Exactly." Alfie answered sincerely.

"All right, then so am I." Cas stepped back, resigned, opening the door wider to let him in, "Upstairs to your left. Bandage stuff is on the bathroom counter, middle door on the other side. And leave her door open, I'll be downstairs."

Cas quickly walked off toward the kitchen to avoid any more awkward conversation as Alfie closed the door behind him and made for the staircase.

At the top of the stairs, just to the left, he cracked her door only an inch or two, "Claire?"

"Yeah?" Claire called back.

He cautiously pushed the door open a little further.

"That was fast."

"I was in the neighborhood."

Claire chuckled and shifted slightly in her place in her bed. "I just figured you were in a hurry."

Alfie shrugged as he went through the room to take a seat on the very edge of her bed, "Well, I do have to get back to work... How bad is it?" Claire rolled away from him, gingerly lifting the fabric at
the arm hole away from her bare stitches, "I really thought it would stay where it was, but I guess it really needs to be taped better."

"Ouch... Did you see how red this is?" Alfie asked.

The portion of exposed skin was one of those tricky areas, that while commonly exposed by most swim suits, would still be out of bounds for physical contact where most people were concerned. Black stitches would have been in sharp contrast with her pale skin, where it wasn't raw and sore, red, and inflamed, but for the intensive bruising.

"If I could see it, and reach it, it wouldn't be red." Claire replied with a hint of snark.

"Right. Okay, give me a minute." Alfie stood, and soon returned with a small basket of supplies he'd found exactly where Cas had described.

Alfie set the basket on the bed in front of him, and looked at the stitches again, "Um... I can't... I don't know if it's just torn up, or if it's getting infected... Where's your phone?"

"Why do you need my phone?"

"So I can take a picture of it so you have something to compare to, in case it gets worse."

Claire passed him her phone, and tried not to move as he took a quick, close picture before setting about the actual ointment and bandage.

"Kevin told me you don't take pictures of people." Claire said quietly, "He said it was weird that you took my picture in the car."

Alfie shrugged as he continued to work, "Well, usually, I don't. Not like portraits, anyway."

"I really liked that one."

Alfie nodded, trying to keep his smile from getting too wide, "Yeah, you did say that on the phone the other day."

"My dad liked it too. All my other pictures suck, or just look fierce. Not that I don't like looking like I can rip someone's head off, that's just not the right kind of picture my dad would want to put on the wall... but if you can do that, how come you don't?"

He shrugged, "I had one that didn't turn out so good. But I figured yours would be different, so, why not? Worst that could happen would be it would be horrible, and I'd say the file was corrupted."

Alfie smoothed the last edge of tape, and settled the edge of her shirt over it. "Okay, you're all set."

"Do you need anything else before I go?" Alfie asked, indicating the injuries lower on her torso.
"No, those I could reach. But thanks for helping me with this." Claire gave his hand a squeeze, "Honestly, most people make me uncomfortable."

Alfie nodded, "Well, you know, Dean has medical training, and Kevin had to help me for a while, so he knows how, too."

"Kevin, maybe, Dean, absolutely not."

"You'd rather have Kevin help you?... Is there something I don't know?" Alfie asked.

"Yeah, I'm allergic to old guys."

The playground of the elementary school bustled with children as Jack glanced around, looking for a fourth.

Repeatedly, his eyes settled on Ben, who was nearby, but the thought of calls home to his parents made him anxious.

Millie, standing next to him, however, didn't seem to mind, "Hey! Ben!"

Ben turned around, but seeing Jack, his expression immediately changed, "What?"

"You wanna play foursquare?"

Jack looked away, shifting uncomfortably.

Ben, having nothing better to do, shrugged, and started toward them. Jack tried to ignore the nagging feeling in the pit of his stomach.

Taking their places on the court, Nate started the game. Everything went smoothly for a short time, until Jack spotted Gabe walking toward them, albeit at a disinterested and generally observational pace.

Jack fumbled slightly, barely returning the ball to Millie, who rolled her eyes and passed it much too hard to Ben, striking him in the face.

Concerned with his own self interest, Jack turned to Ben, who was touching his swelling lip and checking his hand for blood, "You okay?"

Jack winced at a sudden adult voice behind him, "How's it going, guys?"

"I'm okay." Ben answered, "Millie got me with the ball, I don't think she meant to, though."

"Millie?" Gabe asked, looking at the girl who, although quite the tomboy, was easily dwarfed by the other children in her class.

"Yeah, I didn't mean to." Millie answered.

"That's puffing up pretty good, better go grab an ice pack from the nurse, Ben." Gabe said, waiting until he left to turn to Jack with a critical look behind his friendly smile.

"Um... I didn't say hi to him." Jack said quietly, "We were just in the same game."

With a nod Jack couldn't read, Gabe walked away.
"No.\) Dean answered, "You want to work on your own car on downtime when we have space, that's fine, but somebody else has to be in the garage with you, and you're on desk if anyone comes in."

"This is bullshit.\) Claire replied, standing close by in a tank top and jeans suitable for the overly warm weather.

"You're welcome to your opinion, orders stand.\) Dean replied from below the small pickup.

"For how long?\) Claire asked.

Dean shoved himself out from under the truck, and got to his feet. "You had sharp metal cut-well, shred, through muscle. Muscle that involves the use of your arm and your back. It takes two to four months for muscle to completely heal from surgery, planned surgery, with scalpels and shit, you know, straight lines, sterile equipment, more time if you're using it like you're not supposed to be doing."

"But the stitches are out."

"Closed isn't healed." Dean answered, sorting out a different set of wrenches from a drawer.

"I'm sick of getting treated like a weakling.\) Claire grumbled.

Dean, moving back to the truck, stopped directly in front of her, and lifted his left hand next to her right bicep, giving a single hard flick with his finger.

Claire grabbed at her arm with a glare, having felt far more pain than it should have warranted. "You're still sore from your tetanus shot. When that clears up and you can put your left arm above your head, you can get back in here."

Alfie looked up as she walked past the first bay where he was replacing a dead car battery, giving her a sympathetic smile which at least softened her frown.

"Oh, hey," Dean added, stopping her, "Any chance you can watch Ben tonight?"
"Nope. Going to the movies." Claire replied.

"How about you, Alfie?"

Claire rolled her eyes, "Who did you think I'd be going with?"

"Sorry." Alfie replied.

"Maybe my dad could watch him?" Claire offered.

Dean shrugged, "Nah, it um... seems like he puts up with Ben more than he should have to, anyway. You got any friends that babysit?"

"Kevin." Alfie replied.

"Kevin?" Dean raised his eyebrows. He'd been expecting Claire to reply, or at least to hear a feminine name.

"Yeah, Kevin watches these two little girls that live next door to him." Alfie replied, putting the connections to the posts, "Went to return this video game one time, and apparently I interrupted the tea party, and that only happened after they gave him a makeover."

Claire started to laugh, "Yeah, Emmy and Fifi, right?"

"Yeah, but the weird thing is, he really knows his stuff. I said I could make them some popcorn, and he tells me the little one is three, and you can't give them popcorn until they're four because they could inhale it and choke." Alfie shrugged.

"Seriously?" Claire asked from the opening of the hallway, "Sounds like he knows more than I do."

Dean looked back and forth between them as if waiting for a punchline. "Right... Okay, well, I don't guess I'm going to get any other recommendations?"

Alfie sat back down, and leaned in close to Claire as he passed her one of the boxes of candy, "What did I miss?"

"The sacred tree they used to make the paper of the book, they lost a few branches of it, so the morons think they can change the way it runs if they can add more pages to the book. But if they don't shut down the fountain in time, they'll be stuck forever."

With a nod, he settled back in his seat, only to find one of the arm rests had been pushed up while he was gone. Claire seemed to be absorbed in the movie, but with a smirk, he pulled her closer, wondering if he should ask another question to get her to whisper in his ear again, or if it would be pushing his luck.

"... But you'd still have to hide the time machine, or it would pop up somewhere in the past, and everyone would see it, which is why I think we never get to the point where we develop time travel, or when we do, we can only go forward and never backward past the point it's invented in our timeline."

"Yeah, but, in the movie-"

"Ben, dude, the movie thought we'd have flying skateboards that work on water in 2015... And it came out before I was born. Good movie, good with the basic idea, but if you want to get into
temporal paradox, you need some of the time traveling episodes of Star Trek 'Next Gen,' or some Doctor Who, because Spielberg was entertaining the masses, not pandering to the critical thinkers.” Kevin looked at Ben as the younger boy's face displayed his attempt at wrapping his mind around the conversation they were having. "Too many big words?"

"I watched Doctor Who with my mom. Sometimes my dad would watch with us."

"Yeah? What about Star Trek?"

Ben shrugged, "Mostly the Captain Kirk and Spock stuff, my dad thinks they're great."

"You don't?"

"It's kind of boring, there isn't a lot of jokes. I think I'll like it better when I'm older."

"How about something different? I know a good one we can find online."

"I don't know, I think you're right, what you said last week, the kids wouldn't care, I'm just not a hundred percent ready for the questions, you know?" Dean said softly.

"To be fair, I didn't say they wouldn't care,-"

"Oh, I know, I was hanging onto to your every word."

"I think I said... You know, I should be able to remember this." Cas replied with a sip of his drink.

"Yeah, well, you were staring at my neck the same way you'd been looking at that steak." Dean said with a laugh, "You said whether it worked or not, they'd be okay."

Cas shrugged, "I'm not sure that sounds like me. Are you putting words in my mouth?"

"Did you want me to put something else...?" Dean joked.

Cas laughed in a way that wasn't quite shy, and looked over to the other side of the building, past the bar, where the pool tables sat. "What if we both put that on the table as a wager, and settle it with three games of pool?"

Dean leaned back casually in his seat, and looked over to the pool tables himself, before giving Cas a level look that may have been intentionally a little too hot, "I'm up for that... But I gotta warn you, I'm a little rusty."

"Of course, that's why I said two out of three, to give you a fighting chance." Cas replied with a hint of teasing.

Leaving the theater, heading around the corner of the building, Alfie heard a rather loud whistle, and his stomach reacted with a feeling of dread.Keeping an arm around Claire's shoulders, he attempted to signal her to walk a little faster, but instead she turned to see where the sound had come from.

Alfie recognized Chaz and Jim easily, and a few recently graduated seniors from his own class hanging around the back of a green pickup with a lift kit.

"Don't worry about them." Alfie said quietly.

"I'm not." Claire replied.
Nearly reaching the Chevelle, Claire stopped dead in her tracks. Across the driver's side of the car, visible in the lights of the parking lot in white paint, were the words 'Cold Cunt Claire.'

"Shit." Alfie swore under his breath.

As Claire began to breathe again, she made straight for the trunk, popping it open and rummaging in the tools she'd purchased herself. She looked at the four-way with a hint of regret, and picked up the lever of the jack, brand new with shining black paint.

"Um... What's that for?" Alfie asked cautiously.

"They fuck up my car, I can fix it. But who's gonna fix their truck?"

"No-

"I'm done taking it. I don't deserve this, and I can end it right now."

"Until one of them tries to block you, and you get a charge of assault with a deadly weapon. That's not going to look good on a college application, even if you manage to get out of it." Alfie put one hand on top of the open trunk, and the other on the small of Claire's back, "I'll help you fix this, but if we stick around, we're just playing their game, and letting them make the rules."

From across the parking lot, a voice came, "Push her in, Alford!"

Alfie grabbed the jack lever from Claire, tossing it into the trunk, urging her back and slamming it shut. After a deep breath to keep him in perspective, he shed his reddish jacket and wrapped it around Claire's shoulders. "I have an idea."

Claire watched as he hopped up onto the trunk carefully. "What's that?"

"We make them play our game." Alfie offered her a hand up.

Half way through their second game, Dean looked up to find a familiar face watching them closely from the bar. As he stood, Cas passed close behind him, considering his next shot.

"Hm. Uri's here." Dean said quietly.

Cas nodded, turning his back toward the bar, "He's been staring for a while."

Dean looked around the quiet bar as someone broke at the next table. "We could give him something to stare at. Or I can go tell him I'm flattered, but I don't swing that way. Which do you think would piss him off more?"

"Lying's a sin, Dean." Cas deadpanned.

Dean turned to him, not expecting to hear that, but quickly got the joke, and soon they were both in a fit of laughter.

With a quick glance at the bar, realizing Uri had picked up his drink and was coming their way, Cas moved to take his turn as Dean stepped back from the table.

"Hey, Uri, how's it going?" Dean faked a friendly smile, rewarding himself with a quick glance at Cas' form.

"I have to admit, Mr Winchester, I didn't figure you for the type. But it's clear, now."
"What? That I've got a little rainbow glitter of my own to throw around?" Dean asked with a shrug.

Uri split a glare between both of them, "I hope you're both quite satisfied."

Dean started chuckling immediately, but Cas piped up as his second shot connected on the table, "That's riding on this game, actually."

Uri was clearly blocking them out to the best of his ability, and tried to continue to speak as Dean laughed harder, "The district decided not to renew my position, and now I have to move my family several states over to take a lesser contract."

Dean moved back to the table, as Cas had left only the eight ball, missing it when he'd taken the shot on the word 'position,' and Dean had given a yelp in his laughter.

"That's unfortunate, but hopefully you'll find some personal growth in this experience. And maybe next time, you won't leave a child bleeding in a chair while you send his attacker on his way with a pat on the head." Cas replied, meeting his eyes.

"It's unfortunate that I have to pick up the pieces after my life has been torn apart by the antics of a couple of dirt road rejects such as yourselves!" Uri raised his voice.

"Oops." Dean said, getting Cas' attention as the white ball rolled back from the corner pocket where it had tipped in the eight ball, and crossed the table, dropping into the opposite corner, directly in front of Dean's groin. Cas raised his eyes to Dean's, catching a quick wink.

Cas turned back to Uri as he set his cue on the rack on the wall, "Well, we're done here, but you have a pleasant evening, Uri."

Ben stared raptly at the screen while the credits began to roll. "I don't know if that was the dumbest smart show I've ever seen, or the smartest dumb show I've ever seen, but I want to watch the next one."

"Nope. 10:30. More Red Dwarf another time." Kevin replied.

"Okay. What does 'smeg' mean, anyway?"

Kevin shrugged, "I have no idea. I'll look it up, but better not use it until I get back to you on that."

After Ben took himself upstairs, Kevin pulled out his phone, finding a text from his mother. He pressed call.

"I have some time, what's up?"

Linda hesitated, "I wanted to tell you I'm sorry."

"Okay." Kevin replied. "I've been right across the street for a week and a half, and you couldn't come tell me?"

"I was going to, but you aren't there."

"I'm babysitting."

"I didn't want to let this wait any longer. You know damn well I'm not perfect, and this isn't a habit for me. I screwed up, and I'm sorry."
Kevin took a shaky breath, "If all you did was slap me, I wouldn't have left. But you didn't see the video, mom. You blamed Claire for this, after me and three other kids stuck to her like glue for days so she wouldn't get caught alone by this guy, and we still couldn't keep her safe."

Kevin heard Ben's bed squeak upstairs as he got into it, and made for the back porch, leaving the door cracked.

"This has been hard for everybody, but Jane is my closest friend, and at your age, I don't expect you to know how bad it would hurt you if you had to help Samandriel through the same thing, God forbid."

Kevin wiped away the tears as fast as they came to his eyes, but it was still fairly evident in his voice, "He shoved her car into a semi."

"Kevin."

"He shoved her car into a fucking semi, mom."

"Honey, please-

"The whole world should know, okay? They should, but Sheriff Mills said all it would do is hurt his family, so I'm keeping my trap shut. But I can't keep quiet about this from everybody, okay? And it's not Will's side versus Claire's side, not for me, it's how bad this got because I couldn't help her, just like I couldn't help you or my sister. I try, I try everything, and it still falls apart. But you're not Will's mom, you don't have to try to defend what he did, you're my mom, and when you said she should have died instead of Will..."

"If I could take it back, I would." Linda answered, "You're right in the middle of this, and I gave you zero support. And I slapped you. But what I should have done was tell you that none of this is your fault. I should have listened to you, and I chose not to... I'm not going to ask you to come home but can you come by tomorrow when I get home so maybe we can talk this through?"

Kevin ran his hand through his hair, "Yeah, okay."

Claire had gotten her arms into the sleeves of the jacket, and sat stiffly on the trunk next to Alfie.

"Yo, bitch-boy!" a voice echoed across the lot.

"Seven." Alfie said quietly.

"How long do you think this is going to take?" Claire asked.

"Well, the goal is to make them ask that question." Alfie replied, "Also make them wonder what we're up to."

"But we're not up to anything."

"Yeah, but they don't know that. For all they know, we called the cops, sent a text to get some backup, or we could be swapping cake recipes. Ignoring people is a great mindgame."

Another yell came from the pickup, this time directed at Claire.

"Ten... I'm winning." Claire said softly.

Two employees came out of the theater, approaching the truck, one of them much older, and very
"Looks like our game is over." Alfie said with a grin.

The pickup with the lift kit tore out of the parking lot as they both slid down from the trunk. Alfie started for the passenger side, and had barely gotten around the tail light when he spotted more white paint that Claire hadn't yet seen.

The Impala was parked at the back of the bar's parking lot, well away from the dumpsters, nosed into a corner of a tall cinder block wall with almost no light at all.

Next to Dean's car, almost close enough to block the door, sat a dark purple Jaguar.

Cas bent and picked up a tiny pebble, breaking away from Dean and setting it in the center of the roof of the Jaguar before stepping back toward him.

"What was that about?" Dean asked.

"Might be the last time I get to do that. I always hope it'll scratch the paint when it falls off." Cas replied.

"No... That's his car? How the hell does he afford a Jag?... That asshole doesn't deserve my taxes."

Cas chuckled, "Yeah, but he's leaving."

"C'mon, a pebble, though? All the shit he put you through? Tried to call you a... Look, nobody's around, you should teabag his hood ornament." Dean said in a hushed voice.

Cas chuckled, "I'm not going to teabag his hood ornament."

"Yeah, you will." Dean replied, "Or I'll do it for you, and then you're going to wish you had after he moves."

Cas didn't look entirely convinced.

Dean wrapped his arms around Cas, "Okay, nevermind, but you said two out of three, and I scratched, so..."

Cas kissed Dean firmly as he allowed Dean to walk him awkwardly backward between the two cars.

Dean pressed him back against the cinder block wall, kissing his way to Cas' neck, "You know, making bets for sexual favors is kinda kinky for a second date."

"Sorry," Cas muttered, pulling Dean tighter against him, "Left my handcuffs at home."

Dean brought one hand up to the top buttons of Cas' shirt, worrying them open, "Are they fuzzy?... The cuffs?"

"Fuzzy cuffs are for amateurs." Cas replied, running his fingers through Dean's hair, tipping his head back to give Dean better access.

"See," Dean said, coming up for air while slipping his hand into Cas' shirt, nearing his nipple ring, "I knew you were fun... Personally, though, with my hands in a machine all day, I like them fuzzy... Rules for the jewelry?"
"Don't rip it out." Cas answered, "Not really a second date though, is it?"

"Hmm?"

"All those times just sitting on the porches, right?" Cas replied, "Just... connecting..."

Dean ran a hand across the front of Cas' bare stomach before stroking a few times over the outside of his slacks. Dean took to his lips again, coaxing him into a deeper kiss as he wrestled Cas' belt open. Starting in on his slacks, Dean pulled back, "You have no idea how hard it was to ditch you that first time you kissed me."

"Then why did you?"

"You were drunk... Still, I could have given you some hint about the effect that had... I guess I don't really put myself out there, huh?" Dean started to slip his hand into Cas' clothes, but stopped when Cas started to laugh.

"You showed up at my door covered in sweat and grease swinging a wrench and yelling at me about how some people shouldn't be around kids, Dean. That doesn't exactly scream 'I'm into guys,' even if it was hot."

Dean licked his lips, "You thought that was hot?"

"Well, estrogen never really did it for me." Cas replied, pulling him close, and claiming Dean's mouth with his own.

Dean pushed his hand deep past Cas' waistband, gripping him roughly, trying to see what it would take to get Cas to bite down on his lip. He didn't quite manage it, but he did receive a quick, deep moan.

Dean broke away from Cas' mouth, dragging his free hand down the other man's chest and ribs as he got to his knees.

Cas cooperated as Dean shifted his clothing lower around his hips, and shuddered as Dean took hold of him again, wrapping his mouth around him, warm, wet, and soft to start.

Dean worked at him slowly, stroking at his flesh with lips and tongue, his hand making up for leftover length with enough overlap that Cas was soon slick and wet all the way up to his base.

Cas reached above his head, gripping the top of the wall as Dean slowly tightened around him, instinct taking his other hand to Dean's head as he tried not to move his hips too much.

Dean abruptly let go of him with his hand, grabbing his wrist in what first felt like agitation, but soon adjusted to a firm hand-hold against Cas' hip, not quite enough to keep him completely pinned to the wall as Dean took him in deeper, slowly working up to a faster speed.

Through deep, heavy breaths, Cas' voice was barely a whisper, "...if this is what you call rusty... hmmm..."

Dean slid his other hand up Cas' body, his efforts slowing his hand considerably as he navigated Cas' lean muscle. Finding his nipple ring, he gave a few small, probing touches as Cas stifled a choked moan.

Slowing down, Dean pulled his hand from Cas' as he took hold of him again, breathing hard, continuing his motions as he pulled back, "I got an idea... make this a little more fun. Still don't want
"Will you keep going if I do?" Cas panted with a slight quiver.

Dean gave a sly smirk and pulled Cas over the few steps to the Jaguar, keeping his hands moving the entire time as he managed another deep kiss.

Cas felt wound up enough that his blood was burning as Dean, maintaining contact, stepped behind him, pressing close against his back, kissing just inside his collar, steering him closer to the car. "C'mon, it'll be fun."

Dean tightened his grip and continued to stroke him as Cas leaned forward over the hood, bracing himself with a hand, taking a quick look to be sure the parking lot was still empty before dropping his body low enough to drag his testicles over the silver feline statuette.

With a chuckle Dean steered him away by a few meager inches, resuming his goal in earnest, his hand sliding over Cas' hard member furiously. Dean dropped his free hand to Cas' hip, slowing the other one.

"Tell you what," Dean murmured against his neck, encouraging him to thrust, "Show me what you'd do if you had me bent over this thing."

After an initial second of surprise, Cas grasped Dean's wrist roughly, and adjusted his balance, thrusting into Dean's tightened fist. After feeling Dean match his rhythm, he let go of Dean's wrist, putting both hands on the hood, allowing his thrusts to get sloppier as pleasured gasps started to slip from his mouth.

All at once Cas burst with a gasping moan, grabbing Dean's arm, his other hand slipping from its spot, as Dean's free arm caught him under his chest, keeping him from landing face first on the hood as his body sprayed his thick fluid over the dark paint.

Cas pushed himself up to stand, shakily, and felt Dean run his finger over his now oversensitive tip before tucking him back into his clothing, and turning around in Dean's arms only to be met with a gentle kiss as Dean attempted to right his clothing.

Pants fastened, and shirt fairly askew, Dean let go of Cas with one arm as he reached for the hood. Cas steadied himself on Dean's shoulder as he watched curiously as Dean dipped his middle finger into the mess he'd left, and spelled out 'fuck you' in capital letters.

Noticing Cas watching him as reality seemed slow to return, as Dean finished the last letter he quickly popped his finger into his mouth as if it were nothing more than stray frosting from a cupcake.

"What?" Dean asked, as if nothing were unusual at all about their present circumstance.

Cas kissed him hard, his tongue probing deeply to find the taste of himself as Dean submitted with a whimper, "You know... I thought you were a top."

Dean chuckled, somewhat breathless, "You thought I was straight... I don't know where you get these ideas about me."

Cas glanced back to the hood of the Jaguar, "What's that going to do to the paint?"

Dean shrugged, "Probably nothing, but if he leaves it, parks it in the sun, really doesn't notice, it
might be corrosive enough to cause some damage."

Cas looked over the hood of the Jaguar, the hood ornament, the mess, and the faint traces of Dean's message as it began to dry. "You were right... That was fun."
Chapter 25

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, I think I rendered some folks speechless with that last chapter, lol, here's the next one.

Got some background on Kevin and Claire you're going to love.

Thanks for reading! FW)

As the headlights of the Impala swung across the distance between the house and the shop, Dean immediately spotted the back end of the Chevelle, a figure crouched next to the passenger side, and Kevin, sitting on the porch steps drinking a soda. The front door was cracked open.

Dean didn't bother to put the Impala into the garage, instead shutting it down out of the way as he and Cas got out.

"What's going on?" Dean asked.

Kevin looked tired, and gestured to Alfie, who had taped up the windows, details, donned a mask, and was sandblasting the side of the car, "Some fuckhead douche-nozzles waxed poetic all over Claire's ride... Bastards."

Hearing this, Cas, keeping his distance from the sprayer, circled the car as Alfie shut down, and took off his mask, wiping sweat from his face. Cas came back around the back end of the car from the driver's side, which hadn't been stripped yet, "I suppose she's seen it, then?"

Alfie nodded, standing up, "She saw that side. She didn't see this one."

Cas looked back at the Chevelle, and pointed toward the driver's side door, "If it says that, why would you start on this side?"

"Because this side was worse." Alfie answered.

"Worse?"

"She didn't see it. I spotted it, managed to talk her into leaving it here, and got her home without her noticing."

"What did it say?"

Alfie shifted anxiously, avoiding the question.

Kevin spoke up from the porch, "Tell him."

"It said 'murderer.'" Alfie replied reluctantly.

"Tell him the rest, man, you know it's his business to know this shit." Kevin prompted.
Alfie shot Kevin an irritated look, "It's Will's friends, same idiots that tried to get me into a fight while Claire was in the hospital."

Cas rubbed at his forehead, "So some violent assholes are harassing my daughter. You didn't think I'd need to know this?"

"It's not his fault, Mr Novak, he's practically an orphan. Doesn't get how the parent-thing works." Kevin said.

Dean turned to him, "Are you drunk?"

"No. Never touch the stuff. Bad experience." Kevin answered flatly, "Got your kid hooked on cheesy British sci-fi comedy, though."

Dean shook his head and gestured into the house, following him inside, "Any trouble?"

Cas turned to Alfie, "What does that mean, practically an orphan?"

"My mom lives in Paris, and my dad travels for work. It's been a few years since I saw either one of them." Alfie said quietly.

Cas considered Dean's mentions of Bobby, and it wasn't difficult to see a connection, "All right, I know you're obviously trying to protect her, you're out here sanding paint off her car in the middle of the night, but you need to keep in mind, I am not like your parents, and until she's eighteen, Claire is my responsibility. If there is any indication that she could be in danger, I need to know about it."

"Yes, sir..." Alfie looked anxious, "Really, I'm sorry, just... Before tonight, I thought they were just blaming me, I didn't think they were after Claire at all."

Cas nodded, "Is there anything else I should know?"

"Kevin took pictures, we're going to talk to the folks at the sheriff's station tomorrow so they know what's going on, and ...Claire was going to trash their truck, but I talked her out of it."

"I have no idea how you managed that, but thank you." Cas replied, "You and Kevin should get home, it's late."

"But the other side of the car,"

"She's already seen it, and I'm sure Dean will be out here working on it while you're still speaking to the deputies."

Alfie relented, "Okay... All right, but I'll be back over here after that, I've got work, anyway. But I'll make sure that comes off tomorrow."

Cas nodded and started for Dean's front door as Kevin came back out, folding over a few twenties and shoving them into his pocket, "Calling it?"

"Yeah," Alfie replied, heading for his bike.

Vaguely, the sound of footsteps began to pierce Cas' sleep. He was on a couch, slightly reclined in a corner of it, with a head on his shoulder, and an arm around his waist.

"Dean?" he said softly, tapping on his arm.
"Hm?" Dean asked, barely opening his eyes, until the sounds of two doors opening one right after the other, soon followed by a third closing. Dean sat up awkwardly looking toward the stairs.

"The only upstairs bathroom is in your room, isn't it?" Cas asked, getting a nod from Dean, "That would have been..."

"Yeah..." Dean agreed, "You wanna stay for breakfast?"

Cas shook his head regretfully, "I really should have gone home last night, I'm sure Claire's upset about her car."

Claire wandered downstairs to rummage in the kitchen, not realizing her father wasn't home until she heard his key in the lock of the front door.

Heading back to the stairs with her cold pop tarts in hand, Cas came through the door, looking rough.

"Wow, I thought you were out early, but, I guess you're just getting home, huh?" Claire asked, "Crazy party?"

"Actually, I fell asleep on Dean's couch."

"You were out with Dean?... Huh..."

Cas shrugged, "I don't see how that's at all a surprise to you."

"No... I'm not surprised at all. Explains why Dean wasn't going to ask you to watch Ben, but it's a little weird he didn't mention it." Claire replied.

"What does that have to do with it?"

Claire shrugged, "I know, you said you're just friends, but maybe you wanna make sure he knows that?"

"I saw your car..." Cas changed the subject, "I'm sorry, whoever wrote that is a very cruel person."

Claire's expression darkened, "Yeah, well, needs a new paint job, anyway."

"All that work about opening up in therapy, and you're going to suppress this?" Cas asked, "I know you're upset, the car was Bobby's."

Claire sat down on the bottom stairs and opened the silver packet, passing one of the pop tarts to Cas, who sat down next to her as she spoke, "Who does that? I mean, messing with someone's car, that's personal."

Stifling a guilty look, Cas took a bite, "How is that?"

"You're kidding me, right?" Claire asked.

Cas shrugged, "Maybe this is a mechanic thing."

"You can learn everything about somebody from their car. The presets on the radio, what they keep in the door pockets, whether the cup holders are sticky in the bottom, or even pennies in the ash tray. And there's a ton of stuff that gets left in glove boxes. And that's just in the cab. If it runs rough because they don't take care of it, or if they're always waiting too long on maintenance, it shows."
And then there's the type of vehicles, the color, if they keep it in a garage, there's a million little things."

"Okay... What do you know about Bobby from just his car?" Cas asked, "Just for an example."

"A bunch of the parts were replaced, and you could tell he was working on it over time because of how many layers of grime the parts have. The paint was crap, but there wasn't any rust, so he kept it inside to take care of it, like a family dog."

"I suppose you're going to say the green paint was because he was a nurturing person?"

"What?... I dunno. But it wasn't some pretentious better-than-you douche-mobile. You can spot those a mile away."

Cas nodded with a smirk, "That's true... How about Dean's car?"

"I think it's a toss-up whether he takes better care of that thing or Ben. Not that he'd put the car ahead of Ben, but if it were alive, he'd make it eat vegetables."

"When we got back last night, it was pretty late, but Alfie was out there sanding the graffiti off... I know I didn't think much of him at first, but I'm starting to see it. He's a good guy."

"And you just sat there until they left, while they yelled insults at you in the parking lot?" Sheriff Mills asked.

"Non-violent resistance is powerful shit... ma'am..." Kevin answered, "Shows meatheads they can't push you around."

"And you weren't there, but you saw it when he got to Singer Auto, where you were babysitting...?"

"Yep... Well, I was at the house behind the shop."

"Is the car still there?" Sheriff Mills asked.

"Yes, but I already took off the one on the passenger side, and Dean's probably working on the other one right now." Alfie answered.

Sheriff Mills put her elbows on the desk, one hand to her forehead, "Destroying evidence, you mean?... Great... that's great... Look, it's not that I don't believe you, and you may be able to do something about this in small claims court, especially if the theater caught it on camera, but for harassment?... I can't use photos taken by the kid who was recently mentioned in the town newspaper for winning a photoshopping contest in Dallas."

"Digital painting isn't-" Kevin started, but Alfie shushed him.

"What do you recommend? In case it happens again?" Alfie asked.

"Polaroids... Witnesses, public places, calling it in, here, where we can get someone on it, someone with a badge, who won't be laughed out of a courtroom. It's a small town, we don't have much going on... So, I can talk with the theater if Ms Novak wants to press charges for vandalism, since you got the plate number, but she needs to come in herself, with her father."

Kevin dropped his head back to stare at the ceiling, as Alfie shot him a look.

"What?" Sheriff Mills braced herself, "What now?"
"Claire didn't see that side of the car. Kind of hoping to keep that part quiet." Kevin answered.

Taking a moment to shake her head and look back and forth at the two of them, Sheriff Mills, "How much is the paint job going to be?"

Kevin looked at Alfie, who shrugged, "Job perks, no big deal, just takes time."

"Then, I guess, keep the pictures safe, and keep me posted, and we'll all keep our fingers crossed that this doesn't happen again."

Gravel crunched as Claire walked from her home to the shop, carrying the jacket she'd borrowed the night before. Coming around the bend, a soccer ball rolled out of the Winchester driveway and found itself in the small ditch between the road and the fence.

Claire nudged it out with her toe, and gave it a hard kick back into the yard, where Ben intercepted it with a grin. A split second later, his grin disappeared and he broke eye contact, dribbling to a further point in the yard.

Finding his behavior odd, but not entirely strange, she continued to her car, where Dean was taking off the rest of the paint. As Dean shut down the machine and removed the mask, he got to his feet.

"Thanks." Claire said quietly.

"Don't mention it... What color are we doing?"

"We have a backlog, this can sit." Claire replied.

"Bobby would say that. But if you said it to him, you'd never hear the end of it." Dean replied, "You keep it light, you can get a few things done in the garage today, I'm gonna put Alfie on this when he gets in, but we need an idea before he can start the primer."

Claire looked down, considering her conversation with her father. Looking back to the Chevelle, she held up the borrowed jacket and tried to picture the car coated in the lightened red hue.

"Red. Great. That way if you get ketchup on it, who's gonna know, right?"

"Ketchup, hot sauce, blood, works for a lot of stuff." Claire answered, "Any reason Ben ran off? I thought he'd want to kick the ball for a bit like last time."

"No idea." Dean responded, with an unusual look.

Alfie's bike, far louder than his demeanor would have suggested, rolled into the yard, parking near the front office.

Claire walked over, and tried to pass him the jacket.

Alfie shook his head.

"What?"

"You know how you said you didn't need anything from Dallas?"

"Yeah?"

"I got that in Dallas because that tone wouldn't make you look 'weird.' And it's a well-known fact,
girlfriends swipe jackets."

"Well, this is backward. You're giving it to me so you can swipe it? How's that supposed to work?"

Alfie smiled shyly, "How about you just keep it because it looks good on you? And it's lucky, too, I wore it to the gallery, and I won."

Claire gave a frustrated flap with the jacket, "It's lucky, too? I can't take your lucky jacket! Steal it back."

"No." Alfie said softly.

"Take it."

"It don't need it. I got the bike, I got a contract with a bigger gallery, I got the girl..."

Claire gave him an odd glare that few could recognize from her more serious options, and he started to chuckle, "I'm serious, I've worn it, but I didn't get it planning to keep it. You like red, and this one works for you."

"Oh my god, I would expect skin tone fashion advice from my dad, but not from you."

Alfie shrugged, "I know color."

"Then go color my car, Alford!" Claire barked, heading toward the office door, carrying the jacket.

"I don't get a kiss first?" Alfie laughed.

"We're at work, we both agreed about that. But Dean might help you out."

Alfie took his time removing his gloves, not complaining at all about watching her walk away.

The kitchen was silent for a while as Linda gathered her courage. Kevin didn't feel he had much to say. It was beginning to feel awkward.

They were sitting across the corner of the table from each other, but emotionally, it was both miles apart, and crammed into a box with no air.

"I didn't think you'd remember... you never asked about him."

"I was scared he'd come back."

Linda shifted her coffee cup. "He never hit you. I just want you to know that, I never would have..."

"He killed my sister."

Linda made a tiny choked noise in the back of her throat. "You brought up that I didn't give her a name, do you want to know why?"

"I guess it's gonna hurt, but, yeah."

Linda nodded, trying to give him a chance to stop her, but he kept his eyes fixed on her, "We were going to call her Kimberly, because his mother's family name was Kim."

"Is that the same asshole that went around telling everybody it was your fault the baby died? Because you pissed him off, or sinned, or whatever?"
"You shouldn't call her that." Linda said, wiping away a tear.

"Fuck her. She might be dead, but she's still an asshole."

"Kevin..."

Kevin shifted in his chair, "So, if I have kids someday, and I want to name one Kim after my sister, is that gonna hurt you?"

Linda shook her head as more tears came, "No... No, that... That would be sweet."

"But you couldn't put it on her grave?... I mean, Ted Bundy and Hitler got names."

"Kevin, I was a mess. I shut down. By the time I could think again..."

Kevin didn't try to respond.

"This isn't really about right now, though... One of your friends made a poor decision, and got himself killed, and almost killed someone else at the same time."

"He stopped being my friend when he started being a dick. And that was years ago."

"What happened?... You used play together in the back yard all the time."

"He shoved me into the girls' bathroom and told me to freshen up my lipstick. Then he called me a faggot, and got all his buddies calling me 'Trannie' until the gym teachers were worried they were actually going to hurt me, and made them stop... Then, freshman year, this blonde chick shows up from California, and I get shoved into the bathroom, right into her. They called me that shit again, and she didn't scream, or yell at me to get out, she goes, 'My dad's gay, everybody knows, and nobody cares. Just roll with it. If they're that insecure, it's gonna make them uncomfortable.' And then she offered me her lipstick."

"Claire?"

Kevin nodded slowly. "Yeah, Claire... You know, considering how often bullying leads to suicide, she might have saved my life with that lipstick... And the day after she almost bled to death - Will's fault, by the way - I had to tell her. I had to tell her the guy she had dated for months, who was supposed to take her to the prom, tried to kill her, and that he was dead. I held her while she cried, mom... Then I get home and you tell me it should have been her? That Will should have succeeded in murdering her?"

Linda buried her face in her hands for several minutes. "I'm sorry... I really had no idea."

"I know you didn't."

"Did that work?... The lipstick thing?"

"It was weird, but, that, being an outsider, and and treating the girls around me like people, I made better friends. And I still have Samandriel, so... and those guys kept trying to call me gay, or whatever, then I pointed out I was getting all the babes because I'd let them do nail polish or spike my hair, and they all backed off."

Linda looked down at her cup, "You didn't tell me about any of this."

"How did you think I got three prom dates? I'm not Hugh Hefner."
Linda chuckled, "Am I really working that much? That I'm missing all this?"

Kevin shrugged, "You didn't miss anything. There's pictures online."

Linda looked concerned, "What?"

"Yeah. In fact, since all the dress-up crap doesn't bother me, maybe I should try modeling."

Linda tilted her head, "You could."

"Oh, no, hell with that! You thought I was serious? Hell no. That magazine crap is why my bud Stacy is bulimic. No... I'm hot, but that shit is not funny."

"You have a friend who's bulimic?"

"Yeah..." Kevin answered, "Keep a secret for me?"

"I think I owe you that much, depending on the secret."

"It got so bad she couldn't keep food down when she was trying to. Her step-dad went to Colorado and got some medical pot from his brother, made her brownies, and she put on ten pounds that month."

"But you didn't..."

"No way, she needed them."

Linda looked skeptical, "Is that the only reason?"

Kevin looked her in the eyes and didn't answer.

Linda looked away first.

"I'm ready to come back if you want me to." Kevin said clearly.

"You belong here, at least until college. I don't want to miss that." Linda replied, lifting her cup.

"Okay... And I want a tattoo."

Linda set her cup down quickly, "No."

"I want a tattoo of her name, mom. Kimberly, Kimmie, Kim, whatever you were going to call her, however you were going to spell it. Samandriel can help make it look good."

"Why would you do that?"

"Because she was real. She would have been, what, ten, now?... The kid I was babysitting when I called, he's ten."

"You should wait until you're an adult."

"I need this, mom. I need that baby sister I had to have a name-"

"Kevin,-"

"And I need it in your handwriting, and it's going to be a part of me for the rest of my life."
Linda picked up her cup and made for the sink, with Kevin following closely behind her.

"I can get it done without you in some shady back alley by a meth-head named Riff."

Heaving a sigh, Linda hung her head, "I want to see the design first."

Kevin threw his arms around her slight frame, nearly lifting her from the floor, "I'm gonna go get my stuff from across the street."

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Claire sat in the white Taurus with the door swung wide, and the engine off.

"Okay, go ahead." Dean called from some unseen location.

Claire pumped the brake pedal ten times, then held it down. "So when you were looking for a sitter last night... How'd Kevin do?"

The brake pedal sank quickly to the floor under her foot.

"Okay, let it up... He did okay. Got Ben to eat something healthy, let him watch some show he hadn't seen before... Not a bad job... Okay, hit it again."

Again, Claire pumped the brake pedal ten times, holding on the last pump, and the pedal sank slower.

"It's funny, my dad got home this morning, said he was out with you. People are gonna start to talk."

"Let it up... What 'people'?"

"I dunno. Nosy neighbors?"

Dean let out a grunt as he adjusted something, "Aside from each other, we don't have neighbors. Got the nosy part down, though. Hit it again."

Claire pumped and held the brake pedal again. This time it sank, but only about half way.

"I just think it's weird, I said my dad might watch Ben, but instead of saying you had plans with your fellow bachelor drinking buddy, you made an excuse."

"Let go... Claire, you're talking like a girl. Direct questions, okay?"

"Okay. Which one of you guys is the wingman?"

"Shut up... Pump it."

Claire started to giggle quietly, working the brakes, "You said direct, that was direct. And anyway, how would that work if your wingman is gay?... Or are you the one distracting the ugly friends?"

Dean took a deep breath, and decided to turn the tables, "You realize you're living proof that your father is perfectly capable of picking up chicks, right?... Let up the brake."

"Proof he could seventeen, eighteen years ago, maybe. Doesn't say anything about now."

"Plenty of women go out with gay friends, so the wingman thing isn't a bad theory, but the goal wasn't picking up chicks, we were playing pool... Go ahead and pump it again."
Dean was updating a few files in his office when Alfie came in through the bays. "Three coats of primer... Pepto-bismobile mark two."

Claire shot him a venomous look.

"Not pink?"

"I know, we could test the paint on your bike."

Alfie laughed, "Yeah?... Maybe then you'd go for a ride with me?"

"Nope." Claire answered, picking up the tools scattered on the floor, tossing them into the small toolbox.

"You've never been on one, have you?"

"No, I haven't."

Alfie nodded, "I think I get what it is. Why you don't want to try."

"Yeah? Why?"

"Because you wouldn't be in control. I bet other people driving makes you nervous."

Claire shook her head, "My dad drives all the time."

"Yeah, but that's different, right? You're already used to him driving, since you couldn't drive to start with."

"So I'm a control freak?" Claire asked, looking up.

"No... You're... I can't really say anything now, can I? Not without getting in trouble?"

Claire shook her head and got up, picking up the toolbox, and carrying it to the shelves on the back wall.

"Hey, you want to let me get-"

Alfie wasn't able to finish his sentence as Claire attempted to get the heavy box onto a shelf the height of her shoulders. She managed her task, and immediately gripped the edge of the shelf, ducking her head.

"Are you okay?"

"Yep." Claire replied in a squeak.

"Uh-huh..." Alfie came a little closer, "Done for the day?"

"No, I'm good."

"I can call Dean in here, just to make sure."

Claire rolled her eyes but didn't move, "Fine, go clock me out."

"So, you've been working at the scars, right?" Alfie asked, "So that the muscle stays flexible?"

"What?"
"Crap."

"What?" Claire asked a bit more insistently.

"You're supposed to massage a scar that deep, to keep the scarring broken up. I thought you knew."

"Something wrong with the shelf?" Dean asked, moving back into the garage.

Alfie smirked as Claire didn't answer.

"Claire?... You okay?"

Alfie chuckled, "There goes your garage privileges."
Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, this is a rough one if you love critters.
And it's still Feb 6 where I am, so, happy birthday to me! Yay! I survived another year!
That's actually an accomplishment for me, as I was born with multiple health issues.
Thanks for reading! Love you guys! FW)

Ben watched from his hidden spot as Alfie and Claire left the yard. His eyes kept darting back to the shop until his father was in view.

The sounds of the machine coming through his window the night before had woken him, and knowing his father was out, he'd been worried, and went straight for his window. He hadn't seen Claire anywhere, but Alfie had been taking the the paint off Bobby's old car that had been given to Claire.

Murderer.

He wondered if Claire had seen it. It certainly seemed suspicious. He watched the entire time as Alfie removed the word. He had to stop, of course, when Dean and Cas arrived.

The paint didn't look good. He guessed that was probably Alfie's excuse. Probably a surprise for Claire. But it was late, and the machine was loud, so of course Alfie would be made to stop.

He had tried to make out what was being said below, but it was too quiet, and then Dean and Kevin had been headed inside, forcing him to abandon his post and make for his bed as quietly as possible.

Almost to the bend in the road, Alfie squeezed Claire's shoulders and quickly headed back to the shop. Dean was still hanging around the open bays as Alfie approached.

Murderer.

His father had told him Bobby passed away from something normal for older people. Like heart attacks, it just happens. But being in the city at the time, how would he know?

The car had been tagged, and the car belonged to Claire now... Claire had known Bobby, and lived right up the street... But it was the passenger side, and Alfie was the one who was trying to hide it. And he was succeeding.

He still couldn't be sure. But when he'd gone outside that morning, Dean had been sandblasting the other side, and getting it ready to paint. He hadn't found a half-stripped car in the yard suspicious at all.

Clearly Dean trusted them both, but Ben wondered if that was a mistake.

"Ew." Claire replied, as Alfie walked her toward her house.
"I promise, they're brand new." Alfie answered, "She never even took them out of the bags, she'd just leave them anywhere and the maid would put them up."

"Your family has a maid?"

"Yours doesn't?" Alfie asked.

Claire thought he was serious until she caught the look on his face, "Seriously, though?"

"We did. Then her family moved, and my uncle got a housekeeping service set up, they go through the house when I'm over here, probably doesn't take them very long."

"That's really weird."

"Yeah."

"It gets weirder, doesn't it?" Claire asked, "You have a sheep farm in the basement?"

"Yeah."

"And I bet you occasionally fill the pool with jello."

"Every seventh Thursday."

"And you let Kevin host rock concerts on the roof."

"Only on Australian holidays."

"Okay."

"Okay?... I'll go get my car and pick you up."

"You still want that kiss?" Claire asked.

"Nah," Alfie replied, giving her a brief hug, "Dean took care of it."

Claire started to laugh, but the pain in her side took over.

"Sorry. I won't take too long." Alfie said quietly, letting go, and heading back for the shop

Claire trudged the rest of the way to her house, attempting to ignore the tight cramping and stabbing feeling, stretching out on the couch.

Grabbing a small bag of adjustable tools specific to his purpose, and work gloves, Dean headed out into the far end of the yard, looking for chrome door handles for a classic Mustang.

The man on the phone had been short with him, and he wasn't particularly interested in being helpful, but he figured if he had to ship the part, he could pad the labor bill with Bobby's special convenience fee of four dollars and thirty-four cents, the hidden meaning of which always cheered him up.

Making his way to the most remote corner of the yard, between junkers, parts cars, and stacks that had already been picked clean of useful parts, leaving nothing more than a rough shell to rust away as the weeds grew through it, he watched the ground carefully for snakes.

When he first saw the ratty coat, he assumed the animal was dead. It certainly looked mangled. He
considered going back for a shovel immediately, to dispose of it properly, but the beast began to move at the sound of his boots.

A medium sized dog, possibly some kind of underfed Labrador mix, got to its feet in a hurry. It had been curled around a litter of very new puppies with its back to him, and began to growl, ducking her head low in an aggressive gesture.

"Shit... Okay, lady... I'm not gonna hurt your babies..." Dean said quietly, backing up a step and taking a heavy wrench from the bag, just in case. He skirted her, giving her a wide berth, "You stay over there, I'll find somewhere else to be... That's a good girl..."

Dean inched past her, and a few moments later, found himself at the Mustang he was looking for, not entirely sure how to get back past the dog.

"Trust me, she won't care." Alfie answered from the doorway of the large bedroom.

Claire came out of the walk in closet, "You weren't kidding about the tags... You know one of those is three hundred dollars? Who spends that much on a bathing suit?"

"My mother."

"She's going to be pissed at me. This is a bad idea." Claire replied.

"She's not coming back. Not for anything she left in this house." Alfie snapped.

Claire nearly jumped.

A guilty look spread over his face, and his voice softened considerably, "I'm sorry... Um... Look, just, if she wasn't loaded and constantly ditching stuff to move somewhere with bigger closets, she'd be one of those hoarders on TV... She's not going to remember a swim suit she bought two or three years ago, she's probably bought a bunch more since she moved, she'll never know it's gone, so she won't care. Just take whatever you want... Once my uncle gets the place put in my name, I'm probably going to give her one chance to name anything she wants shipped, and the rest can get donated."

Claire shifted slightly, "Okay... But you're not gonna look, right?"

"If I do, on accident, call me on it and I'll come back in here and put on one of the bikinis myself." Alfie said, letting a smile take over his face, "And I'm pretty sure there's some robes in there, too."

Dean was passing the corner of the house, door handles in hand, when he spotted Ben by the small building that was used specifically for paint work, standing on tiptoe to look in the small window of the door.

Spotting his father, Ben came closer, looking back the way Dean had come from, "Where were you?"

"I had to get some parts. Did you get your room clean?" Dean asked.

"Yeah."

"Start figuring out what you're going to need while you're gone?"

Ben made a face, "I'm not sure I still want to go."
Dean toned taken aback, "The last week and a half you wouldn't shut up about it, and yesterday you asked if they could come early."

"Somebody wrote on Bobby's car. Alfie was sanding it and it was gone when you got home."

"It's Claire's car now, and someone was mean to her, that's all." Dean wondered if he was about to have one of those vocabulary lessons involving choice words.

"Yeah, but, it said murderer." Ben replied, "Why would Alfie want to hide that instead of calling the cops that somebody put paint on the car?"

Dean nodded, "I know what it said. He has some good reasons. But whoever put it there was messing with Claire, they wrote on the other side, too. Alfie was trying to help her out."

"What if one of them killed Uncle Bobby?"

Dean nearly dropped the bag of tools, "What?... Ben, they loved Bobby. And Bobby died of a stroke. They couldn't have made that happen. You can look it up if you want."

"How did anybody know it was a stroke?" Ben asked.

"When the coroner and the sheriff's department came out to find out why he died, doctors would have looked into it. They must have found he had a blood clot in his brain, and they wrote it out in a report, issued a cause of death, and listed the stroke on his death certificate, which I had to get to take care of everything that had to happen afterward. Remember that week I was on the phone all the time?"

Ben nodded.

Dean shrugged, "Nobody killed Bobby. And if somebody did, Alfie and Claire would be the first ones to offer to help track down whoever did it, okay?"

Ben nodded again.

"Okay, look, the guy that caused Claire's accident didn't make it. His friends are being jerks, and while they wrote something rude on both sides, she didn't see the murderer part. Alfie took it off fast so she wouldn't see it. It's not important, and it would probably make her feel bad, so please don't talk about it with her, can you keep that part quiet?"

"I guess."

"And the vacation?"

Ben shrugged.

"If you don't want to go, I need to let Sam know. You're kinda cutting it close to Thursday."

Ben looked back down the path between the cars where Dean had been. Dean had a sneaking feeling he knew exactly why.

As the heat changed from what felt like her skin burning to a deeper relaxing of her muscles, Claire decided Alfie was right. She hadn't believed him at first, when he said his back had still been healing, but sitting on the side and dropping his leg in had helped.

It certainly made sense now.
Claire risked a mild stretch to put her left elbow on the edge, letting her fingers dangle into the hot water, watching as a light breeze slowly moved a leaf across the surface of the adjacent pool.

She hadn't heard the door open, and was lost in her thoughts and relief from the pain, until she heard a stir and a small grunt right behind her.

A moment later, Alfie dropped onto the pavement next to her on his back, his head at the edge of the hot tub. He held up two unopened cans of soda of different types to let her choose one.

"You said you wouldn't look."

"Right... And you're that way," he pointed down into the water past his head, "So if I'm looking that way," he pointed upward, "No conflict... Assuming shoulders are okay, since I already saw those earlier."

Claire popped open her soda, "You were right, it's helping... So what's the thing I'm supposed to be doing?"

Alfie brought his left hand over to his right upper arm, flattening it, edge down, "Okay, so the scar is deep, right?... Like a wall under the surface... you want to break it apart. There's three ways, circle, across, and along..."

Claire paid close attention as he demonstrated on his own flesh, over the fictional scar site, with the pads of his first two fingers passed in firmly.

"Five to ten minutes, twice, or three times a day. It also makes it heal faster."

"Why didn't they tell me that at the hospital or when I got the stitches out?" Claire asked.

"Because unless you bring it up, like an Olympic gymnast, or figure skater, or ballerina or whatever, nobody is going to expect a girl to actually use her muscles. They're wrong, but that's how it is."

Claire rolled her eyes, "Next time I'm going to tell them I'm a bodybuilder, then they'll have to tell me everything."

"Next time?" Alfie bit his lower lip trying to keep his expression under control, "The next time you scrape along an oncoming Peterbuilt?"

"I didn't plan it, you know, I was-..." Claire stopped abruptly. Unable to find the words, she wound up looking away, into the water, into her soda, anywhere that might hold some momentary distraction.

"Sorry." Alfie said quietly, "I know... you didn't mean it like that."

Claire nodded in silent acceptance. "So, what if the wall is at an angle?"

Alfie shrugged, "I would guess pretty much the same, except you'd want to hit next to it, too, and get the bottom of the wall, deeper in the muscle. Dean would probably know. Actually, it's kind of weird he hasn't shown you how already."

Claire shrugged.

"So, you're feeling better?"

"Yeah."
"We're still supposed to go out dancing, right?" Alfie asked, "There's a place in the next town over..."

"Across the county line?"

"Just barely."

Claire shook her head, "My dad's not going to let me."

"No?"

"No."

"Ask him. Maybe he'll be cool about it."

"You ask him."

"Well, I could, but I'd rather go with you."

Claire took a moment to comprehend what he'd said, then splashed a few drips of water into his hair as he started to chuckle. Alfie, teeing not to look, awkwardly lifted himself up onto one elbow and leaned closer to kiss her. It was a bad angle, terrible, even.

In his attempt to make it easier to continue by shifting the rest of his body to the edge and holding on to the side of the hot tub on the other side of Claire, balancing over the water, he was suddenly rudely reminded of the effects of gravity.

The moment after the water closed around his face, two hands grasped the front of his tshirt and pulled hard, bringing his head and shoulders out of the water right away.

Alfie sputtered at the sudden submergence.

"Are you okay?" Claire asked, still holding onto his shirt.

"Yeah... Yeah, I'm okay... Not my smoothest dive, of course."

"Right... You didn't hit your head?"

"Maybe?"

"Maybe you hit your head? How would you not know?"

Alfie smirked, and started to speak, but Claire cut him off, "Shut up."

"I just think, maybe, you could be a hallucination."

"I'm not a hallucination."

"That's what all my hallucinations say." Alfie replied, "So, at an angle, huh?"

Kevin made note of Alfie's car in the driveway, and didn't bother to knock as he let himself in, "Hey, Sandman, you got a minute?"

Kevin checked Alfie's bedroom first, where the door stood wide open, and with a glance at the door to the garage, noted the bottom of the door showed no light.
He went through the back door, spotting someone in the hot tub, not paying attention, and not used to anyone but Alfie and Crowley ever being in the house.

"Hey, I need your help with something, I'm gonna-"

Alfie was leaning on the edge with his left arm, and had his right around Claire.

"Sorry!" Kevin spun around, "Didn't see anything, I swear!"

Claire looked over her shoulder to see Kevin ducking back through the back door, "What the hell was that?"

"That was... um..." Alfie slowed where his thumb was working the knotted muscle between her side and her shoulder blade, "I think he saw my arm moving and got the wrong idea."

"He wouldn't say anything, though, right?"

"No... I don't think he'd say anything even if he walked in on something obvious." Alfie replied, "You really shouldn't have picked up that toolbox."

Dean's eyes snapped open. He wasn't certain what he had heard, but something was off. He checked his alarm clock, which indicated it was shortly after two in the morning.

There was a sound coming from outside, a faint snarling and yelping from a ways off.

Thankful he'd fallen asleep with a book instead of actually getting out of his boots, Dean quickly grabbed his handgun from a small gun safe on his dresser and rushed down the stairs.

He threw the back door open, and wasn't far from the porch when he heard Ben call for him from the top of the stairs.

"Stay inside!" Dean yelled back over his shoulder as he took off at a run.

He made his way back to where he'd seen the dog, only to be confronted with a gory mess, and standing above it, a cruel-eyed coyote, not about to walk away from it's meal.

The mother was dead, and several small lumps littered the dark stained ground, and even in the dark, Dean knew what they were.

The coyote moved slowly to pick up one of the smaller lumps, as if daring Dean to stop him, and Dean, having none of it, took careful aim to avoid any chance of ricochet on the surrounding cars, and fired.

The bullet hit it's mark, the presented top of the coyote's head. Dean looked around carefully, and certain there had only been one, tucked the gun away and pulled out his phone to use as a flashlight.

It was worse than he'd thought. The mother dog's blood was spread around, and the little lump the coyote had been moving toward was still attempting to move.

His phone chirped in his hand, a text from Cas, as he heard the front door down the road swing shut, 'Everything OK?'

Dean quickly typed the word 'coyote,' but before he could hit send, he turned around at the sound of frantic footsteps rounding the corner toward him. He tried to meet Ben at the corner and turn him around, but Ben was moving too fast to predict, and went past him.
"You killed my dog?" Ben shrieked.

"No," Dean answered firmly, trying desperately to get Ben to move back toward the house, "No, Ben, I didn't."

"Yes you did!"

"Ben, a coyote killed the dogs, all I did was shoot the coyote. Come on, you don't need to see this-"

"She had puppies!"

"Ben, please, I need you to stay in the house." Dean turned Ben around by the shoulders, feeling his son starting to sob, hurrying him back toward the back door.

Nearly back to the house, Cas spotted them on his way to the front porch, and came around the side of the house instead, "I heard a gunshot."

"Yeah," Dean answered, "There was a coyote."

"There wasn't a coyote!" Ben snapped through his tears, shoving Dean's hands away from his shoulders and running up the stairs, slamming the door.

"What happened?" Cas asked softly.

Dean ran a hand over his face, "There was a dog with a litter. I found it earlier, I guess Ben knew before I did, he's probably been feeding it and didn't tell me... Anyway, the dog probably left looking for food and the coyote came and got the puppies while she was out. One of them's still breathing, I need to go handle it."

"Handle it? You sure it won't make it?"

Dean shook his head sadly, "No, it's really bad."

"Anything I can do?" Cas asked.

"It's a pretty big mess, and Ben saw it, you mind sitting with him?"

Cas nodded and gave Dean's shoulder a squeeze before heading inside.

Dean braced himself, and went for a shovel.

Dean had cleaned up in the downstairs bathroom, to try to keep from waking Ben, then made his way upstairs.

The lamp was on in Ben's room, and Dean leaned in the doorway. Ben was on his stomach with his tear streaked face toward the wall, and Cas was sitting on the edge of his twin sized bed, one hand on the back of Ben's shoulders.

Cas got up slowly to keep from waking the boy, and turned the lamp off on his way out of the room, following Dean into the next bedroom.

"Does, um... Does he still think I shot the dog?" Dean asked, his voice indicative of the stress of the night's work.

"I'm not sure... I'm sorry, Dean, I'm sure that was awful." Cas pulled him close.
"Not as bad as knowing Ben saw chunks of his dog all over the place and thinks I killed it."

Cas squeezed him tighter for a moment, "I tried to convince him that with only one shot, you couldn't have killed the dogs and coyote, but I'm not sure he saw the coyote at all... He did say you hate dogs."

"Yeah, well, that's because I hate dogs, but mostly I leave them alone, they leave me alone... Still, I would have put up with five mutts running around for a few weeks and found somebody to take them."

Cas nodded, then his expression changed, "Five?"

"Yeah. Looked like there were five. There were some, um, pieces missing."

"The dog had six puppies."

"What?"

"Ben said there were six, seven if you counted the mother."

"You're sure?"

"Yes. He named them after the Avengers, the mother was Natasha, and the puppies were Hulk, Thor, Hawkeye, Captain America, Iron Man, and Nick Fury." Dean let his head drop to Cas' shoulder, "Shit..."

"I suppose it's possible the coyote-"

"I don't want think about that, but if I don't go check, I won't be able to live with myself." Dean answered, heading downstairs.

Cas held the flashlight steady as Dean reached under the junker as far as his arm would go.

"Jesus Christ..."

The round, whimpering little pup squirmed further away from Dean's searching hand.

"Just get over here, you little shit."

Cas got to his feet, circling the remains of the Stealth, and getting onto the ground on the other side of the car. He reached for the tiny canine, and actually made contact with it's soft fur, but it jumped, and moved further away.

Dean caught hold of it by it's ample loose skin, and hauled it out scruff wise, quickly supporting it with his other hand as he got up, "Good thing you're a fighter, runt... What do you think, how old?"

Cas shrugged, "I have no idea, I didn't have my dog until he was already a year old. But I would assume dog formula will be necessary."

Dean gave an exhausted look, and absently began to pet the squirming puppy as they both started back to the house.

Cas got closer to get a better look at the tiny creature, "That one looks to be Nick Fury."

Dean looked down at the animal trying to burrow into his elbow, seeing no resemblance in the
squirmimg, whimpering creature to Sam Jackson, "How do you figure?"

"The eyepatch." Cas replied.
Ben woke to Dean shaking his shoulder, "C'mon, bud, I need to run to the store, they'll open in ten minutes."

"Why?" Ben whined.

"I gotta get some stuff that can't wait." Dean answered, turning on the light, "C'mon, it's almost five, one early morning is nothing. Gotta get up earlier than this for a real fishing trip."

"Can I stay home and you go?" Ben said through his pillow.

"No. Someone has to sit in the car and keep the dog in the box."

Ben was startled, suddenly jarred by the memory of the bloodied corpses during the night, "What?"

Confident the puppy had been thoroughly cleaned, as he'd given it a bath in the kitchen sink to get blood and dirt out of it's fur, checking it carefully for bites and pests at the same time, he set it down next to Ben's face, gaining the predicted result, "The coyote missed one. But it can't eat food yet, we have to go get it a special bottle and puppy formula."

Ben put his hand down on the puppy and pulled his face out of reach before sitting up properly and pulling it close to his chest in a hug. As he looked up, Dean knew exactly what he was about to ask.

"We're gonna try... But if it stays, you have train it. Cas knows a few things about training dogs, he said he'd help you. But right now, we're just going to worry about keeping it alive, and it needs to eat, so get dressed." Dean took the puppy back and left the room.

Dean was still putting on his jacket when Ben thundered down the stairs, and went straight for the large cardboard box on the kitchen table. The bottom was lined with newsprint. Ben scooped up the squirming puppy again.

"Cas said that one was Nick Fury, is he right?" Dean asked, straightening his collar.

"Yeah, see the eyepatch?" Ben held it up.

"Yeah, I see the eyepatch." Dean replied, "But just so you know, Nick Fury's a girl."

Ben shrugged, "It's a dog, she's not gonna care what her name is."
Dean picked up the box, hoping the newspaper and sale ads would be enough to keep any messes out of the carpet of the floorboards. He nestled the box into passenger side floor and waited while Ben sorted himself and the dog into the car, "Keep her in the box, I mean that."

"She's little, I don't think she can get out."

"Oh, she can get out. She did it about four times already." Dean shut the door carefully and circled the car to get in.

Half way to the grocery store, the puppy came very close to climbing out and Ben carefully put her back down in the bottom of the box, "What's gonna happen with Nick if I go with Uncle Sam to the lake?"

"She's too little for a vacation. Pets are a big responsibility, but that's just under normal conditions. You add a bottle schedule into that, that's more than I expect from you... So, I'm gonna help you on this one, and then when she's on dry food, it's all you."

Ben was a little too quiet, and Dean risked a glance to find him staring back with a quizzical look on his face.

"What?"

"You're going to give her bottles while I'm gone?" Ben asked.

Dean looked over at him again, "I kept you alive for ten years, I can handle a puppy."

"Yeah, but you don't have mom to help you."

Dean shrugged, "Yeah, and there's no puppy diapers either. I didn't say I was looking forward to it, I just said I was gonna help you... She'll be eating kibble before you get back. She's going to need to go to the vet, get walks, all of that. It's a big deal, Ben."

"But I can keep her inside, right?"

"Yeah... Yeah, we don't want any more coyote problems." Dean answered softly, "Had enough of that."

"Because it's across the county line."

"It's not Mexico, dad."

"Claire,"

"It's not even New Mexico. It's twenty minutes out the other side of town. It's a sign at the side of the road and a line on the map."

"Claire,"

"I mean, jeez, if we had a dance club here, that'd be great, but we don't, because we live in a little pissant podunk, and the only other thing to do around here would be trying to make my car break the landspeed record."

"I just think-"

"And it's Alfie, you think he's cool, remember?"
"How many miles did you walk?" Cas asked firmly. Claire was taken aback, and he continued, "I know you wouldn't have gotten in Will's truck if you thought he'd treat you like that, but you can't always predict these things... I'll allow it if it's a group. At least two more people. And you'll check in when you get there, when you're leaving, and be home by midnight."

"And if I'm ten minutes late? I don't know what traffic is going to be like."

"You won't be late, or there won't be a next time."

Claire poked at her eggs, "That's it? Two more people, check in, and midnight curfew?"

"Comparative to what I was up to at seventeen, you're a model citizen, so I think, yes, I'll give you a chance to prove you can behave yourself." Cas answered, taking a sip of his coffee, "That reminds me, what do you want for your birthday?"

Claire ignored his last question, "If I'm a model citizen, what the hell were you doing?"

"If I told you, you wouldn't believe me. But I do have a record, as far as Poland is concerned."

"I thought you went to school in Germany?" Claire asked, confused.

"Stift Neuzelle is two miles from Oder."

"I have no idea what that means."

"On foot, Poland was a long walk and a short swim away. And I'm probably not welcome to come back."

Jess was looking up the address on her phone to check that it matched the GPS of the car as Sam drove, "Are you sure it's this far out of the town?"

"Yeah, I looked at it a few weeks ago. It's probably pretty quiet, and Ben has lots of space." Sam answered, "Probably a nice change from the city."

Jess watched the trees for a few minutes. "You aren't really worried, right?... I know you said it crossed your mind, but Dean seemed really close with Ben."

"I don't think it's the case, probably nothing, but moving to the middle of nowhere is kind of weird. And it's not like he couldn't make enough to stay where he was, Lisa didn't work." Sam answered quietly, "And then he tells me Ben broke his arm, and... I don't know."

"Kids get hurt sometimes."

"Yeah, but I know how Dean got his own arm broken... Sometimes these things are cyclical."

"I know."

Sam shrugged, "It's a good sign Dean's willing to let Ben go with us. And at the lake, it'll be easy to tell if he's covered in bruises or anything like that."

"This would be easier if you had him around more as a kid, wouldn't it?" Jess asked, "What was he like before he left home?"

"He'd get me ready for school every day, and help with my homework. But I have no idea how my dad got to be the way he was, and losing my mom probably didn't help. Now Dean's on his own,
living out here where things probably get overlooked all the time, no neighbors close by to hear anything... I really hope things are okay, but I'll feel better if I know for sure."

"Is that it?... The sign looks old." Jess watched it as Sam made the turn.

"Must be, there's only one Singer Auto in the area." Sam replied.

Pulling into the shop parking lot, Jess spotted Ben further off. His cast was off, and he was walking slow, letting Nick chase his loose shoelace.

"Oh, cute! Dean got him a puppy..." Jess smiled and turned to Sam, "I'm gonna go say hi, maybe it'll give you guys a few minutes to catch up?"

Sam smiled back and nodded, "That'd be perfect."

Claire popped the new air filter into the Chevelle and was about to close it up when she heard the door. Dean had told her to stay out of the garage while he and Alfie went out to pull a window from a pickup truck in the yard, so she had hoped to be done before they came back.

She'd actually put on her coveralls, but the summer heat was too much, and wound up with the top of them rolled and tied around her waist, her black tank top making yet another appearance as her boots thumped down the hallway.

The man who'd come in was particularly tall and well dressed, and as she made for the desk, she could hear Dean and Alfie in the garage again. She wiped some sweaty hair from her forehead as she pulled a clipboard from the top desk drawer, and attempted to avoid sounding too grumpy, knowing Dean would be lecturing her soon, "How can I help you?"

"Um, I'm not here for a car repair, I'm looking for Dean Winchester. I'm told he owns the place." Sam answered.

Claire gave him a skeptical look, "You're auditing him, aren't you?"

"No." Sam chuckled.

Claire shrugged, "You look like the type."

Claire put the clipboard back in the drawer and headed back down the hallway, "Dean?... Someone wants to talk to you."

Dean passed her in the hall as she tried to slink back to the garage unnoticed.

Spotting his brother, Dean quickly stepped around the desk for a brief hug, and as he stepped back, Sam gave a knowing glance and nod toward the way Claire had gone.

"What?" Dean asked.

"Really?" Sam replied.

Dean shook his head, indicating he wasn't getting it.

"Don't tell me you're not hitting that? Or at least trying to?" Sam asked with a smirk.

Dean immediately gave him a look of intense disgust, "That kid is sixteen. And you're going to keep your eyes, and everything else, off of her, you got that?"
Sam gave a smirking nod, "Of course... I'm sure you only have her around because she's a good mechanic."

"She is." Dean answered flatly, "She's a good employee, too."

Sam was unaware of the way sound carried in the building, and hadn't meant to be overheard.

Claire had gotten within a few feet of Alfie when they both heard his question, and Claire's stomach dropped, and she stopped, a sour look washing over her face, in spite of Dean’s protective response.

Alfie, his hands soiled, delicately put an arm around her, "Limerick?"

"Tires." she growled.

"Bad idea, pretty sure Ben's getting in that car." Alfie replied, "Hate to make him miss his vacation."

Claire didn't answer, and Alfie rocked her gently side to side, "Would it help any if I said you look really tough today?"

"How tough?"

Alfie shrugged, "Well, the tank top makes me think boxing, and the fact that you don't care if the scar on your arm shows makes you seem like you're proud of it."

"I'm not."

"I know." Alfie replied, "But you don't hide it, either. I think most girls probably would."

Claire put her arms around his waist, but didn't respond.

"So, did you ask your dad?"

"Yep... He has a few conditions, but you were right, he didn't say no."

"Hi, Ben!" Jess called as she got closer.

Ben scooped Nick up from the ground and hurried over, giving Jess a hug, "Check it out, my dad's going to let me keep her."

"She's tiny!" Jess fawned over the tiny puppy, "Is she big enough to be away from her mom?"

"No, but we have dog bottles." Ben replied, "Dad says she won't need them for very long. A coyote got her mom, and the rest of the babies."

"What's her name?"

"Nick."

Jess blinked, "You named a girl puppy 'Nick'?"

Dean walked outside with Sam, as Ben had taken Jess to see the house.

"So, cast is off, is he pretty much fine, then?"
"Well, he needs to take it easy, work up to it, but basically."

"Good. Yeah, he's gonna love the lake. You should make some time and go with us next year, you
know. When you don't have construction projects tying you down." Sam looked around, "That's a
lot of metal... Is it really safe for Ben to play out here? I mean, how'd he break his arm, he wasn't
climbing the cars, was he?"

Dean scoffed, "No, he was at school. Phone call nearly gave me a heart attack, since the office lady
just said Ben left in an ambulance. She couldn't tell me why, but another kid hit him with a chair."

"Yikes."

Dean shrugged, "He's over it."

"What about you?"

"What about me?"

"Some kid breaks your kid's arm? That'd be enough to piss me off."

"Yeah, well, kids make mistakes, that's why they're kids. The hard part is remembering that, and
giving them second chances."

Sam shrugged, "You'd know more about it than me."

Dean chuckled.

"You know, I'm pretty much as high on the totem pole as I'm going to get in this firm, there's a
preference, and I don't meet it. I've got a friend who does family law at another place who wants out
of the city... Jess and I have been talking about more long-term stuff, and, well, we're not completely
sure on this yet, but, neither of us like the idea of raising kids in the middle of the city."

Dean shrugged, looking around, "It doesn't seem to make much difference."

"Well, we were looking at that new development, Bridgeway, going up thirty miles down the
highway. It's a small city, but the demand for my area of expertise is good. Cost of living is lower,
there's a private school, and we'd be a lot closer." Sam said.

Dean fixed him with a serious look, "We lived in the same city for years and never saw each other.
What's changed, Sam?"

"Lisa." Sam answered bluntly, "I'm sorry, but that's the truth. Even when dad died, I barely slowed
down. But all of a sudden, the big brother who ditched when I was a kid is a widower with a kid of
his own, and when I finally got my head around what I was feeling about it, I couldn't just call you
up and try to talk to you, because I barely know you."

"I didn't ditch you, Sam. He kicked me out." Dean said firmly.

Sam nodded, shifting, "It can't be all dad's fault all of the time. Some of this, this distance? Part of
that has to be on us."

"That's bullshit. I was fourteen, what was I supposed to do? Try to get you on the weekends? Call
you without him knowing?"

"I know you hate him, but he did the best he could do." Sam replied.
"Oh, is that right?" Dean asked, trying not to raise his voice, but clearly agitated, "I still have scars from the best he could do. Or do I need to remind you how it really was?"

"Fine," Sam snapped, "He was a racist, homophobic abuser, and an alcoholic. I remember, trust me. But as stupid as it was, when he kicked you out, he really thought he was doing it to protect me from you."

"Well then I guess it's a damn good thing we never had a little sister, huh? Or the minute he caught you with a girl, you'd've been out on your ass, just like me."

Both of them were quiet for a few minutes.

"He said a lot of things about you, but I didn't believe him." Sam said quietly.

"Yeah, well, I wouldn't blame you for it if you did. Brainwashing is... I dunno, hard to break."

Sam nodded, "I'm sorry, I didn't want to just run in here and open up old wounds, you know? Just, everything I've been doing since high school, I've been completely focused on getting somewhere with my life, and, well, it's not where I want to be anymore. I don't want to work my ass off in a nice office and miss out on living my life."

"Yeah." Dean agreed, "Yeah, I know what you mean... I didn't expect Lisa to be reason for that, though."

Sam shrugged, "I just realized a few weeks after the funeral that she married into the family, that I had been her brother in law for over a decade and it didn't hit me until she was gone that I should have tried to get to know her better, and that you and Ben were going to be just as distant to me if something didn't happen to fix this."

"It's funny, here I was thinking maybe Jess was working on you."

"Well," Sam admitted, "I can't say she didn't have a hand in it."

Ben set Nick in a paperlined, beat up play pen Dean had gotten for free on a local website, and started up the stairs.

"This was Bobby's house, so it took a long time to move most of his stuff out, but we kept a bunch of his old books." Ben explained as Jess spotted a small study nook between the two bedrooms upstairs.

"The computer looks old." Jess commented.

"Yeah, but I have a tablet with a keyboard, so most of the time for homework, I use that. We really only use the computer to print stuff." Ben answered, heading into his room.

Jess followed him in. It was cheerful and warm, with a large window looking down toward the shop, a wood floor, and toys that were mostly put away.

On a tiny shelf on the wall sat a wooden train with his first and middle names hand painted on the side.

Ben pulled out a handful of comics and brought them to her, "See?... I named them all after the Avengers."

"Nick Fury, I get it now. You know you could have called her Nick Furry. Did you name one Phil?"
Ben smiled, "No. But that would have been good for Nick, since at first we thought they were all dead."

Jess's smile faded quickly, "You didn't see that, did you?"

"Not much," Ben answered, "My dad tried to get me to go back inside. I didn't really get to say goodbye to Natasha, the mom dog, because dad said it was too messy."

"That's horrible. I'm glad he's letting you keep Nick."

"I'm just glad he forgot what I said to him."

"What did you say?"

Ben set the comics on his dresser, "I said he shot my dog. And I kind of yelled at him." Jess was speechless.

"It was dark, and I didn't see the coyote at first. But Mr Novak said there was only one shot, so it had to be the coyote."

"Who's Mr Novak?"

"Our neighbor. He works at my school, and he heard the gun, so he came to check on us. My dad had to... you know, clean it up, and he stayed with me."

"I didn't know you had neighbors." Jess replied.

"Yeah, him and Claire live up the road. He's friends with my dad."

Jess smiled, "Well, that's good. I thought it was just you two out here all alone... Hey, it's been a really long drive, any chance you've got something good to drink?"

"Oh, I guess I was supposed to ask you that. Sorry."

"No, that's okay." Jess started for the stairs, "Do you need to put your comics away?"

Ben looked at the thin booklets sitting on the dresser, "No. Nobody's going to step on them."

"So your dad won't care?"

"He only cares if it's where someone's gonna slip on them or something."

Claire closed up the Chevelle in the third bay, with an odd look at the wall next to it, "It's going to be weird, right?... When this thing comes out?"

"Yeah, it will. But we'll get used to it." Alfie replied.

"Just seems like it's going to take forever, never really going to happen, then all of a sudden Dean's hiring more people."

"I have to take something over to Kevin, but I could tell him to bring Margaret over to my house and we can all hang out instead."

Claire chuckled, "Right. After last time..."

Alfie shrugged, "He'll get over it."
"Wait a minute, you told him nothing was going on, right?"

"I ...didn't think he'd believe me." Alfie answered, looking at little surprised she'd brought it up, "I'm sorry, if you want, I'll tell him."

Claire considered it for a moment, "No, nevermind. It's none of his business anyway."

Alfie nodded, turning the possible implications over in his mind, if Claire didn't mind someone else thinking he'd been touching her, "So, are you going to come over after closing?"

Claire gave a small smile, "Yeah, okay... I don't have anything else going on."

Dean came in through the open door of the first bay, carrying Nick in his elbow, on top of a towel, with a pet bottle in the same hand, pointing toward his wrist. The puppy was a sloppy and greedy feeder, leaking drool and formula from the sides of her mouth, into the towel. Dean carried a blue fender panel from a small car in his other hand.

Claire and Alfie were both a little surprised to see Dean carrying the dog around, as most of the time, he'd been avoiding it.

"What?" Dean asked.

"Nothing." Claire answered.

Alfie gestured to the panel and the squirming animal, "Need some help?"

Dean passed him the fender, "I need the paint taken off of this, any dents taken care of, white primer, it's getting picked up Tuesday. Claire, the new person's coming in who's going to be strictly office work, you're still on light duty, so you're training her."

Alfie took the panel from Dean, as Dean glanced at the wall clock, "Okay, looks like she should've been here ten minutes ago, but this far out of town, she might be having trouble finding the place, so don't give her a hard time about it today."

Dean continued to his office, as Alfie started to look over the panel, "You know, to be honest, I was hoping I'd get to play with the dog."

The door of the front office opened while Claire was still chuckling at Alfie, and she started down the hallway, nearly reaching the desk before she set eyes on the girl across from her. Her smile waned, "Hi, Julie."

"Oh my god, you're still alive... great. And you still work here." Julie said sarcastically.

"You didn't think I was working across town at Morrison's, did you?"

Julie shrugged, "I was hoping to find out you'd moved away. Preferably to some home for cripples."

"Oh," Claire chuckled with false politeness, "Wishing me crippled. That's classy."

"So, is this where I'll be working?" Julie waved at the desk.

"Yes, it is. It won't take long to go over the programs, we only have a few, and the phone only has two lines." Claire replied.

"I can figure it out. You can get back to crawling under things and playing in dirt." Julie said haughtily.
Claire nodded, and gave Julie a big grin with a glare attached, "Yeah, except, I just got orders from my boss to train you. This isn't cheerleading camp, this is a repair shop. We work as a team, we get the cars fixed and back on the road. If you want to last here, you need to play nice. I suggest you pull up a chair."

Julie begrudgingly pulled a chair from the far wall, and brought it behind the desk as Claire quickly dropped into the desk chair.

"What's all that stuff on the keyboard?" Julie asked as Claire pulled up one of the programs.

"Grime from the cars. We do what we can to contain it, but it still gets everywhere."

"That's gross."

"Only because you can see it, unlike all the crap I'm sure you have on your doorknobs at home."

Julie shook her head, "Maybe we can get a new keyboard, and just not have people wiping that stuff all over it. Since I'm going to be at the desk, and not going back there, it should stay clean."

"Except that you're part time, we're still going to need to use it when you're not here, and no one is going to drop everything to clean up to come look something up in the middle of a repair."

Claire explained.

Julie sneered, "So I'm not allowed to make suggestions to make this place a little cleaner?"

"I didn't say that."

"You basically did."

"No, I gave you perfectly good reasons why it wouldn't work."

"Whatever, same difference."

Claire stood slowly and went straight for Dean's office door. It stood open wide, and he had his boots up on the corner of the desk, with Nick curled up, asleep in the towel against his stomach. He was looking through a stack of orders from the last month, and taking notes.

Claire swung the door shut quietly, making Nick stir only the slightest bit, and turned to Dean, her voice hushed, "You can hear all that, right?"

"You're doing fine."

"Yeah, for now. She's probably the one who thought up the stuff you took off my car." she hissed.

Dean shrugged, "You have seniority, that's why you're training her, get you both used to your new positions in the chain of command... What would Bobby do?"

Claire didn't reply, but went back to the desk, leaving the door cracked.

Dean went back to his order forms, vaguely aware of the conversation in the next room getting louder.

"Because it's not a damn makeup counter at Macy's, it's an auto repair shop! You want a clean job, go work at the mall! Otherwise, shut your trap and pay attention."

Dean smirked, setting the papers down to take another note, one hand having migrated to Nick,
"Sounds about right."
Chapter 28

Chapter Notes

(A/N 1: Warnings, in this order... make-out scene, no big deal, descriptions of past abuse, sappy lovey dovey crap, and then some smut.

Smut is at the end of the chapter, again. Your cue to skip is basically when it's implied Cas and Dean are upstairs, after the Kevin/Margaret convo. You won't miss anything involving the plot.

Happy Early Valentine's Day! Love you all! FW)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Claire leaned over against Alfie as she raised the hem of her shirt a few inches to show Margaret part of the scar.

"Holy crap... I mean, it doesn't look that bad, but you can tell you were just sliced right open, huh?"

"It could have been a lot worse," Claire replied, "I lived, so, whatever."

Kevin came back into the living room from the kitchen, carrying cans of soda, and passing them around, "So you got that piece done?"

Alfie nodded and got up from the couch, ushering Kevin to the hallway, "Yeah, c'mon... Where are you getting it done?"

Kevin shrugged, "Not sure yet, but memorial tats usually go over the heart, right?"

"Not always. People get them all over the place, but I meant what shop? Not the little place here, right?" Alfie asked.

"God, no. No, my mom's going to take me to a place near where she works, one of her coworkers got something done there, and she said if I had to do this, I should do it right."

In the living room, Margaret turned to Claire again, "So, your dad won't let you out of the county?"

"It's not like that." Claire answered, "I don't exactly mess up a lot, and the one time I snuck out, it didn't go well for me. He didn't ground me or anything, but he worries."

"Huh. Kevin made it sound like you were under lock and key." Margaret replied.

"Kevin's a dork."

Margaret grinned, "Yeah, he is... So, what are you going to wear?"

"I'm not sure yet, I have some nicer stuff in the back of my closet, but I don't remember what all's in there. I have to dig it out." Claire said quietly.

Margaret gave a small shrug, "I can come over tomorrow and help you put something together, if
you want."

"Yeah, that'd be really cool of you, thanks."

"It's no problem. Kevin says he's never known you to dress up much, I guess the mechanic thing kind of makes it weird?"

"The mechanic thing is really recent, actually."

"Oh. Well, it takes all types, right?" Margaret said quietly.

Dean came to the door with three stuffed and tied socks in his hand.

Cas stepped inside as Dean closed the door behind him, pausing for a quick kiss.

"What are those?"

"They're full of rice. Basically a hot pack when you microwave them. Gets the damn thing to stop whining and sleep."

"Fake litter mates. That's genius."

"Nah, the only genius thing about it is no cord on a heating pad to chew on." Dean answered, arranging the rice filled socks in the bottom of the play pen. He stood again, turning back to Cas, "Okay, where were we?"

Cas reached for Dean's waist as soon as he was close enough, "I think our texts this morning had talking on the agenda, and I promised to keep my tongue out of your mouth long enough to let you. Although I don't think I've properly thanked you for that picture you sent me on Tuesday."

"So, you want to wait on the talking part, or...?"

Cas chucked, "Then we might not get to the talking part at all, I have to get home by a reasonable time."

"Maybe I can get this out of the way fast... Ben's not going to be gone more than a couple of weeks, so, after he gets back, has a couple of days to settle in, I think I'm gonna tell him... I just want to make sure he hears it from me, in private, and that he has some time to ask questions or talk it out. After that..." Dean shrugged, "I'm sorry, I'm not trying to make things complicated."

"You're not. I understand." Cas pulled him close, wrapping his arms around Dean's waist, "I take it Ben doesn't know that you're...?"

Dean shook his head, "Never came up. He had a few basic questions about where babies come from a few years ago, but, y'know, nothing detailed."

"No chance of that." Cas replied, "I can see how it would make for some questions."

"But you're okay with keeping this quiet until then?" Dean asked.

Cas nodded, "Of course... But we don't have to keep everything quiet."

Dean gave him a confused look.

"There's no one else here to hear it if we weren't being quiet." Cas answered his silent question.
"Right... But just so you know, I'm really not set up for much right now, so... Some stuff might need to wait until later." Dean replied, somewhat cut off as Cas kissed him firmly and began steering him toward the couch.

Cas manhandled him slightly, much to Dean's enjoyment, and came to rest lying on top of him. "I can wait... I was in a long term relationship with a side, so, I can think of plenty of options."

"A side?" Dean asked, cooperating as Cas tried to find a comfortable position for them both on the narrow couch.

Cas took a deep breath, "In baseball terms? Didn't pitch or catch."

Dean raised his eyebrows, "Well..."

Cas ran his hand up Dean's thigh from his knee, "Not that I can't switch, but I have a preference."

"I had a feeling that was the case." Dean tugged as Cas' shirt, pulling him in for another kiss, humming slightly as Cas' tongue traced his lips.

The remote for the television was wedged under Dean’s back, and became uncomfortable as Cas worked his way to Dean's neck, his lips rasping against stubble over soft skin, and slipped a hand beneath Dean's shirt.

Dean squirmed and took a sharp intake of air as Cas got to a sensitive spot on his collar bone, and soon realized they'd accidentally hit the power button for the television.

"Hang on a sec." Dean said breathlessly.

Cas pushed himself up on his hands as Dean fumbled below him for the remote. He was about to switch off the television when he realized that the Netflix screen was highlighting a show that had been half watched, the fifth episode in an overdramatized true crime series about psychopaths and serial killers. It was the type of program that used crime scene photos, re-enactments, and over the top music to frighten it's viewers... And on the list next to it were cartoons.

"Shit." Dean said, sitting up as Cas backed up to give him space, "Sorry, I have to check something."

Dean went into the settings and found that Ben's profile had been changed off of the mode restricted for older children and immediately put it back. Unfortunately, he realized, there was nothing to keep Ben from changing it back.

"Is everything okay?" Cas asked quietly.

Giving up, Dean turned off the television and set the remote on the coffee table. He looked at his watch, and noted Ben would already be in bed, "I have to call Ben, but it'll wait until tomorrow... Uh... I don't know if the couch is big enough, maybe we should take it upstairs?"

Jess rolled over as Sam got into the bed next to her, "If you left comic books out on your dresser as a kid, what would your dad do?"

"Me? Yell... If Dean did it, maybe rip them up, light them on fire and throw them in the bathtub, maybe throw a punch or two." Sam answered bluntly, "Why?"

"Because Ben did. He said Dean wouldn't care as long as they weren't a safety hazard... He had a
few toys out, but a lot more put away, the kitchen was full of healthy stuff and junk food, and he doesn't seem to be afraid of anything. The only weird thing was that he said the puppy's mom was killed by a coyote, Dean shot the coyote, and that he accused Dean of killing the dog... He said he was glad his dad forgot about him saying that." Jess said softly, "It really looks like everything is fine, but why would he think his father would shoot a dog? And why would he shoot the coyote instead of letting it run off? The dog was already dead."

"The coyote thing is easy, it's not like stray dogs, they're dangerous, and once it gets the idea there's food there, it's going to keep coming back. They're a menace, and that far out of town, usually you can't wait on emergency services. As for why Ben would think Dean shot the dog, I don't know. That's a little weird, but Dean can't stand dogs."

"Why?"

Sam shrugged, "My dad had one he kept in the back yard, chained in a corner, and Dean had to feed it, but my dad would get pissed if the chain knocked the food over, and he insisted the bowl had to be put against the side of the dog house, he wouldn't let Dean put it at the end of where the chain would reach, so Dean got bit and jumped on a lot."

Sam rolled onto his side, only to find Jess cringing.

"I know it's hard to think about," Sam whispered, reaching to touch her cheek, "But we got through it."

"I guess I'm really sheltered, aren't I?"

"Somebody has to be, otherwise that stuff would be normal."

Jess moved into his arms and settled against him, "Are you glad I never met him?"

"The first time I met Lisa, he called her something horrible the minute she left. Now, you're not Jewish, but I'm sure he would have found something to be a complete bastard about."

"Did he ever meet Ben?"

Sam shook his head, "No, he didn't."

"I guess that's probably for the best."

Claire waited on the couch, leaning against a cushion on the arm of it, her feet pulled up next to her, as Alfie walked Kevin and Margaret to the door.

Returning, Alfie dropped onto the couch next to her, leaning back. He caught sight of her bootlace looking rather loose, and pulled her foot into his lap, retying it, "This place we're going to doesn't have a lot of slow music, just so you know."

"Yeah?... That CD you gave me does." Claire said quietly, "Good thing Kevin warned me ahead of time how your playlists usually turn out."

"What did he say?" Alfie asked.

"That you don't seem to get the idea how it's supposed to work." Claire replied with a chuckle.

"I put stuff on there I thought you'd like that you might not have heard before."
"Tequila Sunrise." Claire replied.

"You don't like the Eagles?" Alfie asked.

"It's about cheating and breaking up."

"Not good, then?"

Claire started to laugh, "Kevin was right."

"Well, I could have loaded it up sappy stuff, and dance tracks about how hot you are, but I didn't think you'd like a typical playlist."

"Why wouldn't I?"

Alfie was quiet for a short time, then pulled Claire's other leg across his lap and moved closer, curling around her, managing to rest his chin against her shoulder, "You say..."

"What are you doing?"

"You want... diamonds and a ring of gold, you say..."

"Quit it." Claire giggled.

"You want... your story to remain untold," Claire tried to cover his mouth, but he pulled her hand away, letting his grin take over his face, "Hey, I'm trying to embarrass myself, here. But all the promises we make..."

"Stop singing."

"Just letting you know I know what an appropriate song is, From the cradle to the grave..."

"You're making an ass of yourself."

Alfie shrugged and kept singing softly, "When all... I want..."

Claire kissed him hard to cut him off.

Alfie swallowed as she pulled away, his expression blank, "I forgot the words."

Margaret reached for Kevin's hand as he drove. He considered telling her about the tattoo, but the pain of explaining it to her would have ruined his lighthearted evening, and he decided to let it wait.

"Who's driving tomorrow?" she asked, breaking the silence.

"I figured I would, since it's a four-door, nobody has to climb." Kevin answered.

"You're sweet... So, you want your buddy riding shotgun, or are we going to be listening to a loud make out session the whole time?"

Kevin smirked, "I figured I'd let Sandman drive, leave my hands free."

"I bet. What were you planning to do with them?"

Kevin shrugged, "I'm sure you'll tell me."
"Can I ask you something?" Margaret's joking tone disappeared.

"Yeah, go ahead."

"How far have you gone, before me?"

"Um... I haven't, really... I mean, I kissed a couple of girls, Sandman sometimes as a joke, and then there's the fake thing with Reese, but that was... uhg."

"So you're..."

"Yeah."

Margaret was quiet as he pulled up to the curb.

"What's going on?"

"Um... I'm not."

"Thank god."

"What?!"

Kevin looked at her defensively, "I just mean, if we... Just, probably a good idea if at least one of us knows what the hell we're doing."

Margaret looked confused for a moment, "So that doesn't bother you?"

"Well, I'm not exactly trying to picture it in my head or anything like that, but, anything before we started dating is ancient history, so who cares? At least you could tell me what works, right?"

Margaret looked out the window. "Okay, this got weird fast."

"What's weird about it?" Kevin asked gently, "It's your body, I'm sure you put stuff in there if you want to, that has nothing to do with me."

"Yeah, but... I don't know, I was worried how you were going to take it. I didn't... I don't know what I thought..."

"Hey, look at me." Kevin said, putting his hand on her shoulder, "If I cared about that, I'd be an asshole. Don't date assholes. And don't date people who would make you feel bad about sex."

"My grandma found my diary in my suitcase last week... She called me a slut and said I was going to hell... I didn't even write anything specific, so I don't know how she figured it out."

Kevin stroked her hair back over her ear, "You should have told her you were starting a cult, and taking on boyfriends left and right. Girlfriends, too. Make her head explode."

"How come you didn't want me to touch you?" Margaret asked, meeting his eyes again.

"Uh... I wasn't ready?"

"What about now?"

"Nope."

"Okay..."
"Mostly because your dad is standing on the porch... That would kill it for most guys, I think." Kevin motioned toward the window, through which Margaret's father was visible, lighting a cigarette as he stood near the front door, "Text me your Grandma's number, I'll call her up and preach about forgiveness, maybe she'll lay off."

"I thought you said you didn't believe in that stuff?"

Kevin shrugged, "You don't have to believe something to preach it, and my aunt used to give me a quarter every time I memorized a bible verse, so I know a bunch of them. And just so we're clear, I totally believe in forgiveness, but it's not something you need, because you didn't do anything wrong. The old lady has a stick up her ass, and was probably banging people left and right in her heyday."

"You realize you just said 'heyday'?"

Kevin rolled down Margaret's window as he saw her father approach, "Hey, Mr Danes!"

"What's going on?" he asked curtly.

Margaret's father was very much the physical opposite of Margaret, tall, and heavily muscled. He had the shape of a bouncer, or a bodybuilder just past his prime, and the wardrobe of a church deacon.

"Just talking." Kevin answered politely.

"Really? About what?"

"The pressure society puts on girls these days. It's a load of crap, sir. In fact, I was just telling Margaret how awesome she is, and that she shouldn't feel like she has to measure up to anyone else's standards."

Mr Danes gave Kevin a hard look, "Son, are you gay?"

"No, sir. I've had a few offers, but I'd rather date girls."

Mr Danes started laughing, "Okay... We're having a barbecue Saturday, two o'clock, why don't you bring your folks?"

"Great. Thanks." Kevin answered, as Mr Danes headed back to the porch to finish his cigarette.

"Holy shit, you made him laugh..." Margaret looked shocked, "He's never been that nice to anybody I've dated before."

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Dean let Cas press him backward through the doorway the moment they were up the stairs, and cooperated as Cas peeled his tshirt from him, hands immediately seeking skin, as Dean attempted to get to the buttons on Cas' shirt.

Catching up quickly, starting from the bottom to mirror Dean's movements still close to the collar, Cas looked up, "I know you said you aren't set up for much, what do you usually use?"

"Conditioner. Just kind of saves time, y'know?" Dean answered.

Cas gave an exasperated sigh, "But you don't...Not internally?"

"No... No, just...uh..."
"I could have brought some, if you'd mentioned it." the last couple of words were muffled against Dean's neck as Dean tugged Cas' sleeves down his arms, reaching behind the other man's back.

Dean gave a small, startled yelp as Cas grabbed his belt, giving a small yank forward the moment his hands were free, "Next time... Next time, I'll make sure..."

"Next time we should go to my place..." Cas replied.

"Cuffs, huh?" Dean breathed, grasping at Cas' bare shoulders as he began working on Dean's jeans.

Cas shook his head, "A lot more than that."

Dean felt Cas' hand at the edge of his clothing, both of them now bare to the waist, and quickly had Cas' lips against his own, reveling in the feeling of another person's flesh against him, someone else's hand fondling him, and Cas' tongue gently working it's way into his mouth.

Cas reached behind Dean and grabbed his ass roughly, as Dean gave a small sound in the back of his throat, and dug his nails into Cas' shoulders. Dean pulled back a bit, breaking the kiss, gasping.

He hadn't had enough time to catch his breath when Cas slowly pressed him over the bed until he lost his balance in a controlled drop from Cas' arms.

In an instant, Cas was above him, attempting to keep contact between his lips and Dean's skin, making a frustrated attempt at Dean's boots just past his hips. Dean reached for the one Cas wasn't working on, and had it off faster, but soon enough they had both hit the floor with heavy thunks.

Dean raised his hips as Cas' fingers curled into his open waistband, giving a small shimmy as the jeans caught.

Cas had been hoping to take a moment to just look at him, but as soon as the jeans were stripped from Dean's legs, he was sitting up, wrapping one arm around Cas' bare torso, his other hand working furiously at Cas' pants.

Dean had yet to accomplish his goal as Cas kissed him deeply and took over, shedding his remaining clothes with ease.

"How long has it been?" Cas asked quietly, pressing Dean down onto the bed.

"Um, this way? Since before I met Lisa." Dean answered.

Cas gave a quick nod, as he lowered his own body over Dean's, kissing him, settling between his legs, both of them an awkward mess of arousal and nerves, already finding something of a comfortable emotional rhythm, and looking for a physical one.

Cas shifted his hips, arranging them both to slot together more comfortably, side by side, tightly encased between their stomachs, kissing him again as Dean began to squirm against him, seeking friction.

Dean ran his hands up Cas' ribs, raking his short nails gently over the sensitive skin, getting a quiet, pleased noise from him, and kept going, continuing to try to rock his hips.

Cas moved lower, slowly, breaking the position Dean had been enjoying, trailing hands, lips, tongue, and occasionally teeth, until he was within reach.

Dean ached for some kind of contact, rock hard, and twitching of its own volition, but one of Cas'
hands went to his thigh, and the other...

Cas wet two fingers in his mouth, and met Dean's eyes with amusement as Dean gave a small shiver, watching Cas, and taking in the feeling of Cas' hand barely grazing the skin as it went up his thigh, "Are you going to keep staring?"

"Probably."

Cas hooked his elbow under Dean's knee, leaning forward, curling his lower body to get better access, touching his entrance gently, and waiting until he felt Dean intentionally relax. He slipped the tip of one finger inside, and immediately, Dean clenched down, "Dean?"

"Yeah... I know, just..." Dean took a few deep breaths, and Cas could feel him start to loosen.

Cas gently worked his finger further in, but Dean's body tightened down around it again, this time as Dean gave a hiss. Cas lowered his head to take Dean into his mouth as Dean gasped, letting his head tip back, choking back a moan.

Dean felt it as Cas attempted a second finger, barely managing it, and tried to keep his muscles from squeezing down painfully.

Cas raised his head from Dean, leaving him dripping wet, and moved back up his body, taking them both in one hand, and claiming Dean's mouth again.

Dean rocked hard against him as Cas started to move, slipping his own hand between them to accompany Cas'.

"Sorry," Dean murmured, as Cas' mouth wandered against his neck and shoulder, "I guess I'm out of practice, huh?"

"It's a good start..." Cas replied, his breathing taking a steady pattern, but not quite panting, "Later on..."

Dean answered him by using his free hand to steer him closer and kiss him softly. He was beginning to relax more, and Cas' gentle motions came easier.

As Cas slowly managed to get deeper, Dean's movements altered slightly, trying to drive himself down on Cas' hand, and losing himself as they both gained speed.

Cas lamented not having a hand free. There were so many things about Dean he was curious to try, to find out how far he could take him, and build him up before letting an orgasm tear him back down.

Cas curled his fingers, putting a soft pressure to Dean's prostate, watching his face carefully as he started to groan and gasp, his hips jerking with each senseless thrust that slid against him.

"Cas...!" Dean's voice strained around a moan, his hand went up to tangle in Cas' hair.

"Close?" Cas asked, pulsing his fingers.

Dean kissed him fiercely in response, and Cas thrust his hips faster, tightening his hand and breaking away from Dean's mouth, going for his neck as Dean's rough breathing gave way to vocalizations with each rushed press from Cas' fingers as Cas brought him to completion.

Cas wasn't far behind, and carefully slipped his fingers from Dean's body, grabbing his hip roughly,
and threw his last few thrusts against him as Dean started to come down, sinking his teeth into a
tender spot on Dean’s chest he’d found, as Dean's hand in his hair grasped and jerked slightly in
response.

"Ohhhh, shit... that was..." Dean was still breathing hard, and not certain he was making any sense.
A deeply satisfied sound came from deep in his throat as he stroked through Cas' hair, pressing his
cheek against the head that had come to rest on his shoulder.

Chapter End Notes

(A/N 2: the song Alfie tried to sing to Claire is All I Want Is You, by U2, the last track
on Rattle & Hum.)
Claire was nearly silent as she went up the stairs slowly, carefully avoiding the slightest chance of making a sound of any kind.

Confident that only the latch on her door would make noise, and she knew how to stifle it by keeping the knob turned until it was all the way shut, she swung her door open quickly to duck inside.

*BANG!*

Claire jumped, her heart in her throat as the swearing started. She was still shaking as Cas came out of his bedroom down the hall.

"What the *fuck* was that?!" Claire asked, her panic starting to calm.

"Left over from the fourth of July. I noticed your car wasn't in the driveway at one, and I wanted to talk to you as soon as you got home." Cas explained, his answer tinged with attitude.

"Great start, giving me a damn heart attack." Claire snapped.

Cas unwrapped the two now-separated strings from the inner doorknob and the screw of the strike plate on the doorframe, "As opposed to the one I get to have when my teenager is out until three, four in the morning? Where were you?"

"I fell asleep on a friend's couch. You know, like you did Friday? I was tired from work. And if you had called me at one, it would have woken me up, and I would have come home, so, what are you blaming me for?" Claire asked angrily.

"I have no idea what you were up to, you could have been at a party and had someone put something in your drink, for all I know."

"I was hanging out with Alfie, Kevin, and Margaret. I don't get invited to real parties anymore, you should have figured that out when you saw my car." Claire raised her voice, "No guns, no booze, no drugs, that's the rules, right? Oh, wait, I forgot, don't date anyone who would hurt me, well, he didn't try to kill me until after, so a lot of good that did."

"What am I supposed to think when you get home this late?"

"That I fell asleep in a safe place with safe people, with my clothes on, woke up with my clothes still on, and realized what time it was." Claire snapped, "Besides, in my experience, rape happens during business hours. Two-thirty-seven and three-forty-two in the afternoon."
"Claire, that has no bearing on this. You can't keep throwing it out there to shut me up. You need to take responsibility."

Claire put her hands on her hips, "Right... It's okay for you to say 'Claire, behave yourself, don't sneak into frat parties, you'll get roofied,' but I don't get to point out that having actually been raped before, I might have zero interest in letting it happen again, and that maybe I know a thing or two about it? The hard way, even?"

"Who else was there?"

"Just the four of us."

"No parents?"

Claire didn't answer right away.

"You were at your boyfriend's house. And I suppose Kevin and Margaret left?"

Claire looked him in the eyes, her voice low, "I pulled the gas tank off a 1998 GMC Suburban three times today to replace a damn fuel pump... Three times, because I kept messing it up. Dean just hired Julie, you remember her? Really bitchy girl from the dress place? And I have to train her, so she can bitch at me every day at work... I'm tired... If I was trying to hide something, I would have called you saying I was staying over at Margaret's, put her on the phone for maybe thirty seconds, and you would have believed it. So why is it so hard to believe me when I'm telling you the truth?... And anyway, didn't you say that would be none of your business?"

"Claire, I'm trying to look out for you. You need to take your own safety into account when you make decisions like this."

"You know what? You're right... Driving tired is almost as dangerous as driving drunk. Next time, I'll tell Alfie I'm too tired to drive, and go crash in his mom's room. And if anyone sees me leaving the next morning, who cares? Not like I have a reputation to ruin."

Claire turned and went into her room, giving a half-hearted swing at the door to close it, which Cas blocked. She sat down on the side of her bed and started taking her boots off as Cas entered the room, knowing better than to get too close, as she was already agitated.

"I don't have many rules for you, why are you having trouble understanding this one?" Cas asked.

"Sleep deprivation." Claire replied, kicking free of her boots and stretching out on her bed, "Two hours, and maybe I'll give a damn."

"And with this behavior, you expect me not to ground you? How do I know you won't be getting back from the club at an unreasonable hour as well?"

"If I was going to screw up my life, I could just as easily do it at ten in the morning as two in the morning... Why do you care so much about what time it is that you can't let this one slide?"

"Because it sets a precedent, Claire, and it could easily become a habit. Which is concerning when it involves you."

"Yeah? Why?"

"It's something your mother could use against me in court."
Claire actually bothered to raise her head, "But you got papers."

"I got emergency papers. For actual, irreversible custody, that will take more time and effort... I'm sorry, but you're not in the clear yet."

Claire put her head down, "Won't happen again... Can I sleep, now?"

Dean reached for the side of the bed next to him, his heart sinking to find it empty. For a moment, he couldn't remember who he'd been reaching for, but he knew he was tired of waking up alone.

Tiny yapping sounds drew him from his bed, and brought him downstairs.

Nick was trying desperately to climb out of her pen, and seeing Dean, began to wag too hard to make much progress.

"Coffee first?... Maybe?... Nope. Right. Bottle first. Because why would I want to be awake for that?" Dean asked, picking her up, "Not your fault your stomach's the size of a gumball."

Dean took the tiny bottle he'd fixed the night before from the fridge and started the hot water running in the sink, sloshing the bottle to stir it as it warmed quickly to room temperature. It wasn't quick enough for Nick, though, and she continually struggled toward it until he shut the water off and put the bottle to her mouth.

"Crap." he muttered, reaching for a paper towel, "Drool all over me, why don'tcha..."

Dean made for his chair and got comfortable, turning on the television to make sure he would be aware of exactly what Ben had been watching. He went through the shows that had been recently watched, and found a couple more, both inappropriate for his age, and both having to do with death, and a documentary of questionable quality about ghosts.

After watching a couple of minutes of each, Dean stopped the last one, and picked up his phone.

Sam was a little concerned about getting a call from Dean so soon, but shooting a concerned glance at Jess, who was turning a pancake, he tapped the speakerphone option and set the phone down next to Ben's plate.

"Hi, dad."

"Hey buddy, you having a good time?"

"Yeah, but we didn't get to do anything yet. There's a rope in a tree that goes over the water, and Uncle Sam said he's gonna show me how to use it."

Sam chuckled silently and passed the syrup bottle to Ben.

"Okay, just make sure you're safe about it, make sure you listen good so you don't get hurt... Listen, I saw some of the stuff you've been watching lately, you switched off kid mode, did you do that on purpose?"

Ben went quiet.

"Ben, it has that setting for a reason. You know why, too. Some stuff on there will mess with your head, and some of it, even grown ups shouldn't be watching."
"But it's about real stuff, dad."

"It's about making scared people more afraid, Ben, it makes money, that's why they make it, but that
doesn't make it okay. They make it sound like there's a killer on every block, and a kidnapper
hanging out around every corner, that's not good for you, or anybody... I put kid mode back on, and
I'm gonna be checking that it stays that way, but this is something your counselor has to know,
because you've been really jumpy lately."

Jess gave Sam a look as she passed him a plate of pancakes.

"What if you watch it with me?"

"Bud, please don't make me change the password, you know I'm gonna forget it. Just quit watching
the stuff that messes you up."

Ben's expression was bleak, but barely for a moment, "Is Nick okay?"

"Oh, yeah. She's having breakfast right now. I think she was looking for you..."

"What if she forgets me while I'm gone?" Ben asked.

"She won't, she's not a goldfish... Don't worry about her, you're on vacation, remember? I got this,
you just have fun, okay?"

A few more words were exchanged, basic partings for a parent and child, before Sam put the phone
away.

Jess broke the short silence, "I didn't know you were seeing a counselor."

"Yeah." Ben said quietly, cutting into his pancake, "My dad said waiting with my mom was too
much for a kid, and that was why I was breaking things."

"You break things?" Sam asked.

"Not anymore."

"What kind of stuff?"

Ben shrugged, "Sticks, shredding paper, then I got a hammer, and I flattened a toy car... There was a
watch my dad had with words on the back, it was already broken. I didn't know he was going to get
it fixed."

"Was he mad?"

"I guess. Mostly he just looked confused. He asked me to stop, and I did, but he still made me go
anyway."

Sam looked carefully at Ben's face, and was surprised to find he seemed bored.

"I used to pop the heads off my Barbies when I was little. I don't even remember why, but my
parents made me go see somebody, too." Jess said reassuringly.

"You never told me that." Sam said, looking up.

Jess shrugged, "I made a few finger paintings and put beads on strings, and they decided I wasn't a
danger to myself or anybody else. It's really not that big a deal."
"She's half an hour late." Claire said, passing Alfie a bottle of transmission fluid, "We need an office version of the hood-pop test. Maybe I should change the password."

Alfie shrugged, "That would throw Dean off."

Claire glanced down the hallway anxiously, turning back to watch Alfie again as he leaned in, upending the bottle into the funnel, letting her mind wander.

Outside, Dean was going over details with the company handling the construction of the new bays, and one of the machines was running loudly. The office door closed even louder, announcing Julie's presence.

Irritated by the behavior behind the sound, Claire noted her hands were still clean, and shoved them into the car just enough to properly make a few dark smears with a defiant look before walking quickly to the office.

Alfie grinned and continued to work. The noise was loud enough to drown out the talking in the office, but he was sure Claire could handle it.

"Thirty-five minutes late, why bother coming in at all?" Claire asked.

"Because I want a new phone, and if I act like I'm trying to work, my mom will get me one." Julie said in a careless, breezy tone.

Claire took a deep breath and sat down. "Okay, clock in."

Julie sat down next to her, putting her purse in the middle of the desk. She clicked into the program and selected herself, and logged the time, adjusting the time she started to the time she was supposed to arrive.

"No, put it back." Claire said firmly.

"Why?"

Alfie came down the hallway to snag a manual, his abrupt appearance unnoticed until he was already in the room from the sound of machines outside. He gestured with the manual in his hand as he left the room again.

"Because you weren't here on time. You don't get paid for that time. You also don't get paid for wasting my time, so why don't you just change it to now?"

"Nobody's going to know the difference." Julie answered.

"So you're into embezzlement? Great. I'll let Dean know, and you can show yourself out."

Julie glared at her, "I'm not quitting. You aren't all-powerful, you know."

Claire leaned back in her folding chair, "What exactly do you want from me?"

Julie shrugged one shoulder, making her hair swing, "Watch you suffer. To start, anyway."

"Yeah?" Claire's mannerisms went cold as she listened closely.

"Yeah. Pretty sure I can change your times in here, add charges onto customers' bills, and get you fired from right here at the desk... But first, just for kicks, I don't know. That spineless asshole you've
got on a leash doesn't look half bad."

The noise of the machine running outside shut off.

Inside Dean's office, Alfie was on the computer checking the inventory for a part he needed for the next repair, the door open wide. Once the machine was shut down, he could hear every word.

"Is that right?" Claire asked, unfazed.

"Yep. And since everyone knows you have all the libido of an eighty year old nun, hm, wouldn't take much from me to get your boyfriend out of his pants."

Alfie's eyes went straight to the doorway as he heard it, listening intently for Claire's response, hoping desperately the noise wouldn't pick back up.

"Go for it." Claire's words seem to come without emotion, "Because if he's that easily distracted by garbage, you'll be doing me a favor."

The sound of machines started again almost immediately, and Alfie made a beeline outside, hoping neither of the girls would notice.

He walked out of the open, empty second bay, and made his way to where Dean was standing with a couple of people from the construction company, turning around to look at the ground being scraped away.

Dean noticed him coming closer, and motioned to the building, "How loud is it in there?"

"Uh... Not horrible, just..." Alfie shook his head.

Dean looked at him suspiciously, "You okay?"

Alfie felt rattled, but couldn't explain it, and fumbled for an excuse.

"You're a mess. And you guys are going out tonight, right?" Dean asked.

Alfie nodded dumbly, vaguely wondering how he knew.

Dean shook his head, "Go home. Maybe get the pounding out of your head before you have to get ready. I'll go tell them in a minute and clock you all out, I didn't think it would be this bad."

Alfie momentarily forgot words were a thing, and simply nodded, heading straight to his car, unsettled enough that he was glad he'd decided not to use his bike. Although in truth, he'd hoped to take Claire out to lunch instead.

A mile down the road, Alfie called Kevin, getting a sleepy sounding answer.

"Hey! ... I need to talk to you, what are you doing?"

"Nothing, what's up?"

Alfie shook his head, "Uh... I'm headed home, can you meet me there?"

"What did you do?" Kevin asked. "Nevermind, hang up and drive."

"Holy shit, man." Kevin answered him.
They were both in Alfie's car, having just hit a drive-through.

"Right?... I mean, why would she say that?"

"What? Dude, you're not getting it."

"What?"

Kevin shoved the rest of his taco into his mouth, motioning that he'd finish his thought in a moment.

"I mean, if someone said that to me, about her,-"

"Mn! No, dude, you're confused because of rape culture."

Alfie gave a hapless look, "How's that?"

"Okay, assume someone said the same about Claire, right? Guy, right? Well, when some asshole straight up says he's going after the girl you like, all, 'I'm gonna fuck your girl,' most of the time there's no implication of whether she's supposed to be cool with it. Basically it's a rape threat unless he's like, 'she'll be begging me for it.' So, if you're an assat, you're like, 'no way, that's my property,' and if you're not, well, you're like, 'you can't treat her like that,' and both reactions come off the same, 'stay away from her,' right?"

"I guess, yeah."

"Right. But that's not how it is for girls, and it's always implied that the guy is gonna be cool with it, even though that's crap. You gotta remember, Claire is not a bitch, but she is seriously capable of acting like one when she's cornered. Bitch is her second language, and she was absolutely swinging the bitch-ax. But it wasn't you she was cutting down."

"I don't know, it really sounded like she meant it, like she didn't care one way or the other."

"She meant what she was saying to Julie, but you're not getting what she was really saying." Kevin replied, "When she said she was going to try to screw you, it's a totally different concept. She pretty much told Claire she's smart and/or pretty enough to make you abandon and betray her. It's less about stolen property and more about destroying a relationship. You know all the words to 'Jolene,' think about it... but basically she said Julie is welcome to make an ass of herself, because she trusts you not to go stomping on her heart like that."

"She trusts me? ...She didn't tell Julie to shove it and stay away from me, because she trusts me not to fall for it?"

Kevin shrugged, "The 'garbage' part, that would be because Julie isn't worth warning. Sick burn, too. If you own up to the eavesdropping, let me know, I owe her a fist bump."

"This is crazy." Alfie said quietly, "I guess I'm just worried she's only killing time with me, you know?"

Kevin unwrapped his second taco, "Not everybody in your life is gonna get bored and walk out on you, man."

"Right... What about my side of this? What do I do?"

Kevin shrugged, "Don't fuck Julie, to start."

Alfie rolled his eyes.
"If it were me, I guess, pay more attention to Claire, but there's a limit, if you guys are, y'know, doing anything, don't go past that. Because if Claire suddenly starts throwing herself at you, she might only be doing it because Julie's a threat, and she'll probably regret that later... And if Julie makes a pass at you in front of Claire, say no, and don't be worried about being rude about it, because she's only doing it to hurt Claire."

Alfie looked uncomfortable, "So, be a dick about it?"

"Dude, Julie is an asshole. Don't pull any punches because she's a girl, she's hurting your girlfriend in ways you have to have explained to you. Be a complete bastard about it."

"What if she cries?"

"Claire or Julie?"

"Julie."

"Fuck her... Just, not literally." Kevin answered, "If Claire cries, though, tell her straight up you overheard, Julie's creeping you out, and she has nothing to worry about. I mean, full-on boyfriend mode. If you want to be on Claire's team, you have to back her up, whether she knows you know the play or not."

Cas opened the door to a girl roughly Claire's age, but smaller, with reddish brown hair and, in his opinion, a bit much eyeshadow.

"You must be Margaret." Cas said with a small smile, waving her inside at her nod.

Claire quickly came down the stairs behind him. Cas watched them retreat to Claire's room, relieved not everyone had abandoned her in the wake of the drama Will had caused at the end of the school year.

"Okay, shoes first." Margaret stated.

Claire shoved a dress strewn over her bed with several others aside, and three pairs of different shoes acceptable for the occasion sat in a slump.

"Okay, how about the gold ones, are they sturdy?" she asked.

"Well, they aren't work boots."

Margaret looked down at the work boots sitting at the end of the bed, "Yeah, those might be cool if they were black, or not beaten up."

Claire shrugged, "I have them for work, they get worked in."

"Yeah..." Margaret nodded, "Dress options?"

"I'm not getting out of here with jeans and a cute top, am I?"

Margaret barked out a laugh, "Nice try."

Claire started pulling the two she'd considered reasonable from the stack of rejections on her bed, but Margaret went straight to her closet.

"What about this one?" Margaret asked, turning around. She held a dark purple dress that'd been
buried on the back of the hanger rod for some time.

"That one doesn't fit, I outgrew it. You might be able to use it." Claire replied dismissively.

Margaret held it up to the front of Claire's shoulders, "I dunno, looks like it would work."

"I couldn't get the zipper up last time, and it's way too short."

"Try. I'll help with the zipper." Margaret replied, shoving the dress at her and stepping out of the room.

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Claire bounded down the stairs. "Daaad!... Tell me I'm not allowed to leave the house looking like a stripper!"

Cas turned around in the kitchen to see Claire in her now well-fitted purple party dress and gold toned scrappy low heels, with Margaret just behind her, "All right... But strippers generally use more body glitter."

"Dad!" Claire looked horrified, but Cas only shrugged.

"This is fine for clubbing, right?" Margaret asked, "She's freaking out."

"You look fine, Claire, I've seen plenty that were far worse." Cas answered, "Although if you're feeling self conscious, that pink scarf Charlie gave you should work as a wrap."

Claire looked confused, "How would you know that?"

"She mentioned it." Cas replied, "But you're right, I wouldn't let you leave the house looking like a stripper, even strippers don't leave their homes looking like strippers."

"How do you eve-... Nevermind..." Claire replied, shaking her head and quickly leaving the kitchen.
Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, couple of warnings...

First off... things get a little more serious with Alfie and Claire... oops. I mean, clothes stay on, but she gets a little spooked. And not unrealistic, this actually happened to me with my first boyfriend.

Second, this leads to a nightmare. I described the nightmare rather than write it, but a rape flashback leading into an accident flashback, and a large quantity of blood is mentioned.

I love how much feedback I keep getting, and reactions this story is causing. I mean, I'm not trying to play with your feelings, but I am totally playing with your feelings, and doing a decent job of it, lol! You folks are wonderful, thank you all for the comments! FW)

Claire spent nearly the entire drive trying to figure out what was different from Alfie's usual half embarrassed reaction when she realized he would start to look down, then immediately look anywhere else. Her legs were bare. She'd worn a long dress at the prom, and she was nearly always in jeans. In the hot tub, she'd been covered by water... And he was finding it very distracting.

She spent another several minutes trying to decide how she felt about it, but without a definite answer, they arrived.

Kevin was talking, and he simply wouldn't shut up, and she was certain he hadn't stopped the entire time as she sat down in the booth.

The music was louder than she'd expected, and despite Margaret and Kevin proceeding to tear it up, after a couple of rounds on the dance floor, she was fairly sure she had lost all interest.

Alfie was looking at bit gray himself, and he'd leaned in close to try to say something over the music, unable to make himself heard.

Claire hadn't been able to understand him, but he made a motion indicating he'd only be a moment, and left the table. He was back shortly, and passed her a drink that was red, and had a few cherries in the bottom of the glass as he sat down with his own, something that looked to be an average soda.

Margaret was speaking loudly into Kevin's ear as they approached the table, and pulled out her phone. Kevin dropped into Alfie's lap, reaching behind his shoulders to tug Claire into frame as Margaret focused her aim for a picture.

Try as she might, she couldn't get past the noise, and pulled out her phone. After typing the message, rather than send it, she simply showed Alfie the screen, 'Where do you want to go for hearing aids after this?'

Alfie cracked up, not that she could hear him over the music. Turning to look at her, he started to
open his mouth, before giving a shrug, opting to run his hand over his face and motioned for her to follow.

His arm was around her the moment she was out of the booth.

The air outside had a mild chill to it, not awful, but it was enough to provide a clear contrast with the warmth of Alfie's hand at her waist.

"Is it a little better, now?" he asked her, somewhat louder than his usual speaking voice.

"What?... Sorry, did you say something?" Claire couldn't keep a straight face, and started to giggle.

"The noise from the shop, right?" Alfie asked, "Kind of messed this up, I guess."

"Yeah..." Claire replied with a look back over her shoulder, "Not exactly my thing, though."

"Really?... Sitting in the booth the whole time, I wouldn't have noticed." Alfie tightened his hand slightly as he teased her, but it caused Claire conflicting emotions, "Not really my thing, either."

"No, you'd rather be on stage singing love songs with Kevin."

"Funny you should mention that... I got asked to do a set with some guys that used to do White Stripes covers, since they got a gig lined up and their brand new singer ditched." Alfie said quietly, "You want to go? I mean, I don't want you to be bored, but Kevin's going, so, not like you'd be by yourself."

Finding themselves by the quarter panel of Kevin's car, Claire shrugged, "Is it local?"

"Down the street from here, on a Saturday afternoon." Alfie replied.

"I think I could manage that." Claire answered.

Alfie smiled and wrapped his arms around her, turning her around, and leaning back against the car, pulling her with him. He gestured to a particularly garish car several spaces away, but in clear view, "Check that thing out."

Claire looked over at the other car, trying to stay focused, but the feel of Alfie's body against her own was causing a reaction she hadn't expected.

"What do you think?"

"Wears neon visors backward..." Claire giggled.

"And the rims?" Alfie asked softly.

"Absolutely, this guy puts rims on everything, even the tree in his front yard."

Alfie nuzzled against her neck, which certainly didn't help the internal heat she seemed to be building, "What about the spoiler?"

"It opens up... That's where he keeps his knitting so his buddies don't see it."

Alfie started laughing, having barely pressed a kiss to her neck, tightening his arms in reflex. Claire turned around, causing him to adjust the location of his hands quickly, which Claire found far too comfortable.
She wrapped her arms around his shoulders as his arms got tighter around her, both of them settling into a long, deep kiss.

Kevin looked around, having seen an employee clear their table, and leaned down next to Margaret's ear, "I think Claire and Sandman ditched us."

Margaret chuckled, "Good for them."

Kevin gave her a questioning look.

"As long as they aren't fighting, don't be too quick to break that up. I know what I'd be doing."

Margaret smirked.

"You're very naughty, Margaret. You're gonna get us in trouble someday."

"Count on it."

Alfie wasn't certain exactly how they'd gotten to this point, but they were undeniably there. There hadn't been any discussion.

At some point they'd gotten into the car to have a place to sit that hadn't been affected by the light rain. Then, thankful it had manual windows, he'd rolled it down half way because it was getting stuffy... And he had told her some time ago, when he'd still been on crutches, that she could sit on his lap any time she wanted. Apparently she'd decided to take him up on that.

Claire was straddling his lap, and somewhere along the line, her kisses had become more insistent, and he'd shifted to slouch, making her small, nearly unnoticeable movements easier. Her breathing had gotten rougher, and he routinely had to push her hair back to keep it out of his mouth.

In the back of his mind, he was sure there was something to suggest that maybe this was too much, but, goddammit, he was busy right now.

Alfie felt certain he'd have a much better time with just a bit more pressure against his jeans, and wrapped his arm around the small of Claire's back, sitting up a bit to get to her neck, which had seemed to be intensifying her actions. But before he'd managed it, she'd dropped her forehead to his shoulder, curling forward with a loud, broken gasp, then holding her breath, shaking hard, tiny whimpers escaped her lips as she grasped his upper arms tightly. He froze. She began to breath raggedly.

"Um... Claire?... Did... Did you...?"

Claire sat up straighter, still shaking, and seemed to try to back away, her voice panicked, "I wasn't trying to... I didn't want this to go that far..."

"I believe you." Alfie said softly. His voice held none of the teasing it had had when he'd said it regarding her plan to shave her head. It was honest, "I mean, it's okay, but I think we should stop... Don't worry about it."

Claire shifted awkwardly, as if not wanting to look at him, but having nowhere else to go.

"Can I just hold you for a while?"

"Why?" Claire asked, concern in her eyes.
"I... read somewhere that most girls want that... y'know, if they... uh... It doesn't have to be a big deal, I swear."

Claire relaxed visibly, and with another difficult shift in the cramped space, allowed herself to put her head down on his shoulder again. Her breathing was still a wreck as he put his arms around her.

Alfie sat back a bit further, and took hold of her thigh, quickly lifting her to one side. After a brief moment of what seemed to be fear, she soon settled again, relaxing a bit more now that she could easily get her legs closed. He could feel it as a remaining tremor swept through her, and considered her frightened reaction, "Don't be embarrassed, okay?... That was really hot, actually... In fact, I'm probably going to do the same thing later when I get home."

Claire was still in a bit of a haze, "Why would you tell me that?"

Alfie shrugged gently, "Honestly?... I mean, those little sounds you made... I could listen to you do that all day."

"You look exhausted." Jess said with a grin as Sam leaned back on the couch.

"Yeah... Apparently Ben inherited Dean's arm, because he hit me pretty good with the football."

"So, if we move to Bridgeway," Jess mused, "How do we do holidays?"

"Well, we can split them up, alternating years, or do all the little ones at home and fly out to see your folks for the big ones." Sam suggested.

"I would want to have a big Christmas at some point, and have my parents come out and see Dean and Ben... You know you haven't said a word about that call this morning."

Sam smiled softly, "Yeah, well, it kind of spelled everything out for me... Not that I'm not paying attention, but, for now, I think everything's okay."

"I warned you."

"You did." Sam replied, stroking his hair back from his face, "The job is getting to me, I can't keep doing it... But if nothing else, maybe it screwed me up enough to get my brother back in my life... You were right about spending time with Ben, too. I mean, if Dean can manage it, and he had it worse than I did..."

"You have to get out of that place, first. You're a mess." Jess said quietly.

At twenty after eleven, Cas heard the front door, and left his room. He spotted Claire coming up the stairs slowly, but with no attempt to keep quiet, "You're back early. Is everything all right?"

"Yep."

"Margaret's curfew is eleven thirty. Every time she breaks it, she loses ten minutes."

"That certainly sounds effective." Cas replied, "You were supposed to text on your way back, though."

"Oops." Claire replied, opening her door cautiously before slipping inside.

Cas retreated to his own room, and stretched out on the bed again.
Dean caught hold of his thigh and pulled it to rest between his legs before dropping his arm over Cas' waist, "Well, puts a kink in our plans, huh?... Or takes one out of it."

"I think we both had a bit much for that to still be an option." Cas answered with a wry grin.

Dean didn't answer, but attempted to pull Cas closer, as though he hadn't noticed Cas was already against him.

Cas tugged at the open waistband of Dean’s jeans, "Such a conflict with these."

"What's conflicting about my pants?"

Cas shrugged, "I'm trying to decide if they look better on you, or on the floor."

Dean attempted to adjust his position without losing contact with Cas' body, "You know there no playing this off, right? I'll have to sneak out after she's asleep."

Cas shrugged, "Or before she wakes up. You have to get up early to feed the puppy."

"Well, I do like the idea of not moving." Dean replied, running his hand up the front of Cas' shirt, coming to rest at his collar.

"Do you want me to set an alarm?"

"You can pull an alarm, I'll show up and be your firefighter." Dean answered with a slight slur.

"Tempting. But I might start to abuse the privilege. I'd hate to hog your time when you have the rest of the town to save, and kittens to get out of trees."

"The rest of the town?... You didn't think I kept showing up at the school to volunteer just so I could hit on the hot, bitchy PTA moms, did you?" Dean asked.

Cas shrugged, "I have no idea, I just know it kept a few of them from hitting on me for a few weeks."

Dean tightened his arm, "You don't like the attention?"

Cas took a deep breath, "Not from Ms McMurray."

Dean wracked his brain for a moment, "Tina's mom?"

"Yes."

Dean shuddered, and held Cas tighter, "Yikes... Poor guy... She grabbed my ass at the grocery store one time. Couldn't get it up for a week. Which is weird, since normally whiskers don't bother me at all."

Claire bolted out of her room, and barely made it to the bathroom before she threw up.

She'd made herself a bit sore, even with clothes in the way, but she hadn't expected it to bring about a nightmare.

The nightmares had nearly stopped, and aside from the one she'd had concerning the Chevelle, it had been months.
This one was different, because the pain, although mild, was physical. The disturbance in her mind had been far more vivid. And when Mr Bartlett had stopped, there was blood. Then there was too much blood. She was in the car, she had crashed again, but the blood, her blood, had been filling the vehicle.

Cas had untangled himself from Dean's arms in a hurry and only realized as he reached the bathroom door that he had in fact remembered to put on pajama pants.

Claire was curled up in a ball in the corner, her back to the wall by the tub, tears running down her face, shaking more than sobbing.

Cas sat down close to her, "Was it a nightmare?"

"Blood was everywhere." Claire choked out.

Sleep had slowed down Cas' usual time for metabolizing alcohol, and he was certain he was still feeling the whiskey, "Just a bad dream about the accident, then?"

Claire was silent, then shook her head. He understood.

"I would hug you, but I can't be sure that's not going to make it worse..." Cas said quietly, mostly thinking out loud, "But if someone hurt you... tonight, I mean, please tell me so I can take you to the hospital."

Claire shook her head without hesitation.

Cas rearranged himself cross-legged, and reached for her, waiting patiently until she moved toward him, unraveling the ball she'd made of herself, and pulled her into his lap, holding her like a toddler.

"Do you have any idea how strong you are?"

Claire wanted to make a sarcastic comment, but couldn't find the air to speak it.

"Very strong... You're the strongest person I know... Even if you feel broken right now, I know tomorrow you're going to get up and keep moving, and keep working on everything you do in life. It's amazing, really."

Claire woke up late, and reached for her phone. Thinking it might have fallen, she leaned over the edge of her bed, looking around the floor to find her charger was gone as well. Finding that out of the ordinary, she headed downstairs, still feeling the effects of a forcefully emptied stomach the night before.

Cas was in the kitchen, getting a cup of coffee from the half empty pot.

"Did you move my phone?" Claire asked, her voice weaker than she'd expected.

Cas nodded, and gestured to the counter, "You clearly needed your rest, and I didn't want to dig through your alarms."

"It's Saturday, I've got work." Claire replied.

"Not today, I already spoke with Dean this morning, he said the noise from the construction is generally difficult for people with anxiety and related issues, and you had a particularly rough night."

"So I'm banned from the shop because it's too loud?" Claire asked, checking her phone, noting three
messages from Alfie.

"You're not banned. But I have to play the parent-card on this one. You're not in trouble, but it's for your own good." Cas answered, "I'm going to go to the large bookstore and the Costco, it's a bit of a drive, do you want to go, or just take it easy today?"

"The bookstore with the tshirts?"

Cas nodded.

"Yeah, okay."

Alfie kept checking his phone, unwilling to call or send another message, unsure how many texts would be too many. And the first one had been long, and split into two. He re-read what he'd sent, second guessing whether his words had been enough.

He had apologized, because she seemed uncomfortable that it had happened. He had asked if she was okay. He had said that he'd like to know if she wanted to talk about it or not, and that he would be fine with either option. It all seemed right. But still, he'd had no reply.

The office door slammed shut, making him look up, despite the fact that he was around the corner from the hallway, and wouldn't have seen who'd come in.

Dean was out discussing something with the foreman again, and Alfie, fully expecting Julie, approached the hallway just in case it was a customer.

"Do you have to shut the door that loud?" Alfie asked.

"I dunno," Julie asked, "Do you have to stare at my ass like that?"

"I don't stare at you." Alfie replied flatly, turning to go back to the garage.

"You could... I wouldn't care." Julie said, sitting down to log in.

"No thanks. Seen the baboon exhibit enough times."

Julie's jaw dropped as he left the room.

His phone chirped as he got back to the garage.

'Not upset with you, my phone was downstairs. Im ok'

As relief sank in, another came through, 'Not going to be at work today, my dad wants to shop. Call later?'

Alfie was about to start typing when Dean walked in from outside, prompting Alfie to stuff his phone back in his pocket.

"Claire's not coming in today."

"Yeah, well, some people can handle the noise, some can't." Dean replied, "I already knew... And her dad is trying to figure out what to get her for her birthday, so if she didn't bring that up..."

"Kevin warned me."
"Good." Dean replied.

"Yeah, he also said to go small, since it hasn't been very long."

"No, ignore that part. Claire's not the type to have an easy time accepting gifts aside from birthdays and Christmas, so go ahead and get her something nice."

"Okay."

"You pull that headache rack yet?" Dean asked.

Alfie shook his head.

"Get that done, you need some time out of here. Watch for snakes."

"Yep." Alfie grabbed the bag of tools and the work gloves next to them as Dean went to his office. He was about to walk out when Julie was suddenly standing close by.

"Found one." he muttered.

"You're really rude." Julie sneered, "You owe me an apology."

Alfie gave his usual non-threatening smile, "All right... I'm sorry you're here."

Julie scoffed, "I'll tell Dean what you called me."

"You should hear what he calls me." Alfie said with a shrug. He waved toward the closed office door halfway down the hall, "Did you want me to wait?"

"So you think you can just hurt someone's feelings because you're cute?" Julie asked, putting her hand on her hip.

Alfie turned to face her directly, his voice firm, "You called Claire a caveman in a dress. Don't think I forgot."

"All I want is an apology. Claire might be on my list, but you don't have to be. We can be friends."

"When pigs fly. So, unless...? No? Okay, then." Alfie replied, and walked out of the garage.

"You're not going to ask me not to embarrass you?" Linda asked, as they made their way to the front door.

"You can't, mom. I've raised my level of consciousness past having a sense of shame. Just be yourself, and hopefully these people are as cool as Margaret."

"And if they aren't?" Linda asked, passing him the large covered bowl.

Kevin lowered his voice, "Then we turn them in to the IRS for running an illegal pet rock fighting ring."

"I know I didn't drop you on your head that hard." Linda replied as Kevin rang the doorbell, shooting her a mischievous smile.

Margaret answered the door and led them to the back yard, taking the bowl from Kevin to put it on a nearby picnic table.
"Kevin, good to see you." Mr Danes walked up, fairly intimidating, despite a barbecuing apron, an oversized spatula in one hand, and a large, chunky baby boy on his hip, a bottle of beer by the neck just under the baby.

"Hi. This is my mom, Linda Tran. Mom, this is Margaret's dad." Kevin said, putting on his best manners.

"Your old man couldn't make it?" Mr Danes asked.

"No, sir. Not for the last decade or so." Kevin replied.

"Huh... Well, I can't very well shake her hand like this, where'd Margaret get to?"

Kevin reached, offering his hands to the baby, who reached into a lean for Kevin.

"Don't see that every day." Mr Danes commented as Kevin took the boy, taking the bottle into the same hand as the spatula, and shaking Linda's hand, "Don't drop him, now, that's my grandson."

"He's had plenty of practice babysitting." Linda commented.

"Is that right? Big family?"

"Just the two of us, actually." Linda replied, "But he's good at it, and can easily turn it down if he needs to focus on his school work."

Kevin jerked his head toward his mother, "She won't let me get a real job until I finish school."

Mr Danes looked to Kevin again, "You know, I served my community as a police officer in Colorado Springs for over fifteen years, I've seen a lot of men with a lot of guts. Most of them, before they have kids of their own, scared out of their wits if you hand 'em a baby."

"Girls babysit all the time, so in the interest of gender equality, I refuse to be intimidated, or just write it off as women's work."

Mr Danes laughed, and clapped Kevin on the shoulder, "I don't know what the hell you're smoking, but a boy your age who isn't scared of this little shit machine puking all over him is okay by me. C'mon, Linda, let me introduce you to the missus."

Margaret suddenly appeared at Kevin's side as he watched his mother cross the yard, speaking cordially with Margaret's parents.

Kevin held his smile, although the rest of his face was starting to give it away.

"So... um... the other night when you told me that thing... not judging, I swear to God, not judging, it changes nothing, I swear..." Kevin hissed, "Please tell me who's kid this is?"

"Are you freaking out, honey?" Margaret asked with a grin.

"Margaret, please, I have been freaking out since your dad said this is his grandson." Kevin answered, "I just need to know before I put my foot in my mouth big time."

"He's my nephew. My sister's in town, she'll be back in a bit."

"You didn't warn me... Like, at all..."

Margaret laughed, "You're fine."
"This is why men die younger... You're torturing me." Kevin adjusted the boy, turning so he could see Margaret as well, "You see that, champ? Your auntie plays mean... Yes, she does."
Monday morning, Claire arrived late, and Julie was already at the desk.

Julie scooted the chair back as Claire clocked in, "Did I forget to show you anything on here, or are you good for today?"

"I was good from day one, ask your man." Julie muttered.

Claire rolled her eyes, "You're on your own... Stay out of the garage."

"Why? Can't take a little competition?"

"Ever had a car fall on you?... Or just houses?" Claire asked, before leaving the room.

She quickly got her coveralls on, not bothering to zip them all the way, and started out the open door of the first bay to ask Dean what she should start on.

A small picnic type shade structure had been set up away from the shop, and Dean was crouched next to the car it shaded, passing something to Alfie, below it.

"What the heck?"

"Yeah," Dean answered, "We still have work to do, anything we can get done out here keeps us from getting too far behind."

"Right... I need to talk to you." Claire said quietly. Alfie started to get out from under the car, "Not you, you're fine. Nothing to do with you."

"Oh... 'kay." Alfie replied, continuing his task as Dean followed Claire further away. Alfie smirked, muttering to himself, "...she thinks I'm 'fine...'"

"What?" Dean asked bluntly, secretly bracing himself.

"Problem with Julie." Claire answered.

"You have a problem with her?"

"No, you do. I'm just telling you about it. She came in late Friday, logged her hours wrong, wouldn't put it right, and said she was going to change my times and overcharge people to get me fired... Just, you have cameras in there, maybe use them, before she screws up the whole business."

Dean nodded, "Okay. Why does she have it in for you?"

"You saw my car? That's her clique... Honestly, I can't think of any other reason she'd want to be here, and I really tried to come up with one."

Dean rubbed his forehead, reminding himself exactly why he didn't date girls during high school, "Right... Okay, stay out of her way so she doesn't drag you into this, and give her enough rope, all right? I'll take it from here... She say anything else?"

Claire shook her head, "Nothing that had to do with the shop."

"Keeping it professional, good job. Why don't you go grab the oil filter, and an air filter while you're
"You really can't take the noise, can you?" Claire called.

Dean shook his head, "Gotta feed the dog."

Claire soon returned to the car with the filters, and sat down beside the wheel, eyeing the jack suspiciously, "You okay in there?"

"Yeah, it's not too bad." Alfie answered, "Might be the ground, but I think it's starting to cool off... Where'd Dean go?"

"Taking care of the dog." Claire replied, passing him the oil filter, and getting up to do the air filter, careful not to lean on the car, "Don't we have ramps?... Seems like it would be a lot safer with ramps."

"Yeah, but this jack works. I checked first." Alfie said with a chuckle.

"Great... How much longer are you going to be down there?"

"That's what she said." Alfie said with a quiet chuckle.

Claire's eyebrows nearly met, and she tried to shake it off, but it had been incredibly out of character.

"You're sure you're okay?"

"Yeah... Did Dean get that oil filter yet?" he asked.

Claire dropped to the ground quickly to look at him. His face was pale, and his hair was drenched with sweat. His hands were getting shaky, "I just gave you the oil filter."

"Oh..." Alfie ran the back of his hand across his forehead.

"Get out here." Claire said in a pleading tone.

"I have to... um..."

"C'mon, we'll go find Dean."

"Why?..." Alfie asked.

Claire was starting to get concerned, "Are you drunk?"

"I maybe have last when..."

"That makes no sense at all. C'mon, get out here." Claire waited, but when he didn't attempt to move, she took hold of his leg, and pulled, throwing her weight into it.

Alfie was not exactly coherent, "Hey, I, uh...Huh... We said not at work."

Claire ignored him, certain something was wrong, and hauled him to his feet, pulling his arm over her shoulder, going straight to Dean's door. The front door was open, and he didn't stumble too much going up the steps. "Dean?... Need some help..."

Claire fumbled with the screen door as Dean came from the kitchen, carrying the bottle and Nick, "What now?"
As Claire got Alfie inside, Dean dragged a hand across the side of Alfie's neck quickly as she moved to get him to the couch.

"You're not sweating. Ditch the coveralls, I'll get you a gatorade. Claire, shut the door and crank up the A.C."

Claire didn't stop moving as she followed Dean's orders, but called after him as he went back to the kitchen, "He's not making any sense."

"Yeah, well, he's been out in the heat for a few hours, too much sun..." Dean came back, passing Alfie a bottle of blue liquid.

Claire went back to the couch as Dean pulled out his phone, dialing the line for the shop. Alfie looked exhausted and disoriented, and he hadn't moved. With an exasperated look, she sat down, unzipped his coveralls, and tried to get him to cooperate with pulling his arms free.

Alfie looked down at her hands, then back to her face, "If you're gonna take my clothes off, you could at least kiss me first."

Dean came back, putting his phone away, "Okay, Julie's coming in, we're gonn-"

"No, she's not invited..." Alfie interrupted, firmly, and much louder than his usual speaking voice.

"Are you freaking kidding me right now?" Claire asked, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"I'm hungover."

Dean put his hand to his own forehead, thoroughly fed up, "Awesome... You knew you'd be out in the sun today, so you dehydrate yourself. Good plan, jackass."

"Hey, if you want me to get back in the chair, that's fine, but Claire gets to sit on my lap." Alfie slurred. "She likes sitting on my lap."

"Claire, you don't have to be here, he'll be okay, if he hasn't given himself permanent brain damage." Dean said quickly.

Alfie waved a hand toward him, "Yeah, Dean can protect me."

"From what?" Dean asked.

"Julie." Alfie said.

The door opened without a knock as Julie let herself in, her ever present cell phone in hand, "Okay, now what? Announcing an employee of the month, or something equally lame?"

Claire took Alfie's hand, and started working at the rolled cuff, hoping to make some progress.

"Okay, here's where we're at, it's too loud in the building, you know they tortured people with music before? Same thing, and it's too hot to work outside." Dean said, motioning Julie to his chair, "This isn't as short term as it could be, but the crew needs daylight. Inside the building, we don't. I can run intake during the day, who's willing to come in when the crew stops for the day? Around four or five, to maybe ten?"

"Do we get a differential?" Julie asked with a long suffering sigh.

"We won't really need someone handling phones that late, I don't think you'll have more than a
couple of hours, but if you want the differential, that's fine." Dean answered, turning to Claire, who'd
gotten one of Alfie's arms out of his sleeve, and Alfie, who had let his head drop back, "You two, however, I need in the garage, we'll only have a few workable hours, and I expect we're gonna fall behind fast, but anything is better than nothing."

"What happened to him? Aside from Claire, obviously..."

Dean shot Julie a warning look.

"Hey!" Alfie responded loudly, lifting his head and gesturing to his lap, "At least if she were gonna
grab my junk, she's got permission... You're just... You... You suck."

Julie started laughing hard.

Dean turned to Julie, "Did you grab him?"

"Come on, what guy is gonna care?" Julie said, her laughter dying down.

"Lots of guys." Dean answered firmly, "Claire, did you show her how to access the cameras?"

Claire shook her head, opening the sports drink Alfie still hadn't managed, and making sure it was
firmly in his hand before letting go, "I knew I was forgetting something."

"I swear, I need a separate HR department for each one of you... Julie, you're suspended until it's
sorted out. I'll walk you back over to get your things." Dean said, "Claire, you okay with him?"

"Yeah, if he gets rowdy I'll let him fall on the floor." Claire replied with a nod.

"Christ, it was a joke." Julie said loudly.

"Actually, grabbing somebody like that is called sexual assault. I'm sure a lawyer can explain it
better." Dean replied, following her to the door.

As the door closed, Claire took the half empty bottle from Alfie's hand, setting it down, "You still
need to lose a layer."

"Yeah?" Alfie asked.

"Yeah... Are you okay? I mean, apart from the... you acting all kinds of stupid thing."

Alfie shrugged, "Just kind of pissed off at her. I mean, that's how Kevin cheats at Call of Duty, but
that's...uh..."

Claire gave him a blank look, "I feel like I should be more surprised by that..."

"Yeah, forget that part." Alfie mumbled.

"I can't... I need to remember not to ever play that game with you guys." Claire replied, working on
his second sleeve.

"Okay... But anyway... Julie... she sucks."

"So you said... I kind of called her a witch this morning."

Alfie grinned, "Nice... I called her a... something. She got pissed off."
"Are we horrible people?" Claire asked.

"Maybe. At least to her." Alfie started tugging at the edge of her coveralls, "Am I the only one getting naked?"

"You're not getting naked, you're keeping your clothes on."

"I did that last time, too." Alfie smirked.

"When Dean gets back, I'm gonna go. It's been weird." Claire said quietly.

"You're leaving?" Alfie looked crushed.

"I'll be back to work after the crew goes, if you're still hanging around. I don't think you can drive like this." Claire answered.

"I said something wrong, didn't I?"

Claire shook her head, "It doesn't count. You're a mess. I figured that out before I pulled you out from under the car."

"I'm heavier than you... pretty sure... you're really strong." Alfie said, struggling the rest of the way out of the coveralls and kicking them to the floor. In his efforts, he slipped to the side and landed mainly in her lap.

"I've been hearing that a lot lately." Claire replied, fluffing his hair a bit to get it to dry faster.

"Will you stay if I shut up?" Alfie asked softly.

Claire turned his question over in her mind, "Actually, can I ask you something, as long as you've completely forgotten what a filter is?"

"Yeah."

"You remember when you fell in the hot tub?"

Alfie grinned, "I didn't look."

"There was something in your mom's closet, looked like a pile of black rags..." Alfie's face sobered, "I figured out what it was pretty fast when I saw the cuts up the sleeves... Why would you throw it in there?"

Alfie struggled slightly, and sat up, "Sorry... um... I'm not trying to keep you here."

"Hey."

"I just really like spending time with you." Alfie looked around, and she passed him the half finished drink.

"Why would you keep that jacket?"

"Trophy." Alfie replied with a shrug.

"A trophy?"

"Yeah. Championship match, me versus the road. I won."
"And threw it into your mom's closet."

Alfie shifted to lean against the back of the couch, not looking at her, "I was upset."

Claire took a deep breath, "Well, good to know your filter came back."

"I got off the phone letting her know I was home safe, and that I was going to have Kevin and his mom helping me out. She made it really clear I wasn't a priority. I figured there was enough blood in the jacket to make a rotting corpse smell in the closet, but it didn't work... Just forgot it was there."

Claire was quiet as he drained his drink and slouched lower on the couch, letting the back support his head.

The sounds of the machines running outside stopped, leaving a heavy silence.

"I know I'm clingy." Alfie said quietly, breaking the intense quiet of the room.

"You're not."

"Yeah, I am. I try really hard not to be, but it's a fight." Alfie looked into his empty bottle, "And you shove people away."

"You noticed that, huh?"

"Kevin told me you hit your dad one time."

"Yeah... I've been in therapy since then. I'm doing a lot better." Claire replied.

Alfie nodded, "Cool... I'm kinda jealous that he stuck with you."

"Are you kidding? I was scared he was going to send me back to my mom in California... This is really depressing."

"You ever try to hit someone when they're hugging you?" Alfie asked, turning to look at her.

"No?... Why?"

"Because if I hold on tight enough, you won't be able to get in a good swing." Alfie replied with a grin.

"Gosh, that sounds healthy." Claire joked.

"I'm just saying, it could work." Alfie chuckled.

Claire rolled her eyes, "So, the Call of Duty thing, was that before or after he dumped you for Margaret?"

"Last time was last week..."

"Wow..."

Dean closed the door behind him loudly as he entered the house again, quickly heading for his chair, Nick and her bottle still in tow, "Okay, Claire... I'm sorry, but I have to kick you out for a bit. Rest up, get an early dinner, and come back at four-thirty. Any time your dad wants you home is fine."

"Right. See you guys later." Claire said, and got up from the couch as Alfie gave a firm tug at the leg
of her coveralls.

"You knock that off right now." Dean said, looking directly at Alfie.

Dean set the puppy on the floor after the door closed, "All right, you doing any better?"

"I guess."

"Where, and what time?"

"What?"

"Julie."

"This morning. Bay three. I guess about ten-fifteenish."

Dean shook his head, "Why was she even in the garage?"

Alfie shrugged, "She wants to piss Claire off. Said she'd give me a blow job in the storage closet... Told her she could hit on the construction guys if she was that desperate."

"You say anything else to her?"

"Um... 'Fuck off?' And I kind of called her a pig the other day."

Dean chuckled, "Okay, yeah, that's pretty clear... Listen, if it's on camera, really clear, you might have a shot at pressing charges. If you want to report it, I'll back you up, but, honestly-"

"Nobody cares."

Dean went quiet. "Nobody's ever going to care unless more guys speak up. But yeah, most folks laugh it off, and tell you there's something wrong with you if you don't."

"No point... She's gone, though, right?"

"Yeah, she's gone, don't worry about that." Dean replied, "Who are we calling to get you home?"

Alfie shrugged, "My uncle's in town."

"That explains the hangover. Does he restock every time he visits?"

Alfie shrugged, "Hey, how come I'm falling over but the guys building the new bays are out there, just fine?"

"You've been off the crutches for less than a month, you're not done healing... I swear, you guys timed your accidents or something... No more of that, I mean it."

"I'm really sorry." Ben said quietly.

Sam took a deep breath, "Yeah, that's... Don't worry about it."

Large, sharp pieces of glass stuck up around the hole where the solid window had been, before the branch had cracked, dropping at an angle once the bottom had hit the ground.

"I can help you fix it." Ben offered.
"No, I'm just going to call a repair place, it's not a big deal."

"Oh." Ben answered, "My dad would just fix it, but I would have to help."

"Yeah?... Why's that?"

"Because when you mess something up you're supposed to help make it right."

Sam shrugged, then nodded, "Okay... I mean, I guess I get it, but, I don't know how to fix a window, so, I'm gonna have a professional do it... And anyway, climbing trees is normal, so, just so you know, I'm not mad about that, either, it should have held."

Ben looked around at the damage, "I can pull the branch out of the way."

"Uh... sure. Yeah, just don't overdo it, okay? If it's too heavy, just leave it." Sam said and went back inside.

Jess had been watching them from the porch, and with an encouraging smile to Been, she followed Sam in.

"Hey... You look freaked out."

"Broken window, no big deal, right?" Sam replied, retrieving a bottle of water from the fridge.

Jess caught his eyes, "Yeah... except that you're acting weird about it."

"Am I?" Sam asked, "Maybe it's because he fell, if he got hurt, how would I explain that to Dean?"

Sam's agitated movements seemed to fill the tiny kitchen of the cabin.

"Sam, stand still, please."

Sam set the bottle down on the counter, and turned to Jess, his hands on his hips.

"Nobody's hurt. It's just a window. So what's wrong?"

"I... I almost yelled at him... I mean, it was like I could hear everything my dad would have said in my head, and it was like it was coming out."

"You didn't, though. And even if you had raised your voice or something, you would have apologized and he'd be okay."

"Jess, I can't... I just-..." Sam swung his hand in an 'I don't know' gesture, and picked up his water again.

"You're not him... Neither is Dean... Ben is a great kid, nobody's hurting him, and sure, this is stressful, but you didn't go off on him." Jess stepped closer and started rubbing his arm, "And what about when we were watching Caleb, and he wouldn't say anything but 'no' for two hours, so you started questioning him? It was cute, and funny, and he was laughing the whole time, he was having fun... If we have kids, you'll be a good father, and if not, you can still be a good uncle... I'm not worried."

"I am."

"How are you going to get your motorcycle home?" Crowley asked. 
In the passenger seat of the luxury sedan, Alfie still looked as though he'd been through the ringer, but he'd at least stopped making stupid comments to Dean. He was fairly certain a few of his attempted puns were going to cost him later.

"I'll get a ride and pick it up, or I'll drive in, and have Claire bring my car over, then take her home."

"The lovely lady mechanic?"

"Yeah... You should meet her while you're here, you won't be rude to her like Naomi." Alfie said quietly, "I mean, you wouldn't, right?"

"Really, Samandriel... I do know how to behave myself sometimes." Crowley replied, turning onto the street.

"Yeah, well, if you'd lay off Kevin, I might believe it."

Crowley gave a small shrug, and pulled into the driveway, "When should I expect to make her acquaintance?"

"I don't know, she's headed back in later, so I can't just invite her over... The construction is making everything complicated." Alfie answered, as they both headed for the kitchen.

"You know, I'm really not all that convinced."

"About what?"

"Well, I haven't met her, but you don't sound, well, close, per se... Friendzone, I believe the kids are calling it."

Alfie smirked, "We aren't 'just friends.' She's my girlfriend."

"Of course. What was I thinking? I'm sure a quiet young man such as yourself has no difficulty talking to girls. I'm also sure Kevin's coached you. Any time he doesn't notice I'm around, he won't stop talking."

"Okay, how much proof do you want?" Alfie challenged.

Crowley shrugged, "I'd believe it from the other horse's mouth."

Alfie nodded, retrieving his phone from his pocket, and setting it on the counter, pulling up Claire's number, and pressing the speakerphone option as it started to ring, "Okay, not a word."

Crowley made a motion of drawing a zipper across his lips.

Claire picked up, "Hey... Feeling better yet?"

"Yeah, a lot, actually. It's probably a good thing you got me out from under that car when you did."

"Well, I already know you'd do the same for me."

"What are you up to?" Alfie asked.

"Fixing a sandwich. My robot broke, got the prom dress stuck in the cheese intake manifold."

"I'll help you fix it tomorrow." Alfie replied with a chuckle, "Listen, um... I was just wondering, you know, I guess it was Thursday night, when we fell asleep, just... Was that enough pillows?... I mean,
I was pretty comfortable, and you seemed really relaxed, but, I could get more pillows."

"I really don't need pillows so much as I need help with that thing you were doing."

Alfie smirked as Crowley's expression reflected his thoughts, "Well, I meant what I said, I'll help with that any time I can... I just got home, Dean’s not going to let me work tonight, so I won't see you, but I'm sorry I kept cracking jokes while you were trying to help."

The line went quiet for a brief moment, before Claire's concerned voice came back, "You didn't ride home like that, did you?... Because I could've driven you, it's not like I have anything better to do."

"No... no, any time my girlfriend has to pick me up off the ground, I'm too far gone to get on the road. But I didn't think your dad would let me crash at your house, so I got my uncle to pick me up."

"Well, don't be embarrassed... right?"
Claire silently stalked through the house, her morning eating away at her mind.

She wanted to head to the shop, but it was too early, and nothing seemed like a decent distraction.

Cas came downstairs with a loaded clipboard and a pen, not unusual for him. Claire secretly wondered if that one wall of his office ever struck him as creepy, too. He went for his usual spot on the couch, absorbed in his paperwork.

"Hey." Claire said, sitting down, "I need boyfriend advice."

"I'm not sure how much help I'd be, I don't date straight men, and I'm uncomfortable discussing the physiological side of things with you. But I'm listening."

"I think you can help with this... Julie said she was going to get Alfie to cheat on me, she said that a few days ago. Then, this morning, he got heat sick, right? So I get him inside, get Dean, and Alfie's saying weird stuff left and right, and Dean called her in to say he was changing hours, and it came out that she... well, she did something."

"What happened?" Cas asked.

"He was mad at her about it. He said she, y'know, grabbed him."

"That's not cheating, that's unwanted and inappropriate contact." Cas said quietly.

"I get that, but... I think this is partly my fault."

"Unless you suggested she do that, I don't see how." Cas replied.

Claire grimaced, "I should have told her to leave him alone, but I was worried that was exactly what she wanted me to say."

"What did you say instead?"

"I told her go ahead and try... So I guess I kind of caused this."

Cas looked surprised, "I didn't realize you had that much faith in him... But, no, unless she specifically said she was going to do what she did, you had every right to believe her actions would be socially appropriate."

Claire gave him a confused look, "There's a socially appropriate way to steal someone's boyfriend?"
"Of course." Cas answered, turning back to his paperwork, "There's a socially appropriate way to do anything."

"Okay, what about robbing a bank?"

"Ask Wallstreet, or the government... But you could have expected her to attempt flirting and possibly a few dates rather than just making him uncomfortable right away."

"What do I do if she tells him what I said?"

"Don't give her that kind of power, tell him first, and tell him why. But do try to keep in mind that he has every right to be upset about the situation, perhaps even irrational... Although I think he's far less likely to involve a tire iron."

Claire slept in Wednesday morning, knowing she'd be better rested for another late shift.

Her phone buzzed on her desk as she started to get dressed. Alfie had sent her a photo of a drawing, it was a cartoon, but clearly by his own hand.

A small potted cactus had been wrapped tightly with duct tape, the end still attached to the roll. The roll sat on the ground next to it, and needles stuck out from all directions. Above the roll was a speech bubble that read "Much better."

Claire couldn't help smiling, and saved the photo before responding, 'My new lock screen, thx'

Unable to work from home throughout the entire summer, Cas was in his office at the school, trying to ignore the echoes from a summer program still running.

"Hey, where's Leslie? I wanted to find out when we're getting that new vending machine in the work room." Gabe said, leaning in the doorway.

"In two weeks." Cas replied, not looking up.

Gabe didn't take Cas' disinterest as a hint, and wandered in, stopping at the filing cabinet in the corner and picking up one of the frames, "Woah... who is the stone cold fox?"

Knowing full well he didn't have any photographs of anyone else in his office, either at work or at home, Cas gave a targetless glare that ended somewhat towards the door, "I believe you referred to her as my 'little munchkin.'"

Gabe cleared his throat, and held the photo closer to his face, "Ah. I see it now, well, you oughta get some better light in here... She's a real sweetheart, I'm sure she'll be gorgeous when she's all grown up."

"Right."

"Hm... No delicate way to ask now without sounding like a pervert, but she got the candy, right?"

"Yes, thank you. She was quite happy about it, too, it was a pleasant distraction."

"How's she doing now?"

"She's back to work already. It's been a quick recovery."
"Good, good. That's wonderful news..." Gabe nodded, then gave a heavy shrug, "So, listen, I'm trying, here. I mean, we have to work together, I took your advice on that Lytton kid, and everything went peachy. We've got a whole school full of these kids, and it's our job to make sure as few of them turn into assholes as possible. This is supposed to be a joint effort, and it's like I'm talking to a wall, here. I think we should have a team building activity for the whole staff."

"I'm here to keep the school running smoothly, not entertain you." Cas replied firmly.

"Okay... Okay, look, I've apologized. And I've grown as a person since then. Just to show you I'm serious, I want to fix you up with my cousin Lewis. I really think you'd hit it off, he has no sense of humor, either."

Cas sat back in his chair, "Of course, because the last time you tried to fix me up went so well... At any rate, I'm seeing someone."

"Heh, right. Word has it you've been single for years."

"I'm not discussing this with you."

"Fine. Small town like this, I'm sure you've got your choice of fellas. Completely explains the lack of a name, though." Gabe replied.

"I wasn't going to say anything until he's had a chance to talk to his son about this, but I suppose it's as good a time as any, since he's out of town, and this could effect my professional life," Cas said wearily, "I'm seeing Ben's father."

"Winchester? The mechanic all the single moms have been drooling over? I knew that guy was too pretty to be straight. You know, they say mechanics can really work a piston."

"My daughter is a mechanic at Dean's shop."

Gabe rolled his eyes, "Not sure how I keep managing to screw myself like this."

"If you didn't, I'd have to suggest it to you." Cas replied dryly.

"All right, all right... This is going to be a long school year. What's it gonna take to get where we're on the same page?"

"We are on the same page, Gabriel. You're an ass, and I want to keep my job. As long as that's understood, there'll be no problems."

Gabe shrugged, "That is the absolute best I'm going to get from you, isn't it?"

Cas didn't look up, "Well, I could suggest you bend over, but I'm taken."

Gabe bust out laughing, "Oh, man, there we go, that's the Cas I remember... We'll make this work. Not like that, but it'll work, you'll see."

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Kevin squirmed and tried to keep his weight up off of Margaret as she pulled him closer, tugging at his waistband.

"Margaret," his voice was disrupted by her lips and tongue, "Quit that, you're gonna make me fall on you."

"That's the point." Margaret growled back.
Frustrated, Kevin broke away, coming up to sit on his heels between her legs, breathing heavily, "I don't... You're just... really small..."

Margaret looked shocked, her arms instinctively moving to cover her exposed bra, "Are you seriously comparing me to Reese right now?"

Kevin's eyebrows came together in confusion, "What?... No, not that, those are awesome, just... all of you, the whole thing, compared to me... I don't want to hurt you."

"You're worried you're gonna squish me?"

"Um, yeah?"

"Same way I've been trying to get you to squish me the last five minutes?"

Kevin shrugged, "Yeah, well, what if you can't breathe?"

Margaret kicked at his thigh gently with the back of her heel, "Just c'mere."

Kevin slowly lowered himself over her, slowly letting her take his weight as he kissed her softly.

Margaret snaked her hands up the back of his shirt, gathering the fabric with her thumbs as she went, tugging at it firmly when she reached his shoulders to get him to struggle out of it.

"What's that?" Margaret asked, spotting the white bandage on the left side of his chest as his shirt came away.

"Tattoo, tell you later."

"You got a tattoo?" Margaret asked, giving a squeak as he nipped her earlobe.

"Later..."

Kevin stuck a thumb into her waistband at her hip, and paused, his hormones making his mind hazy, "How far were we going with this?"

"When does your mom get home?"

"Uh... four hours."

Margaret gave a sly smile and kissed him, taking his lower lip between her teeth as she tugged the front of her jeans open and reached for Kevin's hand, "Keep kissing me."

Kevin was only too happy to follow her verbal, and physical instructions as she guided his hand into her clothes. He tried hard to place what he was feeling with what he knew to exist only from porn and diagrams he'd found online, but had difficulty distinguishing soft, wet flesh from soft, wet flesh. He kept his hand relaxed, carefully picking up and imitating her delicate motions, until she adjusted her hold and pressed him in deeper, engulfing two of his fingers.

Margaret's breathing was noticeably different, strained slightly as he held perfectly still, "What's the matter?"

"Um..." Kevin whimpered slightly, "That's amazing..."

Margaret pulled him closer by him shoulders, and kissed him harder, rocking her hips against his hand, giving a soft hum of pleasure.
The thin sheen of sweat on Kevin's skin had greatly affected the adhesive on the bandage over his tattoo. The edge had peeled down, catching on the strap of her bra.

"Hang on a second," Kevin whispered, moving to reach it with his free hand.

Margaret was quicker, "I got it..."

Margaret fumbled with the bandage before Kevin could even slow her down, "Hang on, I gotta tell you-"

Margaret looked up into his eyes with an anger he swore he could taste, "Get out of me right now, or I'll rip your balls off."

Kevin gingerly pulled his hand away, "Please give me two seconds-"

"You can have your two seconds with Kimberly, you sack of shit!" Margaret said venomously, shoving him away, hard, quickly fastening her jeans and grabbing her shirt, "Fucking tell me you never did this stuff and you go and brand yourself with some bitch's name, fuck you!"

"I can expl-"

"Fuck you!" Margaret yelled, as he did his best to stay close to her without physically stopping her from leaving as she quickly left the room.

"Margaret, please-"

"I am not about to be somebody's side chick, this is over, and you're a total bastard." Margaret reached the top of the stairs, still shaking in her fury, "Don't call, don't text, just stay away from me, you got that?"

"Watch-" Kevin saw her start to slip when she missed a step, and reached out for her, grabbing her hard by her upper arm as she started to fall. He carefully wrapped his other arm around her as they both wound up sitting down hard on the top stairs.

Margaret shook with pain and anger as the tears started.

"...Are you okay?" Kevin asked softly.

Margaret choked down a sob, elbowing him in the ribs as she squirmed away, going quickly down the stairs and out the front door as fast as possible.

Kevin stared down at the front door for a few long minutes before laying back onto the floor behind him, fighting back his own emotions as he buried his face with his hands and rolled onto his side.

Dean relented, and played the video back a third time.

"I'm sorry, I just don't see how this is such a big deal. It's not like she hurt him or something."

Dean rubbed his temple, "Really?"

Julie took a glance at her mother and settled smugly deeper into the back of her chair.

"I'm sure they were just joking around. Clothes stayed on, it's fine."

"It's inappropriate. He was backing away from her, if you put her in his place, with him doing the
grabbing, he'd be going to jail. Your daughter is lucky he isn't pressing charges."

"It's just one of the mechanics, though, not a customer. Why should she get fired for that?"

Dean found the conversation draining, "You can't tell me it's okay for someone to just grab somebody else like that."

"Oh, I'm sure he didn't mind telling his friends about it later, boys are pigs." Julie's mother chuckled.
At Dean's unamused stare, she pretended to correct herself, "Well, they grow out of it, of course. But, I mean, Julie is fine, he's fine, so I'm not even mad."

"Boys are pigs?" Dean asked.

The woman nodded.

"He wants nothing to do with her, and she does this, but he's the pig?"

"I'm not sure what you're getting at."

"Okay, let me spell it out for you... Your daughter sexually harassed someone."

"But she's a girl!" she replied, angrily emphasizing each word.

"Get out."

"He wants to meet me?... Why?" Claire asked. It was dark outside, but the inside of the shop was well lit. She sat cross-legged next to the empty wheel well, brake pads in hand.

Alfie was in the next bay, replacing a broken headlight, "He likes to be involved? I don't know. That's a parent kind of thing, right?"

"I guess."

"He's leaving tonight- well, by now he's already left, so it'll be a while. I mean, if you want to."

"He's kind of the only family you have, isn't he?" she asked.

Alfie shrugged, "More of a relative, actually. But at least he doesn't actually want anything from me, like Naomi does. Just kind of shows up sometimes."

"That's weird."

"That's my life." Alfie replied.

Dean's office door flew open and Julie's mother stomped out, her words hurried and unintelligible. Claire caught an uncomfortable look on Alfie's face as the commotion continued to the front of the shop resulting in a slammed door that made him flinch.

Dean grumbled his way back into the garage, quickly picking up where he'd left off on a small pickup truck's exhaust system, "Claire... just so you know, if I get sued for this, you're gonna get a lot of questions. Do me a favor and be honest about it."

"Yeah? Which part?" she called from her spot on the floor.

"All of it."
"Like where I was sitting when you offered me a job?" Claire asked with a smirk.

Dean didn't answer.

"Hey, maybe they'd want to hear how you gave orders about prom dates..."

Dean shook his head, "Claire..."

"Or how much you spent on that portrait of that high school girl that works for you." Alfie said quietly, joining in.

"Guys, not funny..."

"Oh, come on, like we wouldn't back you up?" Claire acted offended, "You don't trust us?"

"He has a rusted white van, you know." Alfie said quietly.

"And a puppy." Claire replied, "Can't say he's ever offered me candy, though."

"That's a junker, and the dog is Ben's." Dean said, clearly enough to be heard through the shop.

"Well, he does bribe us with food sometimes." Alfie mused.

"Yeah, kosher-vegan with extra bacon."

"Okay... Fun's over, whoever's done first gets to pull parts with a flashlight and a butterknife." Dean grumbled around a grunt as he struggled with the object in his hands before picking up a wrench.

Claire was wracking her brain for a witty comeback when Alfie chimed in, his words slowly paced, "So, you're saying we should be very careful to try to finish at the same time?"

Claire burst with laughter as Dean tossed the wrench to the floor and walked back to his house.

Cas had just stretched out on his bed when his phone began to ring.

With Claire still at work, at first he was alarmed to see Dean's number, and picked up right away.

"Hey, Cas... Had a break for a few minutes, wanted to check in on you, say hi, all that."

Cas couldn't help a small smile, "Hi... I'm glad you called, I have to tell you something... I'm sure you'll understand with the coming school year, I have to be upfront about possible familiarity between myself and a student..."

"Yeah?... You mean like, 'hey, I'm dating that one's dad'?"

"Exactly... Well, it was an opportune time. I'm sure Gabe won't have any reason to be in contact with Ben before August, so this shouldn't be a problem, right?" Cas asked, a hint of anxiety in his voice.

"Uh, no. And I get it, you have to protect yourself at work."

"Maybe I should have waited." Cas said, his tone changing.

"No... No, Cas, this is... I want to be open about this. It should be out there. And anyway, it's not like Uri couldn't have spread the word to the whole district by now, if he hasn't moved yet, it could have been old news already." Dean replied, "If anything, it just gives me a bigger push to tell Ben before it comes out some other way, huh?"
"I suppose you're right." Cas answered, "I just don't feel you should be pressured to say anything."

"It's not pressured, Cas, it's just not having enough space to chicken out of going for what I want... I promise."

Cas got up and went to his window, "Where are you, right now?"

"My kitchen. Where should I be?"

"I can think of a few places that would suffice."

"I bet you could." Dean replied, "But I left these two teenagers in the shop, and they were making sex jokes, so if you distract me in here with any comments about cooking oil or whatever, I might forget to check on them."

"Well, don't let me distract you. But if you'd like some company later on..."

"Are you gonna sneak out?"

"I might." Cas answered, "But now that you've mentioned cooking oil..."

"Hey, I gotta go, you know where I'll be."

"All right. In case I get caught up in something else, though, have a good night."

Ending the call, Dean put the phone back in his pocket, "Better one if you show up."

"Ten thirty, time to call it quits." Alfie said quietly, letting the hood fall closed.

"Yeah, soon. I gotta finish this."

"Anything leaking or drying out?"

"No, but it's nearly done." Claire replied.

"Claire, it'll wait."

"It's easier if I can clear the bay now."

Alfie shook his head, "It would take you another half an hour. It's not going anywhere. Besides, if you keep rushing the repairs you're going to make a mistake... People take these things out on the highway, you know."

"We're finishing up with three more than we ended yesterday with."

Alfie shrugged, "What are they gonna do?... Take their car to the next town? It's broken. Not pay us? We send the plate and work order to the court house. But barreling through to get it out of the way is a bad idea."

Claire looked up as Alfie offered her a hand up from the floor.

As she got to her feet with his help, he pulled her close, "Can I walk you home?"

"Why? Because this is a bad neighborhood?"

"Yeah. Major drug problem, break-ins, it's pretty bad."
Claire chuckled, "Yeah, I guess... I need to talk to you anyway."

Alfie had a feeling of dread wash over him, "Okay..."

They set about the usual tasks of closing the bay doors and getting the lights, and Claire tapped on the doorframe to Dean's office as Alfie went to clock them out at the desk. "We're heading out."

Dean looked up, looking rough, and noticed Claire looked about as worn out as he felt. "Yeah... You okay? Different time isn't getting to be too much for you?"

"I'll live." Claire answered with a yawn.

Dean nodded and Claire headed for the door.

Alfie was quiet until they'd gotten to the road, "So, you wanted to talk?"

"Yeah, I think I messed up big time." Claire replied. She was tired and regretful, and both weighed heavily in her tone.

"What? How?" Alfie asked.

"Um... Julie said she was going to make a pass at you. I should have told you."

"I know... Actually, I heard you guys."

"You heard that?"

Alfie shrugged, "Yeah, well... you knew I was in the building, and I'm sure you heard it when the machines stopped. It's not like I was trying to spy on you, I just figured you knew."

"So... what else did you hear?" Claire asked, concerned.

"Uh..." Alfie could have repeated her words verbatim, but chose to play dumb, "I dunno, something like she could try, but you trust me, or something."

He couldn't her small, relieved smile in the dark, "You didn't say anything about it."

"Neither did you... But you were right. I mean, I wouldn't..."

"Yeah, but... I'm sorry. I feel like it's my fault."

"What else could you say?" Alfie mimicked a high voice, "'Keep your hands off my man, Julie. I'll rip out your hair extensions!' I mean, if she was looking for a fight, why give her what she wants, right?"

"So, what? You think I wouldn't fight for you?" Claire asked.

It struck Alfie that prior to Kevin's explanation, that was exactly what he had thought, "Well... if you had to, to keep me around, then I wouldn't really be worth fighting for, right?"

"Way to avoid the question." Claire replied tiredly.

"Okay... uh... I don't want you to. But I think you might... Probably... I mean, I'm sure I said something to make you uncomfortable the other day on Dean's couch, and you just kept trying to take care of me. You didn't bolt."
"I'm not the bolting type."

"I can tell... That's a big deal to me." Alfie stopped as she opened the gate, "So, I guess now that I think about it, yeah. You would, because you stand your ground... but I would rather you not get into any fights. I don't like the idea of somebody hurting you."

Alfie reached to embrace her, but Claire leaned on the fence, "But you got hurt. And that might be because I didn't just tell her to fuck off, or slam her head into the desk or something-"

"Hey!... I told her to fuck off, okay? So, that should have counted double, because that came straight from me. You didn't let her, and I'm really not hurt, just... irritated."

"Call of Duty?"

"Basically." Alfie shrugged, "It's not your fault, and that's it. No more to talk about."

"You could do better than me." Claire said quietly, staring at the ruts in the gravel road.

Alfie felt his heart wrench as he realized she meant it, "Take it back."

"What?"

"Take it back."

"But it's the truth."

"It's an opinion, and it sucks... What happened to you?" Alfie asked softly.

Claire shifted slightly, and turned to look down the road, then back toward the house, but Alfie's eyes never left her face.

"My friend Mick had this dog..." Alfie said quietly, taking his time, "Nice dog, really quiet, not exactly smart, but it was a dog... Came from the shelter. It was cool with everybody, except Mick's dad. He'd get home from work, and the dog would run and hide. He wasn't mean or anything, but you could tell, you know? Whoever had it before... Anyway, one day he's the only one home, the dog got it's paw stuck in the fence, and it was bleeding from trying to get free... It bit him the whole time he was getting it loose, but he wouldn't just leave it there... It didn't run away from him anymore after that."

Claire hooked her hand on the back of her neck, "I'm not sure if you're calling me a bitch or giving me permission to bite you."

Alfie looked away with a slightly embarrassed chuckle, "Well, I'm not calling you a bitch... But, you're talking about someone I care about, so be nice, okay?"

"So I do have permission to bite you, along with other things, if you even remember that part."

"Why? Is your dad not home?" Alfie asked, gesturing toward the house.

Claire chuckled, "Goodnight, Alfie."

Alfie gave a shy smile, "Kevin could have made that work."

Claire started for the door, only to have Alfie tug her back gently by the sleeve for a quick kiss before she went inside.
Chapter 33

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Okay, hope you're ready for the start of a real rollercoaster... I just blitzed through a few new chapters you're going to love, but as usual, I'm hogging them for tweekability and fine detailing.

Don't be fooled by the stuff in this chapter, it's been way too realistic to be something someone with this much trauma can just brush off.

Comments getting pissed off at the characters have actually been really amusing for me, because I know, I get pissed at them too, like, 'wtf ru doing?!' But real people make mistakes, and this is so much fun to write.

Thanks for reading and sharing this story with me. FW)

Dean sat at the kitchen table in the mostly empty house, looking down at the chunky, ball-shaped creature wagging at him.

She had started taking the occasional piece of puppy food from the bowl he'd gotten her, gnawing at it, leaving crumbs and she would drink the water, but it was going slowly, and she was still relying heavily on the bottle.

Dean tried to ignore her and focus on his pre-packaged frozen bowl of scrambled eggs, potatoes, and bacon, but she put her front paws up on the side of his leg, and gave a weak attempt at a howl.

"Nice try. Yours is over there. Don't like it? You can wait on a bottle."

At Dean's words and eye contact, she wagged harder and fell over, quickly getting back up and giving him a yap.

"I'm not falling for that one again."

Nick shifted clumsily and put one paw on his leg again.

Dean gave in, taking a small piece of bacon out of the eggs, and fed it to her, "Don't get used to it. That stops when Ben gets back. No people food for you."

In the back of his mind, however, Dean was well aware that was a load of crap.

Kevin spent two days tearing apart and reorganizing the attic, and finally having found the correct box, he took the government issued document, one of the few photos his aunt had taken and left in a closed envelope just in case Linda had decided she needed them later, and headed straight to Margaret's house.

He muttered to himself as he put the car in park, taking a few deep breaths to calm himself, "I'm gonna get murdered by a redneck... Yeah..."
He put the photo gently into his shirt pocket, unwilling to spring that on anyone, and got out of the car. He considered that she'd asked him to stay away, but he hadn't called or sent texts, and he felt sure she deserved an explanation.

He was prepared for anything. Tears, a punch to the face, anything. From either of them. And he was willing to take it.

Kevin checked that her father's car was in the driveway, rang the bell, and stepped back.

He could hear movement inside, and caught a glimpse of Margaret's look of disgust through the decorative glass on the door, but it didn't open. He was about to ring the bell again when it swung open.

Mr Danes looked down at him, his features hard, "You better have a damn good excuse for the bruise on my Maggie's arm, kid."

"I didn't hit her."

"No, but it sure looks like you grabbed her while she was walking away," he growled, "And that's not okay, either."

"She almost fell down the stairs... I was trying to keep her safe. She was upset, and wasn't looking where she was going."

Kevin held his angry gaze, refusing to look away, as badly as he wanted to.

"Right... And I bet you're here to tell her she's upset over nothing, you broke up with the other girl, and everything is fine?"

"No, sir... No, I didn't tell her that the tattoo she saw was my dead baby sister's name. And it's not healed up real well yet, so it's hard to tell that it's..." Kevin said, handing him the paper, and pulling the collar of his shirt down.

In the fading sunlight, Mr Danes could make out a pair of pale pink wings behind a silver infinity symbol that carried the name Kimberly in Linda's distinctive cursive. There was no mistake of the meaning behind it, not with a certificate of birth reading 'stillborn' and 'Baby Girl Tran' in his hands, dated a decade before.

"Okay... Say this is all true, she didn't say anything damn thing about how she got that bruise. So the fact that you even came over here--"

Kevin cut him off angrily, "I could never raise a hand to a woman, not after watching my father beat my mom so bad the baby died, okay? ...I don't care if she doesn't want to see me, she doesn't have to. But she deserves to know that she didn't get cheated on, and nobody was taking her place, and she's worth more than that, so she won't put up with anybody cheating on her in the future. That's it. That's the whole reason I'm here. Now if you want to kick my ass for coming here after she told me to get lost, that's fine by me, technically it's stalking, but don't let her think for another minute that some other girl was better or more important than she is."

Mr Danes stared down at Kevin in shock as Kevin angrily wiped away a tear as it formed, "Son, you got a lot of balls... I'll tell Margaret about the tat, either she'll call you, or I better never see you again. You got that?"

"Yes, sir." Kevin answered flatly. "Thank you."
Mr Danes handed him the piece of paper, and Kevin went back to his car.

Faced with the boredom of another early morning, despite the lack of rest work had been allowing them, Claire went to Alfie's rather than sit around the house waiting for work to start.

At some point halfway through a box of donuts, they'd agreed it had been a good idea, but the tone of their conversation soon changed.

Claire giggled at Alfie's comment about installing an 8-track player in Dean's car, "He'd turn you into a pancake."

"Might be worth it. Just for the look on his face." Alfie replied.

"I want to put a dock in the Chevelle." Claire said quietly, "But if I do that, might as well put in a better stereo too, right? And then where does it stop?"

Alfie shrugged, "Wherever you want, it's your car."

"Yeah. But what would Bobby say?"

"Bobby wouldn't care. He always put people first." Alfie said, "He'd be glad you were getting some use out of it."

"We should take it to the old airport." Claire said with a smirk.

"Um..."

"What?"

"I've already taken that one to the airport." Alfie said, turning a bit red.

"You took my car to the airport without me?"

"It wasn't your car then, it was Dean's, technically. And he wanted to run out some gas because it was sitting for so long, so he gave me the big gas cans, his card, and said to run it all the way out." Alfie couldn't sort out her expression.

"Okay... How fast does it go?"

"Um... I wasn't really going for speed..."

"What were you doing to my car?"

Alfie opened his mouth to speak, then closed it again.

"What?" she asked, suspicious.

"How's the alignment?"

Claire narrowed her eyes, "What did you do with my car?"

"I'm not sure I feel safe telling you." Alfie said quickly, starting to get up from the couch.

Claire climbed onto his lap, pinning his shoulders to the cushions, "You better tell me what you did."

"How about I just replace the tires I wore out?"
"You were doing burnouts, weren't you?"

Alfie shook his head.

"Donuts?"

Alfie glanced at the box on the coffee table, "Not with your car."

"Tell me."

"I was doing one-eighties... The steering in that thing is just... really tight... You wouldn't believe it."

Claire looked irritated for a moment, but it quickly changed to curious, "Okay, let's go... You're going to show me how."

Claire started to get up, but Alfie shook his head, and caught her waist.

"What?"

"I'm not going to show you how."

"Why?"

Alfie was quiet, "Same reason you won't get on the bike with me. You're gonna get scared."

Claire kissed him softly, "I'm not going to get scared."

"So you're just going to let me drive, take your car up to a high speed, and yank the wheel, stand on the brakes, and spin it around hard enough to throw you into the door... And you're still going to speak to me after that?" Alfie's voice was barely a whisper as his thumb slipped under the waistband of her shirt.

Claire's breathing got shaky, "I can handle it."

"You can't... If you let someone else be in charge, you'd fall apart."

"You can duct tape me back together later." she replied.

"I would have to."

Claire kissed him firmly, and feeling his thumb move against her waist, grasped his wrist and pulled his hand away.

Alfie looked at his wrist as she pulled back, still holding onto it, "That's not weird to you?"

"You think I'm weird?"

Alfie shrugged, "I'm not complaining."

Claire moved to kiss against the side of his neck, still holding his wrist away, feeling his other hand come to rest on her thigh, surprising her enough to make her jerk, nipping his soft skin.

Alfie choked down a small yelp that devolved to a mild hiss as he calmed himself.

Claire caught his other hand as it started to move.

"Hey..." he whispered, "You didn't forget what happened last time?"
He meant his words as a caution, but the memory spurred her efforts. She kissed him deeply, pulling both of his hands to the sides of her neck, and bringing her own to the waistband of his t-shirt, and tugged the whole thing up over his head in one smooth movement.

Alfie murmured something against her lips as he came back to them, wrapping his arms around her, pulling her close against his chest. He shifted to the edge of the couch, taking her weight with him like it was nothing, running a hand down her back, "Okay, before you grab my hands again, what do you want me to do?"

"Don't grab me." Claire replied breathlessly.

Alfie started to nod, but she gripped his shoulders tightly, and leaned in, rolling him sideways onto the couch, as he tried to maneuver them both, to no avail. He pulled the hem of her tank top up a few inches and dragged the pads of his fingers delicately across her skin making her shiver as she continued to kiss him.

Claire sat up and pulled her top off in what was almost frustration. Alfie's hands fell to her thighs as she let it fall, and she caught the stare he was giving her. "What?"

"Just..." Alfie shrugged, "Um..."

"It's the scar, isn't it?" Claire asked, her left arm coming to her side to cover it.

"Scar?... No, just... I don't know, your bra is..." Alfie cursed the lack of blood in his brain as she tried to piece together his thoughts through his few words.

"Lace breathes." Claire replied dismissively.

"Okay... Yeah, um... just... see right through it... it's really nice."

"Yeah, you should get one."

"Can I borrow this one?" Alfie asked with a smirk as he reached for her back.

Claire scoffed, leaning back down onto his chest, "You can try."

"You gonna make me give it back?" Alfie asked, as she dragged her lips against his collar bone, tangling her fingers in his hair.

He carefully ran his hands over the back of her bra looking for some hint of a clasp, somewhere, completely perplexed. He felt one of her hands slip between them as she came back to his lips, her hips sliding against him, her jeans rasping against his own. Her hand was gone again in a moment and her bare skin was against him.

Alfie pushed the straps down her shoulders, digging his bare heels into the couch cushions to help him adjust his position, which he had to immediately do again as he came down on one of her boots. She quickly had them off, and her hands were soon moving frantically at the fastenings of both pairs of jeans.

"Claire... Hey... um-" lips again. Nevermind.

Feeling a bit manic himself, he raised his hips, shoving his jeans down as she somehow managed to get out of her own.

Alfie took hold of her ribs to help her steady herself as she was moving haphazardly trying to get her
body against his once again, both of them desperate, but she grabbed his hands, tearing them away.

Claire kissed him, taking over, still holding his wrists as she felt him twitch below her, where she’d accidentally flattened him. He groaned slightly, his breath coming through his nose in small bursts. She was well aware he could feel her, and she was completely in charge.

She let go of one of his hands, giving herself just enough space to take hold of him, making him react. She lined him up, and let her already very aroused body sink down around him as he lay still, trying to control his breathing.

Alfie tried to put his arm around her, but she quickly had hold of it again, keeping it off of her. He was soon overwhelmed by the feel of her body as she began to move awkwardly, lacking a real rhythm until she struck an angle that seemed to satisfy her needs. He rocked his hips insistently as his body yearned to take over.

It wasn't long before Claire was trembling, and Alfie bucked his hips as he felt her speed up. Unfortunately the leg she had to the outside of the couch slipped off the edge, bringing her down on him hard. She pulled her leg back into place and kept moving.

Alfie tried to tug a hand away, to support her leg, but she wasn't allowing it, "Don't... don't grab me..."

"I wasn't... not going to..."

Claire increased her speed as much as she could, needing to brace her hands but still holding Alfie's close to his shoulders. Her entire body was on edge, and the few rushed kisses she could manage were sloppy and hectic.

Unlike the night in Kevin's car, she had far more warning this time, but was unsure how to express it. She felt ridiculous suddenly becoming self conscious right in the middle of this particular activity, but the words weren't coming as fast as she was. Claire let go of one of Alfie's hands and brought hers to the side of his neck.

"Alfie..." Claire's voice was a strained whimper, "... Oh, god..."

Alfie increased the speed of the small amount of thrusting he was able to manage, feeling her tighten around him as her whole body clenched. He felt her muscles tighten around him, stroking at him, waves pulling at him deep within, and nearly at the same place, he remembered one detail they'd both glanced over.

Still lost to the world, shaking in her throes, Claire hardly felt it when Alfie pulled his hand free and grabbed her hips, lifting her off of him, and letting her fall across his chest toward the back of the couch as his own climax hit him hard, thick spurts landing where they may.

Alfie tightened his arms around her, both a complete mess. He nuzzled against her, "Sorry... um... but we skipped something..."

Claire was still hazy and breathing hard, "What?"

"Condom."

"Oh."

Alfie stroked her hair gently, "Give me a second, okay?"
Claire lay still as Alfie got up, her sense of calm and peace lingering even as Alfie came back to kneel next to the couch, applying paper towels to the mess.

Alfie stroked one of the paper towels against the back of her leg, crumpled the whole mess into a ball and set it on the floor before getting back onto the couch, curling around her, "I guess I need to tell you, I don't know if it was all... out... I should have said something, I guess."

Claire silently snuggled closer against him, trying to ignore his words, focusing instead on the warmth of him.

He ran his fingers along the scar on her side with a whisper of a touch, occasionally making a muscle twitch.

"You'd tell me, right?... If anything happens?..." Alfie asked softly.

Claire nodded against his shoulder, knowing full well she had no idea if she would or not.

Dean was exhausted. He carried Nick outside, concerned about the machines that could easily crush an errant puppy.

The concrete had cured, the beams were in place, and the thick metal sheets of roof and siding were being attached.

During the course of the evening, he planned to have Alfie and Claire help him move everything away from the wall the was the end of the building, and tomorrow the crew would open it up, joining the new room into the current garage.

He'd had skylights and better wiring put into the new bays in an attempt to keep costs down long term.

By the end of the day, he was certain he was going to be completely drained, and Cas, who hadn't managed to make his way over the evening before, had had a suggestion for dinner that didn't sound too bad.

Alfie's bike was audible from the highway before he swung into the yard. Dean was already shaking his head as the helmet came off, "You're two hours early."

"Yeah?... I guess this is just a really fun place to be." Alfie replied.

"You need a hobby... Wait, no, you have one. Why aren't you doing it?"

Alfie shrugged, "That would mean sitting still. And I can't, I have a sugar high to burn off."

Dean shook his head again, "Teenagers... All that junk is going to stay with you in a few years."

"It was only half a box of donuts."

"And the other half?"

"Claire."

"Right." Dean gestured inside the shop, "The bays are empty, but everything, even the benches, are coming away from the wall tonight. I want bay three as empty as the day it went up. The wall comes down tomorrow, then we put everything back tomorrow night. The foreman's nephew is coming in for an interview on Monday, I want you to make sure we have a junker for him."
"Oh, do I get to do it this time?" Alfie asked hopefully.

"He's in his twenties, do you really want to piss him off?"

"Let Claire do it."

"Why?"

"To pay her back for making her train Julie."

Dean looked irritated by Alfie's good mood and gestured toward the stacks awkwardly, forgetting he was holding a squirming, fat puppy, "Go find a junker, we'll discuss it later."

Dean noticed the red Chevelle leaving, and waved, this time with the hand not holding the dog, "Didn't she just get back?"

"Yeah, her dad left some papers at home, asked her to take them to the school." Alfie replied before heading for a junker.

Kevin was half asleep when he answered the door in his pajama pants. Something the size of a DVD box was immediately shoved in his face.

"Woah..." he said, backing up, rubbing his eyes.

The box was wrapped and had a large bow, and the words 'I'm sorry' were written across the paper in thick black ink.

"Margaret?"

"You should have told me... I mean, it's none of my business what you put on your skin, but there was no way that was going to end well."

Kevin nodded tiredly, "Sorry about your arm. I really wasn't... you okay?"

Margaret wasn't sure about Kevin's reaction to her presence, "Yeah... My dad said there was no way that was anything but a memorial tattoo, and that if you cared that much about your baby sister... well, I don't know if you want to hear his version."

Kevin waved toward himself, groggily, "Lay it on me."

"He said if you're enough of a pussy to spill your guts like that to him, then if I get bitchy you'll throw me a midol instead of knocking me around." Margaret shrugged.

Kevin leaned on the doorframe, "So, translated from sexist-asshole-speak, he figures I'll treat you right."

"Don't talk about my dad like that." Margaret smirked and poked him with the gift she'd brought.

Kevin ran a hand over his face, and through his hair, "He talks like a sexist asshole... 'Gitcher ass in the house, little darlin', bake me some cookies and bring me a beer... Then hold mah beer, I got fireworks and a lawnmower.'"

Margaret started to giggle, "He doesn't sound like that."

"At the barbecue, he literally turned to me and said, 'Son, hold my beer,' then turned the flame up on
the burgers... Literally."

Margaret made another attempt to pass him the gift, "C'mon, open it. I wanna see your face."

"What? Just standing out here in my jammies? I don't think so."

Margaret looked him in the eyes, "Are you mad at me?"

Kevin shrugged, "I just woke up... Are you coming in, or are you kidnapping me?"

"Kidnapping you." Margaret threw her arms around his shoulders and wrapped her legs around his hips.

"Awesome." Kevin said with a stifled yawn as he closed the door.

Dean wasn't thrilled with what he was seeing. He had an idea, but didn't want to think about it.

Claire kept insisting she'd only pulled a muscle in her leg, and Alfie looked guilty as hell. And they'd been at Alfie's that morning, where there was zero supervision...

As an employer, however, it wasn't his place to say anything. They were dating, they were public about it, it wasn't unexpected. And they knew damn well there were cameras everywhere in the shop. For the most part, they behaved themselves at work. He'd only threatened to turn a hose on them once, and when he'd walked into the front office, it had turned out he'd misheard, and they had been on either side of the room. Not that Claire had let him live that one down.

He wondered briefly if he should mention it to Cas, or even if he could, from a legal standpoint.

"Let's get the work bench over there, and Claire, start working on the shelves."

Claire set down the box she'd been holding and crossed the garage as Alfie made for the work bench.

"Okay... Nope. Not going to happen." Dean said loudly, trying to ignore the guilty look from Alfie, "You didn't pull a muscle, it was a tendon. Go home, take an anti inflammatory, and ice it."

"I'm fine." Claire replied with a grumble.

"I can tell which one it is, where it hurts, and I've got a good idea how much. Go home and take care of it, or tomorrow you're going to want to take off the whole damn leg."

Claire shrugged, "Okay... And my dad's going to ask, you both still coming over in a while?"

"Yeah." Dean replied.

Claire gave another tired shrug and started home.

As she got to the road, Alfie glanced at the gate, "Maybe I should walk her over there."

Dean shook his head, "Nah, she'll be fine... But, man, I swear..."

Alfie didn't realize Dean had noticed the guilty looks, and had intended to mess with him, "What?"

"Women... Really high pain tolerance... They need it, of course, y'know, for childbirth. But if you overdid it with the same tendon, you'd probably be on the ground right now, not trying to organize a
Alfie looked horrified, "So how much pain is she in? She wasn't complaining about it."

Dean shrugged, "That's different for everybody. But Lisa was a yoga teacher, and one time she was teaching the advanced class, and this girl has her foot up behind her head, and her bad knee gives out. She tried to keep her balance long enough to get her other leg down, basically strains every muscle up the inside of her thigh. She was a mess for months."

"Ouch."

"Yeah, but that's nothing, really." Dean risked a look at Alfie's face as they started to get the work bench moved to gauge his reaction, "When Ben was born, well, you never met her, Lisa was really small, and she'd been reading up on this Gaskin lady, famous midwife, right? And she's convinced she's not having a baby laying down. So they give her this squat bar that hooks onto the hospital bed. She was squeezing that thing so hard, out of nowhere, she yanks on it really hard, messed up her shoulder. I had to stand on that side and hold her up, it was crazy... And really messy, too."

Dean considered what he could use to segue into sleepless nights, colic, and diapers. Perhaps the dog could be useful.

"I'm going to try to forget you mentioned that... Any idea what Mr Novak is cooking?" Alfie asked, fighting a queasy feeling.

"Yeah, he told me, but I forgot. Probably some roast or casserole or something."

Alfie nodded, "I guess I should try to get to know him, huh?"

Dean nodded, "That's generally how the whole dating someone thing works, you eventually get to know their family."

Alfie still looked uncomfortable, "He's really cool, but I get the idea he doesn't like me very much."

"Cas likes you just fine. But you're seeing his daughter, so, you know, he has to disapprove. Natural order... Drop-out with a bike, all that."

With the bench moved, Dean looked at the shelves he'd told Claire to work on before starting on them himself.

"My uncle wants to meet Claire... I think if Naomi ever wants to meet her I'll tell her shove it, but Crowley..."

Dean nodded, "Well, that's really up to you. I mean, I took Lisa to meet Bobby and Karen a few weeks in. Later on, she met my dad at my brother's graduation, then I get a call from my brother, he's apologizing all over the place because my dad was an asshole, I call my dad to give him one chance to explain himself, and all he did was dig in his heels... I cut him out of my life."

Alfie raised his eyebrows, "Just like that?"

"It was a long time coming, but, yeah... See, Ben was already on the way, we just hadn't told anybody, and I figured anybody who'd say that about my fiance was going to be just as horrible to my kid. I wasn't about to keep calling him family after that, my family were the people I was protecting, Lisa and Ben, and the people helping me protect them, like my brother."

"So, that's just something you had to do, huh? To keep them safe?"
Dean nodded, "It goes both ways, though. If there was somebody in Lisa's side she didn't want around Ben, I would've backed her up. And I know Claire's mom is a really sore subject, so, that's not someone I'd put on your Christmas card list. But you know your family better than anyone you're gonna have a relationship with, and if somebody is a dirtbag, there's no reason to let them walk all over you and the people you love just because you share a couple of chromosomes."
Claire went up the front steps, a tight pull inside her left thigh tugging painfully within her hip.

_Slut._

She went into the kitchen, where Cas was stirring something on the stove while reading something on his phone, leaning down to get a bottle of water from the fridge and regretting it immediately.

_After the last time..._

Claire stood carefully, attempting to put less weight on the injury, "Where's the motrin?"

..._why would you ever..._

Cas pulled a bottle of pills from the junk drawer, passing it to her, "Are you all right?"

..._let anyone touch you?_

Claire nodded, with a glance to the freezer. The idea of anything frozen on the inside of her thigh made her uncomfortable, "I pulled a muscle, I'll be fine."

_You're disgusting..._

"Maybe some stretching would help." Cas offered.

_He's gong to send you back to your mother because you're a tramp..._

Claire took an extra pill and drank deeply, "Yeah, I'll try to stretch it out. When's dinner?"

..._Unprotected..._

"Give me another hour and a half." Cas replied.

..._What else could go wrong?..._

Claire nodded, and started carefully up the stairs.

_You used him. He was kind to you, and you used him._

She gripped the desk and tried to flex her leg backward, the doubts plaguing her mind getting louder.
If you get pregnant, you'll ruin your life... If you get rid of it, he'll hate you forever... But what diseases is he going to get from your already used and broken body?

Claire put her knee on the desk and tried to lean forward, feeling the stretch becoming painful and easing off. She was slowly becoming more upset by the thoughts that kept entering her mind unbidden.

You couldn't let him touch you... You took it too far... You held him down... You put him at risk... You used him the way that man used you...

Claire sat down on the floor, and slowly worked her leg into a cross-legged position to try to ease the pain, but it wasn't working.

The pain is your punishment... You made him sick and he's going to die... You made him disgusting, just like you...

Claire put all of her weight on her other leg and shoved up from the floor, heading for the bath. A bag of frozen peas sounded like a horrible idea, but heat might help.

You're damaged... And you're dragging him down with you...

Her thoughts continued to harangue her as the water ran, but as the water closed around her bare body, all she could think of was the feel of his skin.

To say dinner was awkward was an understatement. Alfie hadn't been able to get the mental images of an upright birth out of his head.

Part of it had been an aversion, but also, the description paired with an ancient birthing goddess statue he'd seen in a museum once during a summer vacation in New York. Of course his parents had wandered away, leaving him to his own devices, but there had been a clear description on the display, and he had found it fascinating.

The conversation had been pleasant, until Claire cracked a joke about having stashed a dead stripper in Dean's trunk.

"Claire-" Cas started, as Dean nearly choked on his beer.

"Well, where else was I gonna put it? I thought maybe the roof, but you'd notice the vultures eventually."

Dean set his beer down and pointed at Claire, "That is enough, young lady. You know damn well where I keep the shovels. I expect you to handle that right after dinner."

"Okay... Where'd you put the other three?"

Dean chuckled and from Cas' expression, he seemed to be wishing the floor would open up and swallow him whole.

Dean looked at Alfie, who was smiling quietly, amused by the exchange, and gestured to Claire, "Your girlfriend's a classy lady... Make sure you warn your uncle to mind his manners so she doesn't faint."

"So, Alfie... Or is it Samandriel?" Cas asked.

Alfie shrugged, "Either is fine."
"All right... What kind of work do your parents do?"

Dean gave him a look that was clearly loaded.

"Well... my dad's a businessman, he works for a Fortune 500 company, and my mom... I guess you could say she tries to be a philanthropist." Alfie said quietly.

Cas considered Alfie's behavior, and quickly figured out he was minimalizing the situation.

"Tries to be?"

Alfie shrugged, looking increasingly uncomfortable, "Well, she cares about how she looks, and when she's giving to charity, she looks benevolent. I mean, it's good there's a new hospital going up in South America somewhere, but it's a joke compared to how much she spends on shoes."

Silence fell over the room.

Cas nodded, "How is it that you wound up in a small town like this? If you don't mind my asking."

Alfie shook his head, "When I was about three, my dad got this idea that it would be better for me to grow up in a small town. He had this business partner that treated people like crap, and he was worried I wouldn't learn to respect people. So we moved out here, and I guess he was right, but they both hated it here, so..."

"So you're working at the shop for fun?" Claire asked.

Alfie nodded, but didn't meet her eyes, "Yeah."

"You're really weird."

Alfie smiled, "Yeah, well, at least I don't hide dead strippers in Dean's trunk."

"No, yours was a dead nun."

"Right. The convent was on the way here."

Alfie leaned on the rail of the Novaks' porch, looking at the gravel road. Claire soon joined him.

"Where's the road go?" he asked, indicating the direction of the gate at the end.

"It's got a gate further on, ranch access. We might get a real road eventually, there's a developer that wants to put in a neighborhood." Claire said quietly.

"That would suck." Alfie replied.

"Yeah."

"How bad does it hurt?" Alfie asked, "You're still limping."

"It's not horrible... And it's not because of you, it's from slipping off the couch." Claire answered quietly.

"Yeah, but that was because of me."

"No."
"You're not going to let me apologize."

"No."

"Are you okay?"

Claire took a deep breath, and considered her answer, the doubts were starting to build again.

"If you aren't, if you need space, or if you need me to stop you when stuff gets too... y'know, I can do that." Alfie was barely whispering in the quiet stillness, but she could make out every word, "Just... please don't shove me away. Don't ditch me."

"I'm fine." Claire lied, "And I'm not going anywhere."

Alfie started to reach for her, but she had turned to go back inside.

Through the glass of the door, the interior of the house being far better lit than the dark front porch, she could see Dean helping Cas carry the dishes from the dining room back to the kitchen. He had both hands full, and Cas had stopped him in passing.

Claire knew what she was seeing before their actions confirmed it, and she quickly looked away, "I knew it..."

"What?" Alfie asked.

"Nothing," she waved vaguely toward the door, "I'm just really tired, don't worry about it... I'll see you tomorrow."

She opened the door carefully, her eyes still on him, and closed it loudly as she went inside to give Cas and Dean an opportunity to recognize her presence in the house.

Alfie frowned at the small slam, unsure exactly what state they were leaving things in.

Alfie was vaguely aware he'd fallen asleep, and could almost feel the book in his hands, and was dreaming he was carrying it.

He was walking through a dark hallway that was particularly long, and completely unfamiliar.

He came to an open doorway, where a warm yellow light streamed out from the room. Turning to look inside, he recognized it immediately as his own bedroom. He stood frozen to the spot as he stared, completely transfixed, moving only to brace himself on the frame.

Claire looked to be several years older, and she was laying on her side, nursing a baby that lay next to her. She looked up, catching his eyes, and smiled.

Alfie left the doorway, coming close and getting onto the bed as carefully as possible.

"You're really quiet." Claire said softly.

"Yeah... I was just thinking..." Alfie replied in a whisper.

"About what?"

Alfie smiled, "I think I just told my inner Buddha to get fucked."
Claire grinned, stifling her laughter, "I'm having trouble staying awake."

Alfie pushed her hair back from her ear, "Go to sleep. I'll take care of everything."

Alfie jerked awake, quickly tossing aside the book in his hand, letting it fall to the floor, and answered his phone, "Hello?"

"The wall's down." Claire's voice came through. He could hear gravel crunching under her boots and the sound of wind as she walked, "Dean's calling us in to get the shop put back together. We have a lot to get done."

"Yeah... Yeah, I'll be right over."

After getting off the phone, he got up from the bed, only to see the cover staring up at him from next to his work boots. It was a heavily abridged history of Buddhism that Kevin had recommended. He kicked it under the bed with a chuckle and walked out.

Claire had barely gotten to the shop when her phone rang again.

"Hi dad."

"Hi... I left a folder on my desk, it's very important for a meeting in have this afternoon, but I have one about to start, can you bring it to the school?"

"Yeah, I guess I can. What does it look like?"

"It's yellow, and labeled 'attendance projections.'"

"Yeah, okay."

"You can just leave it in my office when you get here."

Claire skipped the computer and went straight through the bays as she walked into the garage, "Alfie's coming in, but my dad forgot some papers he needs... Again. I have to run them to the school."

Dean looked up, "Yeah, okay. How's the leg?"

"It sucks."

"Yeah, I bet. Okay, rethink if you're okay to work today while you run those papers to your dad."

Dean said, motioning to the door.

Charlie entered Cas' dark office and immediately jumped out of her skin at the figure sitting on the edge of the desk.

Claire was looking at her phone, which was dimmed, lighting the structure of her face just enough to seem skeletal.

"Claire! Jeez, you scared the crap out of me!" Charlie exclaimed, switching on the light.

Claire's eyes were red, and she quickly got up, "Yeah, my dad needed some stuff from home, I just... I was going to make phone call, since it's quiet in here."
Charlie looked concerned, "You've been crying."

"No... I punched something I was allergic to, and it got in my eyes." Claire replied.

"Do you need your dad? He's going to have a break in about five minutes."

"No... Actually, I don't really want to see him right now."

Charlie shifted her weight, "Okay, look, you're upset, I can tell. And I know you don't open up to just anybody, but just remember, if it's girl stuff, I'm here, okay? We went through this before, remember? I've got your back."

Claire ducked her head, pretending to scratch at her hairline to hide her eyes, "How do you know if you have an STD?"

"What?" Charlie squeaked involuntarily. She shut the door quickly, glancing into the hall to make sure it was empty, "Uh... well, the easiest way to know is to go get tested. And if you have to ask, you should... Just to make sure everything is okay... And maybe double check that you know what you're doing, as far as protection goes."

Claire didn't look up but her shoulders started to shake.

"Oh, god..." Charlie said, reaching for Claire's shoulder, "What happened, sweetie? I know a good spot to dump a body."

Claire shook her head as tears came, and she started to sniffle. Charlie reached behind her for a box of tissues, "It was two years ago... if I was sick, I'd know, right?"

"What was two years ago?"

"I was raped... Then yesterday, I just... I went too far with my boyfriend, and... What if I have something?"

Charlie pulled Claire into a tight hug.

"Something would be wrong, right? I mean, I would know?... I'm just scared... what if I made him sick?"

"Don't worry about that right now, worry about you. If nothing's wrong, it's none of his business. Now if this was yesterday, you have time to get in, get seen, get some morning after pills, and if everything comes up clear, then you're fine, and if it doesn't, then you tell him." Charlie patted Claire's back awkwardly, "Then, I guess you try to be more careful in the future."

"I don't know if I can do this." Claire answered brokenly.

Charlie nodded, "It's a big deal... I can go with you, face the wall or whatever."

"Okay."

"It's gonna be okay..."
to make sure it's applied fairly."

He looked around the room, finding several downcast eyes.

"Maybe we don't have enough anonymity for employees, but if you're worried about keeping your job, come see me. I'll be the douchebag, and I'll walk for it. These kids come first... Moving on..."

Cas turned the page on the print out, and several other people followed suit, "Review Sexual Harassment Policy for Staff."

"I don't think we need to worry about that, we cover this every year. We've never had a problem." Gail spoke up.

"Well I'm new here, and I want to make sure I don't sexually harass anyone on accident." Gabe replied.

"You're not supposed to do it on purpose, either." Cas answered dryly.

"See?" Gabe gestured to Cas, "How was I supposed to know that?"

"Again!" Ben yelled as soon as he reached the edge of the dock.

"Take a minute to breathe, first." Sam laughed.

"Idon'tneedtobreathe!"

"Sure you don't."

Sam pulled Ben out of the water, setting him on his feet.

Jess sat nearby, toweling her hair, "Did you see the turtles?"

Ben looked where she was pointing, still catching his breath, "Where?"

"On the log."

Ben looked closer. "They look like rocks."

"Yeah, but who would swim out there to put rocks on a log?" Sam asked.

Been shrugged, "I don't know, people do weird stuff."

"Yeah, I guess they do." Sam chuckled.

"Can I go again now?"

Sam nodded and stepped closer to the edge, picking Ben up, and throwing him out over the water.

"He really loves that." Jess giggled.

Sam's eyes didn't leave the surface of the water until Ben came up again. As Ben's face breached the surface, something seemed off. Jess was speaking, but Sam couldn't focus enough to hear her as he realized Ben wasn't moving.

Alfie came down the hallway to get his first look at the changed garage. The end wall was gone,
replaced by two more bays, nosed in toward the third.

The work on the building hadn't been seamless, but it was functional, and would hold well.

The skylights in the new section made the building brighter, with fewer of the dark corners he'd grown so used to. It also made the place look far less dismal.

"Wow... I thought Claire was coming in?"

"Nah," Dean answered, "The minute she got here, her dad needed her to run something to the school, and she's still limping. I told her to think about staying home. She really isn't going to do herself any favors walking around on it."

Alfie started moving equipment back to the back wall, "How many people do you have lined up to interview?"

"Three more after this Ivan kid." Dean replied, "But I think you're right... I'll let Claire set them up on the test."

Alfie nodded, "Cool... I have to make a run to Dallas pretty soon."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah, well, it looks like if I play my cards right, I can be the hot new thing." Alfie scoffed.

"Yeah, sounds like your deal." Dean replied, "Naomi still setting this up?"

"Yeah, but I'm getting tired of her shit... I think I'll get a hotel this time."

"When is this?"

"Week after next. We should be done with the backlog by then." Alfie said quietly.

"Just don't miss Claire's birthday. Cas wants everyone there. Ben's gonna be back the day before."

Alfie smirked, "She can go to Dallas with me."

"No." Dean said firmly, "Knock it off, or I tell her dad you said that."

"I know you would."

Sam didn't even remember jumping in, but he was nearly in reach when Ben swung his arm wide, splashing him in the face.

Sam sputtered, still trying to reach for him, but now Ben was laughing, "I got you that time!"

"Are you freaking kidding me?!... Ben, you can't fake being hurt like that!"

His heart pounding hard in his throat, Sam grabbed hold of Ben and went straight for the dock.

"Sorry." Ben said remorsefully as Sam quickly reached his target, Jess standing at the edge to meet them, and helping Ben out of the water as Sam shakily pulled himself out.

"Are you okay? Are you hurt?" Jess asked, looking over Ben's head quickly, and checking his eyes before wrapping him in a hug.
"He was faking." Sam growled, getting to his feet.

Jess let go, gesturing to Ben, indicating Sam should continue.

Sam gave a confused shrug.

"Ben, you should know that's not okay." Jess said firmly, throwing Sam a look.

"Right... Not okay..." Sam was still dripping, and the adrenaline was still pumping. "You never fake an emergency. Never... If someone called 911 over this, they might be coming out here to save your life while somebody else actually needs help. This is..."

Sam shook his head, grabbed his towel and walked back toward the cabin.

"Do you want me to drop you off at your house?" Charlie asked gently as she drove.

"No." Claire answered in a voice that was emotionless enough to be frightening, "I need my car."

"Okay... I know that made you uncomfortable... You're really brave." Charlie said, "And she said you were probably fine."

"I don't remember half of it..."

"Oh, god... Okay, the important thing to remember is you took a pill that will, hopefully, keep you from getting pregnant, it's like a super birth control pill, not like the other one you thought it was... You didn't want that one, you were really clear about that part, before you... just kinda, well, shut down... You got a prescription for the pill, which isn't going to work until you've been on it for a month, and they are running your tests... I'm really not sure you're okay to drive."

"I didn't throw things or punch the doctor. I'm fine."

"Are you sure?" Charlie asked.

"You said you wouldn't say anything to my dad... What's he going to think if my car stays at the school?"

Charlie nodded, "Okay... If you're sure... But text me when you get home."
Despite the sunny day, Claire could have sworn every single cloud in the sky hung over her head, but the moment they entered the parking lot of the elementary school, the light gleaming off the Chevelle's red paint began to lift her spirits.

"Okay," Charlie said, putting the car in park, "You have the side effects list for the thing, and the other stuff, right?"

Claire held up the opaque paper bag, "Yeah."

"If you have a bad reaction, call me, but you know your dad would focus on helping you first, he wouldn't worry about why until later."

"He wouldn't worry about why at all, I just hate talking to him about it." Claire answered, "Thanks for dragging me in there, I don't think I would have gone on my own."

"It's okay, just be careful."

"You already said that. Pretty sure you said that once for each condom in the box."

"Expiration dates."

"Yep." Claire answered, getting out of the car.

Getting in, Claire stuffed the bag into the glove box, and took a deep breath, leaning back in her seat, and flexing her hands on the wheel.

She decided she didn't feel like going to work today. And she wasn't ready to go home and stew in an empty house, hiding in her room. Everything in her life seemed to stack up in her mind as a lack of choice. Her life felt as though it were happening to her, not things she decided for herself.

Everyone kept telling her how strong she was for surviving, but her survival hinged entirely on her ability to pick up and keep going. To hold on just a little longer. There was no active decision making on her part.

Claire started the car, bolstered by it's roar. It ran sweetly due to the care she'd taken, the paint was perfect, and there were hairpins in the cup holder. It was hers. And she could fuck it up if she damn well felt like it. She could replace the brakes, and the tires, and fix the steering. It was hers to maintain or ruin any way she pleased. And it bore the marks of choices she had made for herself.

She got on the road and went straight for the abandoned airport.
Dean was having a difficult time understanding Sam on the phone. Somewhere in the rambling was something about Ben in the lake, and a window.

"Sam!... Is he okay?" Dean asked forcefully.

"Yeah, Ben's fine."

"Great... Next time, lead with that."

"Sorry."

"It's fine, now, what happened?"

Sam took a deep breath, "We were swimming at the lake... he had me throwing him in, he was having a great time, everything was fine, and the next minute, he comes up and he's just floating there, I can't even tell if he's breathing."

"Okay, but was he?"

"Yeah, he did it on purpose. I go straight for him, he splashes me in the face."

Dean ran a hand over his face, "Little shit... You okay?"

"Um, yeah, I guess... Jess tried to get me to give him a talking to right then. I tried, I swear-"

"No... no, if you don't have practice with a kid, trust me, you gotta calm down first. It's different when it's your kid, and you've had 'em since they were a baby, but that kind of crap, you need to give yourself some space and come back to it after you calm down."

"I yelled at him." Sam answered, his voice an exhausted mess, "I am so sorry, Dean."

"What? Of course you yelled at him, he was pretending to be dead in a lake and scared this shit out of you. That's not okay."

"You're not pissed?"

"At you, for yelling? No. Ben, however... Look, actions have consequences. Breathe, and when you calm down, I dunno, make him watch some online CPR course or something until he gets that drowning isn't funny. Then, if he ever needs it, he'll know what to do." Dean replied, "Now, what was the thing about the window?"

Cas gathered his things in his office, preparing to leave, but wasn't at all surprised when Gabe walked in behind him.

"I think it went well today."

"Of course you do, you made everyone uncomfortable." Cas replied, "That was your goal, wasn't it?"

"My goal is a school where the new kid doesn't get his arm broken with a chair, and carrot top isn't scared to mention she's got a new girlfriend. A school where the kids are safe, and the teachers do their job well." Gabe replied, "Skipping a safety policy? C'mon, it's tedious shit, but it's important. We can't slack off on this stuff, slacking off is what got us here."
"You're genuinely invested." Cas looked surprised.

"Yeah... You think I got into education because kids are cute? I mean, some of them are okay, they can be a real laugh riot sometimes, but mostly they're just walking germ balls with tears and bitchy parents. But eventually, they become adults, and if somebody throws in a monkey wrench, they turn out like me. Nobody wants that."

"I would have thought you'd say so at the meeting instead of pretending to snore after anyone spoke for more than thirty seconds."

"If you don't make your point in twenty, you've lost your audience. There's no point in talking after that." Gabe replied.

"Sound advice." Cas replied, "What did you want, anyway?"

"Well, you know I came in here to shake everything down, and actively look for problems. This place is loaded with them. Gallon of gas and a match... Except where you're concerned. You seem to be the only one actually doing their job around here. Why is that?"

Claire rolled down both front windows, and ran the entire length of the smoothest runway three times, just enjoying the feel of the drive, and listening to the sound of the engine.

On the fourth time, she slammed the brakes, turning the wheel hard.

She thought she had managed it, at first, feeling the car spin around, but the motion continued in a way she hadn't expected.

Claire wasn't certain exactly what had happened, because it had gone so fast.

The windshield was a spiderweb of lines, and the back window had several cracks across it. She shut off the car, and tried to get out, but the door was stuck shut.

Claire held the latch handle in the open position and kicked at the door with both feet, and tried to open it from the outside handle as well. It wouldn't budge.

She climbed out through the window, surveying the mess she'd made.

The Chevelle had rolled all the way over and came to rest on its wheels. The side mirrors were off, the roof was dented in, and the beautiful paint was trashed.

Claire sat down on the ground to stare at it, partially out of shock, and soon began to laugh. The laughter completely took over until she couldn't breathe, and tears streamed freely at the humor she saw in the situation.

This damage was completely different from the graffiti it had sustained before. It was far worse, and had occurred only because she had made the choice to be careless. No one had tagged her car. No one had shoved the car she'd been driving into a large oncoming vehicle. She had made this choice, and had somehow come out unscathed, and with enough time, she would put her car right again.

Claire and her Chevelle had not been anyone's victims this time. But they had been through this together.

"I rolled...! I rolled ...my fucking car...!" she gasped for air, "Oh my god, I trashed it!"

After another round of tearful laughter, Claire practically dove in through the window and carefully
kicked out the windshield. She stood up, through the spot where it had been, and lifted the sheet of shattered auto glass off the hood, tossing it to the ground.

She settled into the driver's seat again and started the car.

Dean was exhausted by the time he'd closed up for the day. He and Alfie had managed to get the shop back in order quickly and had made more progress on repairs than he'd expected.

Sam's call had rattled him, and Alfie had worked himself nearly senseless. He had seen Cas come through on the road, but he hadn't noticed if Claire's car had returned.

Walking slowly to keep an eye on Nick, Dean made his way up the road, and was soon aware of two things. Nick needed a proper collar and leash, and Claire's side of the Novaks' driveway was empty.

Dean scooped Nick up, and went up to the front door, tapping twice before letting himself in, as he and Cas had both gotten used to doing, "Hey, Cas?... Did Claire make it back okay?"

Cas came downstairs, "Wasn't she at work today?"

"Not after you called her."

"It's probably nothing." Cas replied, his phone in his hand in a heartbeat.

'Check in pls'

Claire ignored the chirp of her phone as she knocked on Alfie's door. It opened quickly, but he was surprised to see Claire.

"I have to tell you something."

He looked past her to the curb where she'd parked, and then back to her, "Where did your windshield go?"

"Not that."

Alfie stood to the side as she came in, and reached for her the moment the door closed, but she shoved his hands away.

"Sorry... You know, you're confusing the hell out of me lately?" Alfie said softly, a spark of fear in his eyes.

"I'm confusing the hell out of myself, so, you're not alone, there."

"Yeah, but at least you know what's going on in your head, I don't." he replied.

Claire looked down at her boots and licked her lips, "Can we sit down? I... I need to get this out."

Alfie nodded, and tried to put his hand on her back to guide her to the couch, but she jerked away.

"Don't... Just don't touch me right now, okay? I just... I feel so gross..."

Alfie pulled his hand away quickly and waited as she sat down in one of the chairs before taking a seat on the couch.
Claire took a deep, shaken breath, and started to explain, but he cut her off, "Are you okay? What happened to your car?"

"I rolled it, it's fine. But that's not important right now. I really need you to shut up."

"Okay. But you're okay?"

"I'm okay from the car, I'm not okay from the other thing." Claire replied.

"Yesterday?"

"No, not yesterday... God, I would be fine with yesterday except for the thing I need to tell you, please! Just close your mouth, okay?"

Alfie closed his mouth and waited. He was certain she was building into 'It's not you, it's me.'

"When I was living in California, I was raped... Twice... I know I'm acting like I'm bi-polar, but I'm not, I swear, it's just..."

Alfie looked crushed, and got up, "Why wouldn't you tell me that first? Before anything happened?"

Because I knew you would look at me like that!" Claire yelled, "And that's not what I need from you!"

Alfie spread his arms wide, raising his voice, "What do you need from me? I'm right here, you can have it. But I don't know unless you tell me."

"Stop it!" Claire snapped, "I already took plenty from you, and I'm trying really hard not to do that!"

Alfie started to reach for her again as she got up from the chair.

"Don't!... Look, I... I didn't tell anybody after, except my mom, and she didn't care, because she let him do it, so I went to the doctor today to make sure I don't... have anything you can catch, and..."

Claire shuddered, "It's like I can still feel somebody touching me, and I hate it."

Alfie dropped his hands as the whole room was weighed down by a heavy silence. Claire didn't move, but tears were forming, mostly from frustration, and worry about how he would react.

"You love me." he whispered.

Claire wiped angrily at her eyes, as if to curse any sign of weakness to an early grave, "I didn't say that..."

"You do... After everything you went through, you put yourself through that today, to try to protect me?"

"You really don't get it." Claire spat, "I'm trying to tell you I could have made you sick."

"You love me."

"Goddamn it,-"

"You love me." Alfie said again, more insistently.

"I didn't say that!"
"You didn't have to."

The tears came faster now, and her voice shook with isolated sobs, "This is my fault... I practically held you down."

Alfie shook his head, "I lifted you right off of me, I could have stopped you at any time, I didn't... I know you need to be in charge, I just didn't know why. But I'm okay with that."

Claire sniffled, not stepping back as he came closer, "What about what you want?"

"What about it?" Alfie shrugged.

"What you want should be just as important as what I want."

"What I want is to be with you. But if what you need is to be in charge, that's fine with me, because then I get to be with you."

"That's not supposed to be how it works!" Claire said, frustrated.

"Why not?" Alfie put his hands into a gesture ready to receive her if she'd step closer, "I know I want you to be happy, and I know you love me."

"Stop saying that." Claire's voice came out shattered as she stepped into his embrace.

"It's okay," he whispered against her hair, "I love you, too."

"Her phone might have run out of battery." Dean suggested, "Or maybe she's at a movie and turned it off. I mean, you could track the GPS, but it's not really late enough to be that worried, right?"

"She tells me when she's going out, though. This isn't just unusual, it's been all day, and the usual suspect was with you during most of that time."

Dean nodded, "She's barely late for dinner, though. Probably a dead phone. And remember what you said last time? 'Safe place with safe people?' And she said it wouldn't happen again. Give her a few more hours to live up to that."

Cas leaned forward, his elbows on his knees, and Dean ran his hand over the back of his shoulders, "You're probably right... At her age, this is nothing, right?"

"Well, it's not nothing, but kids are supposed to give you gray hair." Dean said quietly, "Luckily it looks good on you."

Claire continued to chew on the twizzlers as Alfie spoke quietly between eating potato chips, stroking her hair with his other hand. Her head rested on his chest as they lay on the cool tile of the kitchen floor.

"... If I get enough recognition, bigger places will want to pick up my stuff, and buyers will be asking them to show it, then... when I'm not slaving away at making the stuff, I'm dressed up in a monkey suit doing my dance of bullshit to make them think I have any idea what I'm doing... I'm going to wind up in New York again at some point, but they'll like me if I point out I was born there..."

"Why?"

"I don't know. Everybody in New York has a running competition of who's more 'from New
York'... Where were you born?"
"The hospital."

Alfie chuckled, "You know what I mean."
"The hospital. Here in town."

"So you're from here."

"I'm less from here than you are from New York. Left when I was three weeks old, never even visited until my dad came to get me."

"Did you start high school there?"

"No, I moved right before..." Claire trailed off as Alfie's arm tightened involuntarily as he realized she had been barely out of eighth grade.

"Sorry."

"All the apologizing is getting on my nerves. And don't say sorry to that."

"Hang on." Alfie raised his hips to get to the phone in his back pocket, "Crap... Where's your phone?"

Claire sat up, her hair was a mess, "Probably in the chair."

"Your dad's been trying to call."

"Crap." Claire quickly got up from the floor and went for the living room to dig through the cushions. She located her phone, and called Cas right away.

"Claire? Where have you been all day? Are you all right?"

"I was out with Charlie for a while."

"Why? You can barely stand to be in the same room with her."

"Girl stuff." Claire replied.

"You called her a smurf with a dye-job and said she was a walking cartoon character."

"Call her, she'll tell you. We left my car at the school. Then I picked it up and went for a long drive."

"Claire-"

"I'm okay, dad."

"Just get home, please. Safely."

Claire rolled her eyes, "Yeah, okay."

Getting off the call, she turned to Alfie, "I have to go."

"Are you working tomorrow?"

"Maybe in my own driveway, we'll see."
Alfie nodded and attempted to kiss her.

"Woah... I think that stuff is enough to get me drunk off the fumes..."

Alfie chuckled and hugged her instead, "Did you lie to your dad?"

"No. It was definitely girl stuff, and Charlie was with me for support. But it's easier if he thinks we were out bra shopping."

Alfie nodded, "I was going to call you a bad influence, but you did take the bourbon away."

Dean squeezed Cas' hand, "Headlights... I'll get out of here so you can handle this your way."

Cas returned the squeeze as Dean got up from the porch swing, displacing Nick from her spot on his boot.

His eyebrows nearly met as the Chevelle pulled into the driveway.

Claire climbed out through the window as Dean went straight for her, "What the hell happened? Are you hurt?"

"I'm good."

"Were you in there?"

"Yeah."

"Jesus Christ..."

Claire shrugged and went for the porch where Cas had wondered to a better vantage point, "Claire, please tell me you saw a doctor."

Claire felt fine, and had seen her fill of medical professionals for the day. She didn't think she could handle any more prodding, even if it was above the waist.

"Yeah, I did. Responsible, and all that."

Cas shook his head, "I don't even know where to start with what this is going to do to the insurance."

Claire shrugged, "Don't call them. I'll fix it, it didn't happen on a public road, this is my problem. I need to learn dents and paint anyway."

"Your windshield is completely missing." Dean waved a hand toward the car.

"Yeah." Claire replied nonchalantly, "I couldn't see through it, so I kicked it out."

Cas looked at Claire, horrified, and his voice came out of it's own accord, "Have you completely lost it?... Are you having some kind of mental break down right now?"

The stress of the past several days culminated in Claire's mind, causing her to actually consider the question for several seconds.

She nodded, and in a shaky voice she said, "Probably... But... I think I'll be okay tomorrow."
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

(A/N: You guys are so lucky I'm a 1337hax0r, [elite hacker] because the email I use to write in due to the fact that it autosaves, friggin ate this chapter. I had to switch to a desktop, grip it tight, and raise it from my sent folder. Which is a huge deal, because I really love this chapter.

Before you complain about Kevin, please keep in mind that while he tries hard not to be, he's still a teenaged boy, and he's full of crap and hormones, and as lovable as he is, he occasionally proves himself capable of minor jerk behavior, such as his attitude with M's dad, and Crowley [it's a good story].

Thanks for reading! FW)

Alfie walked through the dark, empty shop, heading into the garage. Everything was pitch black, and in the same layout it had been for most of his time there. All three bays were clear, and in the center of the second bay, Claire sat on the floor, her knees drawn up close to her face. She was crying silently.

He crept closer, "Claire?... Hey..."

Alfie crouched and took her hands, and the moment he did, she caught his eyes, and crumbled into a pile of dusty white ash.

He immediately started wondering how to put her back together again, and who could help her, but before he could move, a spark ignited deep in the ashes, and burst upward, knocking him over on his back.

Looking up, he could see it. In the flames, or more correctly, made of flames, she stood, stretching her arms wide, her head thrown back as she emerged. The fire ranged across the color spectrum from white through gold and crimson.

He was so taken by her raw power and beauty it took him a moment to realize the long scar on her side was just as visible as every other part of her naked body. Entirely made of fire, it was still Claire.

Slowly, he got to his feet, and stepped closer as her arms came down, watching carefully as her eyes opened. She stared into his soul, and he was content to let her.

"Don't touch me," she whispered sadly, over the sound of the flames, "You'll burn."

With only a breath of hesitation, he clasped the sides of her neck and pressed his lips to hers.

He could feel the flame spread over every inch of him, burning him right down to his bones. But she was the fire...

Alfie woke with a desperate groan, panting, and drenched with sweat. He wanted to sink back into
his pillows, but he quickly realized he had laundry to do.

Cas woke peacefully, the sound of birds chirping somewhere outside coming through the glass of the window along with the early sunlight.

Dean's chest weighed heavily against half of his own, warm, and rhythmic in his breathing. His bare arm and shoulder rested across Cas' thin white undershirt, the tattoo on his deltoid close to Cas' face.

Cas soon realized he'd stayed all night, not meaning to, but that rushing home wouldn't help anything. His mind was looking for any distraction it could get.

Dean’s arm bore a dark purple flower with a date, and a bit lower, a fingernail sized set of footprints with a date a few months after the first.

Cas noticed darker lines below the designs, and tilted Dean's flesh gently to get a better look.

"What is that?" he muttered.

"Gladiolus." Dean replied in a barely intelligible grunt.

"It's a cover-up... That was a military tattoo."

"Mm."

Cas turned it over in his head, "Why would you cover that?"

"Don't ask, don't tell." Dean replied against his neck, "Somebody told... Set me up. Asked me to dish it out when he knew we'd get caught... just wanted to wash out and get home to the wife he didn't mention... bastard... Put the blame on me, too, they almost believed it because I had him bent over, tried to say I overpowered him, but there were too many holes in his story, so I didn't wind up with time and a dishonorable discharge, barely squeaked through with a general discharge."

"That must have been horrible."

"Not something I want to remember, no." Dean answered, rolling to his side, "Got the flower from Lisa's bouquet... Just got sick of seeing it every time I got out of the shower, y'know?"

Cas nodded.

"Okay," Dean said, sitting up, "I'm awake, and you're still here, which means you probably need to check on your kid before something happens to your new Ford."

"I have to admit, I'm a little scared what I might find when I get over there... I'm not sure I should have come over at all."

"It'll be fine. I'm sure you'll be able to use this to talk me down when Ben gets this bad." Dean replied.

"Do you think she's on drugs?" Cas asked.

Dean shrugged, "No idea."

"She was exposed to it for who knows how long... If that was normalizing..."

"She called you, man. She knew that wasn't normal."
"She didn't call about the drugs, the drugs were an excuse to hide what her mother was really doing."

Dean hung his head and ran a hand across the back of his neck, "You got a guardian for her? In case something happens to you?"

"No... I'm still working on getting custody so I can have Amelia's rights terminated." Cas answered quietly.

"I'd do it."

"You have a child of your own to worry about. And he isn't dragging around the damage she is."

"I don't care, I'd make it work. Anything is better than sending her back. I think she knows that, too, and that scares the hell out of me, what she might do about it."

"She told me she'd run."

Dean got up from the bed slowly, "Well, tell her she has somewhere to run to."

Kevin let himself in, looking for Alfie, who he found plugging away at his computer, silently obsessing over a color palette on the screen.

He spotted a black piece of paper and picked it up.

"Woah, that is hot... Bet she knows how to toast a marshmal-" Kevin spotted the scar, "Oh, god."

Alfie, finally noticing his presence, spun around and snatched the piece of paper, putting it face down on the desk.

"So... Um... Looks like you got some."

Alfie was somewhere between embarrassed and irritated, "Yeah... Did you?"

"Almost... Working on it."

"Okay," Alfie replied, "Why don't you go keep working on it, and leave the real men alone with their work?"

"That was Claire." Kevin stated simply.

"That was a representation."

"Did she pose for that?"

"No."

"Right, no, you have photographic memory and x-ray vision. She probably just did a little stretch," Kevin mimicked the pose, finding it quite difficult, "And you just saw everything, uploaded it through the wifi from your brain."

"That's exactly what happened." Alfie replied with deadpan sarcasm.

"Too bad I'm going to have to warn her, the fire kink thing sounds dangerous."

"Uh-huh."
"'Cause if you hit that... you also have to hit that with a fire extinguisher."

"Go away."

"Oh, come on, I didn't come in here looking for a crayon drawing of your naked girlfriend, you just left it out. No friggin idea how I'm gonna look her in the eye after this, but..." Kevin shrugged, "Unless you want to 'fess up you did that with the crayons in preschool."

Alfie leaned his chair back, "What's up?"

"Check it out, it's healed up." Kevin said, pulling his shirt up to show the tattoo, "The shade and the skin tone worked like you said."

"Great." Alfie replied.

Kevin nodded, then gestured to the picture, "How come you draw her hotter than me?"

"Because unlike with you, there's a real emotional connection, it's not just about sex." Alfie said with a sarcastic smirk.

"Ohmigawd, she stole my man! That bitch!" Kevin said in a high voice before pretending to sober, "So can I borrow that for like, ten minutes?"

"You mean ten seconds?" Alfie retorted.

Kevin chuckled and reached for the paper, but Alfie slammed his hand down on it before Kevin could touch it.

"Shit... Just how accurate did you make that?"

Alfie's cheeks were burning but he only shook his head.

"Holy shit... You guys actually...? Dude, I told you, this thing with Julie-"

Alfie shook his head, "Totally resolved first."

"Yeah, but Claire-"

"Shut up."

"Morals, man! C'mon!" Kevin seemed to agitate in place.

"You just asked to borrow the picture, where's your morals?"

"Not like I asked to borrow Claire."

Alfie picked up the black piece of paper as he spun his chair back to the computer, giving a sharp tap from the back of his fist straight to Kevin's groin as he went.

Kevin crumpled, hissing a few choice words as he got to the floor, "Shit... I was gonna use that later."

"No, you weren't."

"Had that coming though."

"Yeah, you did."
Okay... But, as I lay here, dying... tell Margaret I thought she was awesome.

"Yep."

"Can I see the one on the screen?"

"No."

Claire's eyes popped open, remembering what she'd left in the glove box.

Charlie had done her best to distract her from her discomfort by prattling on and on about things she felt Claire would need to know, and one of them had been structural integrity.

Claire darted through the empty house, checking the kitchen for Cas before zipping out to the driveway and leaning in the passenger side window, still open, to pull out the bag.

It had been a very mild night, not warm and certainly not freezing, so she decided the items were likely fine even having been in the car that long, and snuck back into the house, sparing her misused vehicle a remorseful look.

The house was quiet as she got ready for the day, and it didn't take her long to figure out that she was alone in the house.

Claire considered the mess her car was in, and what Cas had said to her the last time she'd damaged a car. Of course she had been on the edge of death at the time, and supposed he might have said anything to encourage her to keep breathing.

She went into the home office, and into the closet, finding the unlocked fireproof box exactly as Cas described.

Claire opened the box and flipped through the stack of papers that had been carefully arranged into folders. One near the bottom had a tag with her name on it, and she pulled it out from under the others.

Inside, at the very top of the stack was the emergency orders granting Cas temporary custody and a protective order against Amelia. She had been there for that, and it held no interest for her. She took the recent papers out and set them on top of the box, finding more papers and several Polaroids below them.

Cas had said that the positive DNA test had been a surprise. He'd mentioned that he had already decided to be her father whether she had been his or not. Claire found it confusing.

The photos were of a much younger, and very happy man, holding a tiny newborn. One of them words on it in Cas' handwriting, which hadn't changed much, 'My baby girl, Princess Claire.' It carried a date roughly a week and a half after her birth.

Claire shook her head, "Sap."

In another, he was laying on a sofa and the tiny newborn Claire was asleep on his chest while he pretended to eat her head. Claire couldn't help smiling as she looked at it.

Looking past the pictures, Claire saw the next piece of paper. The DNA test results had indeed come back confirming that Castiel Novak was her father, but what really surprised her was that they had come back at least a month after her birthday. The whole three weeks he'd occasionally seen her,
he'd had no way of knowing that she was his biological child.

At the sound of the front door closing downstairs, Claire closed the folder and shoved it hurriedly back into the box, swinging the door closed, and leaving the closet.

As the closet door shut behind her, it displaced the air in the small, enclosed space. The gust caught the loose papers on top of the box, knocking them over the back.

"I'm concerned."

"Yeah, I know."

"Do you?" Cas asked.

"I feel a lot better today." Claire replied, "I'm sleeping better, I got a lot done, and I pulled the windshield, Dean said I can put it on tomorrow while the shop is closed."

"How did it happen in the first place? You're just missing all day yesterday, and suddenly you appear in a car you love that's covered in damage." Cas looked shaken by the memory, "At this point I'm not sure alien abduction is out of the question."

Claire laughed.

Cas rolled his eyes, "How is that funny?"

"I got probed."

"Claire, please, be serious."

"I'm being serious." Claire replied, "I was upset, I was at the school, Charlie asked why, and I told her everything. Then, two years late, I guess, she took me to a clinic... Got probed... So, if I have some horrible diseases, I'll find out pretty soon."

Cas put his elbows on the table and buried his face in his hands, muttering, "Of course... Of course, she let it happen, she would have been found out if she had taken you for even basic medical care..."

Claire had reached her limit. She picked up a forkfull of her mashed potatoes, and launched it catapult-style straight for his face, splattering the back of his hands.

He pulled his hands away to find her watching him without any hint of humor, "What was that for?"

"A parenting thing you missed out on... Next, I was going to hit the liquor cabinet and throw up on you, and you can laugh while I try to walk around and land on my ass a bunch of times while talking gibberish."

"Claire, this is hardly the time-"

"Yeah, it is, actually... Because I'm done. She doesn't get to fuck up my life anymore. Yours, either. It's shitty luck that I'm old enough to be tried as an adult, I wouldn't put you through that, but you stuck with me the whole time, and I've decided I'm okay."

"You've decided?... I'm wondering if you need psychoactive drugs, Claire... I think this break from counseling has been too much."

"So we go back. He's gonna tell you I'm doing amazing, and I don't need happy pills."
"No, you don't need happy pills, you need pills that keep you from rolling your car over with you in it."

"Gosh, if they handed those out like candy, nobody would ever crash again." Claire gave her words a sarcastically chipper intonation.

"Claire, I can't lose you again!" Cas said, putting his hand down on the table, hard, "And I can't wonder how bad the next wreck is going to be, or how much blood they're going to need from me because a tiny town like this doesn't usually have a good stock of B negative."

Claire finally had a reaction, "What?"

Cas looked at the back door, "They had given you all the B negative they had, and they were going to start on the O negative. They were holding out because if anyone else came in with either type, they'd have nothing left to give them... You didn't get that type from your mother... Do you have any idea how difficult it was for me to convince them to take it?"

"...Because you're out."

"Yes... And your life was at risk, so they weren't sure they could believe anything I said. Thankfully someone was willing to take a chance and disregard protocol."

"You didn't tell me."

"How would I even begin that conversation?"

Claire shrugged, "'Good morning, patient zero, want some brains?"

Cas gave her a hard look, "What does that mean?"

"It's a zombie movie virus thing."

"...For my generation, and the generation before, patient zero was the hypothetical person that brought AIDS to North America."

"Sorry... I didn't know that." Claire replied.

"You shouldn't be expected to, things have changed a lot since then."

Cas realized he still had his half finished plate in front of him, but his appetite was gone. He pushed it to one side.

"I know this has been hard for you, too," Cas said quietly, "But if I don't do everything I can to get past it, it's just going to stay bad for the rest of my life. I wasn't trying to roll my car, I was blowing off steam. I had a fucked up day."

Cas looked over her face closely, "That's all this is? Moving on?... You're not suicidal?"

Claire scoffed, "I'm not suicidal."

Cas rubbed at his forehead with one hand, "I had a long talk with Dean this morning... You'll probably be of age before anything could be official, but essentially, if I die, you're going to him. Legality doesn't matter, you're resourceful enough to get yourself back here, whatever happens."

"Would you get Ben if Dean died?" Claire asked quietly.
"Ben has other family, you don't."

"That's kind of weird. Why Dean instead of Charlie?"

"Because Charlie wouldn't be able to intimidate anyone into leaving you in her care."

"You've known him for a few months, dad. Do you hear how this sounds?"

Cas shook his head, "Would you rather go somewhere else?"

"No."

"Then it doesn't matter." Cas replied, "Most of the time it takes years to really get to know a person, but very rarely, it happens much faster... And I didn't ask, he offered."

----------------------------------

Monday morning, Dean welcomed the young man with a short, black ponytail into his office, "Ivan, right? Go ahead and have a seat..."

Dean scanned the resume, "Okay, you've got some work experience, but nothing involving cars. What about apart from work?"

"My dad got me a Mustang when I was thirteen, he figured I'd have it running by the time I could drive."

"Was he right?"

"No."

"That sounds promising." Dean muttered, "Tell me about your car."

"It's a small pickup, so I can move stuff."

"I was looking for details on the vehicle, not what it can do."

"Oh... It's a Mazda."

Dean nodded, "Year, make, model, number of cylinders, what kind of oil does it take, the last time you changed the spark plugs, how does it run, what are it's biggest problems... The young lady at the front desk right now could tell me everything about her car in a heartbeat... That's what I'm asking."

Ivan scoffed, "What? Blondie? I thought she was here for decoration."

"This is a family business, Ivan. Everyone who currently works here had a lot of respect for the old man who started the company, and we respect each other. We had somebody recently who got inappropriate, she didn't last a week."

"Look, I need this job. I'm a hard worker, a fast learner, and I can do things your way. Not really sure why you'd have a skirt running around a garage, but that's your business, and it won't distract me from getting my work done."

Dean raised his eyebrows, "I gotta be honest, you are making a really crappy first impression. But everyone's gotta start somewhere... So let's get this out there right now. She's not 'a skirt,' she's got a name and you're gonna use it, not blondie, or anything else, she's underage, and you're going to overlook the gender thing, because if it comes down to the two of you, I already know she knows what she's doing. We got one more person here, Alfie, and you're gonna treat him the same. You get
"your work done, and get along with everyone. You got that?"

"Yeah." Ivan nodded, "Got it."

"Go see Claire for your first assignment. We'll just find out what you can do, if you pass, you can stay." Dean pointed to the door, "If she's not at the desk, she's probably in the garage."

Ivan nodded and got up, leaving the room.

Claire had left the desk, and was in the first bay putting a side mirror on the red Chevelle.

"Shit... Did they die?" Ivan asked, looking over the damage.

"No." Claire scoffed, "I didn't die. I just haven't gotten the hang of stunt driving yet."

Ivan chuckled, "All right, the boss said to see you, and get to it... Where do you want me?"

Claire didn't like his tone, but got up from the floor and led the way to the third bay, "Are you going work in that, or do you want some coveralls?"

"I usually just ditch my shirt. What about you?"

"Coveralls, usually."

"Spend much time at church, then?"

"I was raised agnostic." Claire replied, moving to open the door. She carefully pulled the lever only half way, and let go before the hood could pop up high enough, "All right, get it open, check the levels of the oil, the transmission fluid, and the wiper fluid. Everything you need is on the back wall."

"Did you want me to tell you, or do I need to show you the dipstick?" Ivan asked with a smirk.

"If anyone wanted to see your dipstick, you wouldn't be asking that question." Claire replied, unimpressed.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Brace yourself, this one is a doozie.

Thanks for reading, thanks for the comments, love you guys! FW)

Tuesday, Alfie had run out of small projects, and Dean wasn't ready to haul out the transmission of the Taurus just yet.

Claire hadn't come in yet, but her Chevelle was still in the first bay, and he figured she wouldn't mind if he used it to stay busy.

"Gotta love those woman-drivers, amiright?" Ivan scoffed from the second bay, "She didn't even get the hood popped all the way open before I got started yesterday. She laughed about it later, too."

"She probably did it to teach you a lesson." Alfie commented quietly.

"Yeah? Is she bossy like that?"

Alfie shrugged, "She doesn't let anyone tell her what to do, if that's what you mean."

"Right. What about Dean, in there?"

"That's different."

Ivan nodded, "Well, give it a couple of weeks, I want to get in pretty good here, maybe make manager, since more people are coming in after me, then we'll get her back at the desk so she doesn't go crying about it just because somebody says she has a nice ass."

Alfie smiled slightly, "She wouldn't cry about it."

"Yeah? Seems like a real prude."

"She's a very strong, independent person." Alfie said softly, "And if she is a prude, that's her business. But if you try to kick her out of the garage, you'll be gone, fast."

"Oh, god, not you, too." Ivan replied, "Do you get a free snip with your first paycheck, or do your balls just fall off from working here?"

Alfie laughed, and continued to pry at the door.

"Shit, yours probably haven't even dropped yet, if you have any to start with." Ivan muttered, "Damn teenagers running the place. I'm gonna have everything running smooth in two months, count the days."

"Oh yeah," Alfie replied, "Marking it on the calendar."

He could hear the echos as the front door opened, and Claire clocked in on the computer.
Claire went straight for the supply closet for her coveralls, and came back out to see what Alfie was doing with the door, "Any luck?"

"Not really." Alfie replied, "I think the passenger side is worse, though. Which side hit first?"

Claire shook her head, "I really have no idea, I didn't even realize I rolled until I got out."

Alfie grimaced.

"Maybe next time you'll show me how to do it right?"

"Not getting off that couch was the best thing I ever did," Alfie said quietly, with an embarrassed grin, "So, given the opportunity, no, I am never teaching you to spin a car."

Claire shot an irate look toward Ivan, who wasn't listening at all. Alfie caught it quickly.

"Also," he said far more clearly, "You have a really nice ass."

Ivan looked up as Claire nodded, "Yeah, I do. But we're at work, remember?"

"Yeah... I guess I should try to behave myself... But I really need your help with something." Alfie said, passing her the pry-bar, "You'll need this."

Claire looked puzzled as she followed him into the supply closet.

Alfie turned around, closing the door after her, unaware that her heart was pounding at being shut inside the small room. Alfie didn't approach her, but she could hear his whisper in the stillness, "This guy is a complete jerk, just... Gimme a minute, okay?"

Claire stepped back to lean against one of the shelves, trying to keep her sudden apprehension in check.

Alfie slammed his shoulder into the closed door, and slapped the wood a little higher up, "Oh, yeah, baby!... Give it to me like Kevin does it!"

Alfie rolled his back to the door, causing a general displaced rhythm of thumps with his fists, and occasionally a boot, his voice steadily growing squeakier as Claire fought to contain her laughter, "Oh, god!...That's good!... C'mon, I can take it!... I can take it, just shove it in there!... Tell me I've been a bad boy!"

"You're an idiot, you know that?" Claire said quietly as Alfie's skilled falsetto went higher, and strained.

"HoOOLY shit!... Mmph! Faster!... More!...Moremoremore!"

Claire covered her face with her hand, "You sound like Minnie Mouse!"

Alfie grinned and slammed against the door a little harder, "OHGODCLAIRENOTTHATHARD!"

The door was abruptly shoved open, knocking Alfie back behind it, interrupting his performance. Dean looked unamused, but the murder dropped from his gaze as he spotted Claire, fully clothed and laughing at the back of the small room, still holding the pry-bar and struggling to breathe.

Dean turned to Alfie, "Get out of the closet."

"You really shouldn't rush those things. People come out when they're ready." Alfie replied sweetly.
"My office. Now..." Dean growled. He turned away, headed for the hallway, "...Jackass."

Alfie caught Claire's eyes before he hurried after Dean.

Closing the door behind him, he dropped into the chair across the desk from Dean.

"What the hell was that?... Because we're not hazing the new guy."

"I don't know if I can work with him. And I know Claire won't be able to." Alfie replied.

"Is that right?... Claire will tell me if she has a problem with this guy. I don't know what you think you were doing, but it stops now. And don't use your girlfriend as the butt of some sex joke."

"Technically, I was th-"

"Shut up."

"Yeah."

"So... Anyone in immediate danger? Anyone doing something inappropriate?... Aside from you?"

"Um... I'm going to be running this place in a month, and put the girl with the nice ass back at the desk where she belongs?... Or is that appropriate?"

Dean leaned back in his chair, "Yeah?"

Alfie nodded.

"It's not an easy industry for women. Stay close, but let her handle it."

"Dean, she..."

"What?"

Alfie shrugged, "I just don't want her to get hurt."

"I didn't say 'stay out of it,' did I?" Dean gestured to the door.

Alfie pulled the door shut behind him as he left the office. He wandered back out into the garage, finding the pry-bar and returning to the Chevelle, looking around and finding only Ivan.

"She went looking for an antenna." Ivan said quietly, "So, what's the deal? He must really be impressed with you."

"How do you mean?"

Ivan laughed, "How long have you worked for this guy? ...Okay, you look like you're about fourteen, so let me explain this to you: anybody who even pretends they're fucking the boss' daughter, anywhere, gets told to hit the road. Unless he doesn't give a shit about her."

"Wait, what?" Alfie asked blankly, "Dean's not her dad. She and her dad live up the road."

"Uncle?"

"No. They aren't related." Alfie replied.

"Well, then I guess we know how she got the job." Ivan chuckled.
Alfie stood up and looked over to the other car, "Probably because she doesn't put head gaskets on backward."

Dean braced himself heavily against the shower wall as he breathed in time with Cas' slow rhythm.

Cas' hands slid over Dean's body as the hot water ran over them both.

"It's getting easier..." Cas whispered against Dean's neck, "Do you want me to go faster?"

Dean had been about to answer that he'd need more lube first, as they'd been going for a while, but echoes of attempted humor earlier in the day suddenly shut everything down.

"Actually, I need to stop... Sorry." Dean answered, silently cursing Alfie, and his bullshit.

"Don't apologize, we both knew this could take a while." Cas said gently, slowly leaving him.

"It's not like that, I just accidentally psyched myself out of it." Dean replied, turning around and pulling Cas close. He pressed Cas' back to the wall, kissing him hard and taking him in his hand, as Cas moaned softly, "You've been so patient about this."

"Eventually..." Cas started, though Dean interrupted him several times, "... till you can't walk..."

"Promise?"

"You'll love it." Cas said, his voice straining as he tipped his head back to let Dean at his throat.

With his free hand, Dean pulled Cas' arm up to his shoulders, stepping closer, leaving just enough room to continue his attentions.

Cas could see that the television was running by the lights reflected in the windows. So much for sneaking home. He almost wished he'd stayed at Dean's.

Claire was on the couch, watching a horror movie. She looked to be half asleep, and seemed to have eaten nearly an entire bag of chips.

The door creaked as it opened, and he braced himself for questions. He decided it could very well be time. Claire would understand not to tell Ben. He wouldn't avoid the question if she asked.

"Hey..." Claire said, sitting up and pausing her show, "What time is it?"

"It's one-thirty."

"Shit." Claire turned the television off, and got up, taking the chips to the kitchen.

She was about to head up the stairs, but Cas stopped her.

"What?"

"I forgot to mention it at dinner, but we're going to see Dr Thompson on Friday. Two o'clock."

"Okay... I have to go in early tomorrow." Claire yawned, "My car is in the way, and I have to learn to talk to insurance reps. Also, the new guy thinks he's awesome because he's older, but really, he couldn't remember where the screwdrivers were and he lost a car battery... How the hell does you lose a car battery?"
Cas nodded and started to speak but she was already half way up the stairs.

Only having a half day, Cas pulled his white Ford Edge up the gravel road only to find a small red Buick parked on the gravel by his front gate, and his front door standing wide open.

He didn't recognize the car, and Claire was still at work.

Cas turned into the driveway, heading for the door, but he was met on the porch as she came outside.

She'd always been thin, and her dirty blonde hair had always been somewhat lifeless, but the years had not been kind to Amelia. Being used to Claire, a stunning picture of health, Amelia was a sharp contrast, with a hint of underfed and unwashed.

"You shouldn't even be here. You need to leave, I'm calling the sheriff." Cas warned, reaching for his phone.

"Oh, the sheriff is already on the way, where is my daughter?" Amelia demanded.

"Somewhere away from you, and that's all that matters." Cas replied, "You broke in?"

"It was open. I'm looking for my child. A door is not going to stop me."

"Of course," Cas growled, pushing past her, "You've probably lined up a few johns for her to service, and a schedule to keep."

Getting to the top of the stairs, his heart sank as he saw that Claire's door stood wide open. Once again, Amelia had found a way to violate Claire's sanctuary.

"I have temporary custody papers, she's leaving with me. You're gonna pay, big time." Amelia said.

Cas turned, going into his office, surprised to find the door of the box in the closet unlatched.

He quickly pulled out her folder, but all the newer papers were gone.

Cas' blood ran cold as he turned, looking at her from the closet doorway, "What did you do?"

"Amelia, I swear to you-"

"Watch it. I'm going to repeat every threat to law enforcement when they get here." Amelia pointed at his chest with a thick stack of papers, "I have custody according to California, and the sheriff's going to make sure she leaves here with me. There is nothing you can do, so, wherever she is, get her back here, now."

"Let me see those." Cas held out his hand.

"Go ahead." Amelia replied, handing them over, "The certified copies are locked in my trunk, in case you try ripping them up. You should keep that copy, though, to remind you not to try it again."

Cas fought through rage and panic to focus on the date. The orders from the California court had been issued after the accident. If he could find his own, or get a copy from the courthouse, especially paired with the protective order, Amelia wouldn't have a leg to stand on.

Through the front door, which he'd been too distracted to close, they could both hear the sound of a
vehicle's tires crunching on the gravel road.

Coming out onto the front porch, his hands shaking, he found Sheriff Mills had blocked his driveway with her cruiser, not far behind Amelia's car, and was approaching the house cautiously.

"Is everyone okay?" Sheriff Mills asked suspiciously.

"Everything would be okay, but my daughter is missing." Amelia said loudly in an accusing tone.

"She's not missing!" Cas replied, "She's at work. She has a job, unlike some people."

Amelia rolled her eyes, "All I want is to take my little girl home, where she belongs. I found birth control pills and condoms in her room. God knows what this man has been doing to her. He's not even her real father."

Cas' anger grew visibly, and wanting to avoid an altercation, Sheriff Mills attempted to diffuse it, "She's a teenager. If she were my kid, I'd be a lot more rattled not to find them... Okay, we need to get this sorted out, I'm here to enforce custody, if either of you want to try to get your lawyer on the phone, now would be a good time. And Mr Novak, you need to call your daughter and get her to come home. I'd prefer you do that here, in front of me, so I know exactly what you say to her."

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Claire was sitting at the front desk, typing details into an insurance repair form when Alfie came in from the garage, "Hey... You might want to text your dad, I just saw a squad car heading for your house."

Claire gave him a puzzled look, "It's probably fine."

Alfie shrugged, and sat down on the edge of the desk the way she had many times when he'd been in the chair.

In his office, Dean's cell phone rang. Spotting Cas' number, he picked up immediately, "Calling me at work, that's pretty hot."

"Yes, my daughter, Claire Novak works there, I need you to give her a message."

"Cas?"

"That's right, Novak."

"Something's wrong."

"Yes."

Dean got up and went into the front of the shop, looking out the window over the couch. He could barely make out the back of the cruiser over a low bit of brush along the fence line, "What can I do?"

Cas' voice was strained, "Her mother is here, and she needs to come home right away."

"Jesus Christ, man..." Dean put a shaky hand to his forehead.

Alfie turned around, and Claire looked up, but both remained silent at seeing Dean this alarmed.

"You want me to get her out of here?"

Through the phone, he could hear Cas take a shaky breath, "Yes... thank you."
Dean ended the call, and looked up, "You brought your bike today, didn't you?"

Alfie shook his head, "No, I used my car."

"Good... you two need to split, quietly, and don't tell anyone where you're going. Claire, go ahead and 'forget' your phone in your coverall pocket, and you," he pointed to Alfie, "You better keep your phone on, and charged, you got that?"

"What the hell is going on?" Claire demanded, getting to her feet.

Dean put his phone back in his pocket, "Your mother showed up. Your dad wants you gone. They can't force him to hand you over if you're not here. If they make him trace your phone, you won't have it on you."

"No." Claire shook her head. She was shaking, but she was infuriated, "No. She can't do shit. I'm not going anywhere."

"Claire, please," Alfie begged, "My mom's got a beach house, we'll split for a week and come back, you'll be safe."

"No." Claire replied firmly, "I'm done. I'm not running."

Dean shook his head, "Your dad said to get you out of-

"I don't give a shit! ...This is my life, and for once, it doesn't suck! This is my home! She doesn't get to drag me out of it or make me drop everything and leave!" Claire yelled, "I'm going over there."

"If you go over there, you're as good as gone. There's a law enforcement vehicle blocking your dad in, and if he tries to stop your mom from taking you, they'll arrest him." Dean said quickly.

"Claire," Alfie looked at her with fear in his eyes.

"I'm not leaving you." Claire replied, "... And I'm coming back."

"I'll go with you."

"No. I don't know how this is going to go, and you're going to distract me. Don't leave this room." Claire couldn't help but feel guilt as Alfie sat down on the desk again. She turned to Dean, "Dean, um... Can you walk over there with me?"

Dean nodded, "Yeah."

He followed after her down the dark hallway and waited as she left her coveralls in the supply closet, and they left through the open door of the first bay, heading for the road.

"If he gets arrested, that would really hurt his chances of getting me back, right?"

"Yeah." Dean replied.

"That can't happen. But if you're there, you can keep him calm... I know you're dating my dad."

Dean said nothing, stress slowing his search for the right words to reply.

"That's fine with me, by the way... I guess Ben might have some questions, though, so I wasn't going to say anything until one of you did..."
Dean nodded as they passed the gate, coming out onto the road, "I appreciate that."

"You know, you were more of a parent to me in two hours that one night than my mom was my whole life?... Still are... If you guys are still together next year, I'm getting you a mother's day card."

Dean chuckled. "Listen, if I slip you a credit card, can you get home safe?"

Claire shook her head, "Don't need to, Amelia's never going to get me past the county line. I have a plan, but... I'm gonna need your help with something." Claire pulled a thick metal bolt out of her pocket, "Here, you better take this... Maybe give it to my dad later."

Dean took the bolt as she held it out to him, "Okay... This thing mean something?"

Claire shrugged. She spotted both of her parents loudly arguing on the small front lawn, and Sheriff Mills trying to keep them a safe distance apart as she and Dean got close to the cruiser.

"Do me a favor, I'll never ask you for anything again." Claire said quietly.

"Yeah... What do you need me to do?" Dean asked.

"Press charges."

"What?"

"You can drop them later, but just get the sheriff to take me in long enough that my dad can make a big fuss over the whole thing, sort stuff out, so they can't release me to my mom. I'm a minor, no record, they'll go easy on me."

"That's a stupid plan." Dean replied.

"Only if it doesn't work."

"So, what do you want me to say? You were stealing from the shop or something?" Dean asked as they got to the back of the red Buick, headed for the yard, as Sheriff Mills approached them at a similar speed.

"No... I wouldn't ask you to lie for me."

"Then how are yo-"

Dean was cut off as Claire's fist flew out of nowhere, catching him in the face. He stumbled slightly as she hit him again, knocking him against the back of the Buick. He sat down hard on the ground, bracing himself for the next punch that never came.

Looking up as his vision cleared, Sheriff Mills had Claire pinned over the top of the trunk of the Buick, and was cuffing her. He gave Claire a startled look of bloodied confusion, and she winked.

Dean carefully got to his feet as Sheriff Mills pulled Claire up from the trunk. He still wasn't entirely sure what had happened, but Cas, and the woman near him were frozen in abject horror as Claire yelled in their direction, "You're next, you fucked-up junkie bitch! If I can knock him on his ass, you know what I'm gonna do to you!"
As the car door shut behind her, Claire could feel a trace of Dean’s blood on her knuckles as she leaned at an angle into the seat back, watching the commotion. She specifically watched her mother. Amelia looked bewildered and afraid.

Claire adjusted her wrists in the cuffs with a satisfied, and somewhat vicious smirk.

Amelia's car left first, followed by the cruiser. Dean had done his best to keep the blood off his shirt, unfortunately failing anyway.

Sheriff Mills had tried to keep all of the adults apart once Claire was inside her car, and both Cas and Dean had complied. She'd also wisely insisted on Amelia leaving ahead of her.

Dean didn't say anything, but he had had some ideas had the sheriff left first.

Cas was visibly shaken as he watched the cruiser leave. Dean approached him slowly with a sympathetic look.

"So... as it turns out, baby girl can, in fact, throw a punch."

Cas turned his head to look at Dean, who was lightly bruised, and still bleeding.

"...You're pressing charges?" Cas' voice came out broken.

"She asked me to... Not a great plan, but after she hit me, I kinda had to go with it, there weren't a lot of options left." Dean explained, "I'm going to drop them, I swear... She just needed to buy you some time, and this was all she could come up with, short notice."

Cas shook his head and turned to go inside. Dean followed after him, "You... you just let her get herself arrested... You couldn't make her stop? You understood me on the phone, you were supposed to get her to leave!"

"Let's make sure we're clear on this, Cas, nobody makes Claire do anything... And that's probably
for the best, considering the shit that happened with her mom. She made her decision, and I didn't have time to come up with a better way to keep her safe! Now you've gotta get your shit together and get her home." Dean answered fiercely, "She seemed to think you could do that, so... what? Talk to the judge again? Call a lawyer?"

Dean had followed him into the kitchen. Cas grabbed several paper towels and pointed to a chair.

"Please, sit down before you get blood everywhere." Cas said wearily, proceeding to shake his head, "The custody papers, and the restraining order are missing. She was in the house looking for Claire... She said she found birth control in her room."

"Yeah, well, not to be 'that guy,' but she's got a boyfriend... And, I dunno, there's other, y'know, legitimate reasons for it, other than ...just that." Dean said, as Cas carefully wiped the blood from his face.

Cas nodded, "Thankfully the sheriff was of a similar opinion. Amelia suggested-..."

Dean set a hand on Cas' hip, "It's gonna be okay... Listen, I'm gonna call my brother, see if he has any advice... Are you sure she took the papers?"

"I can't be sure, the only ones I saw were the orders she got in California. But I keep all of Claire's information in a file, and they aren't there."

"Okay, so... Courthouse?"

Cas nodded again, "I suppose that's the next step."

Dean reached into his pocket and retrieved the thick bolt Claire had given him, and held it out for Cas to take.

"Why do you have that?"

"She said to give it to you... Before she hit me... Also, she figured us out."

Cas raised his eyebrows. Dean answered with a nod.

"I didn't realize we were that obvious."

"Well, maybe not to the outside world, but, Claire does live with you... And you've been coming home late a lot." Dean replied.

"She wasn't upset, was she?" Cas asked softly, a genuine look of concern on his face.

Dean chuckled, "She said she's getting me a card for mother's day... But you remember what I told you? She hit you because she knew you wouldn't hit back... Shitty way to say 'welcome to the family,' but I'll take it."

Relief washed over Cas' face as he realized that the understanding and trust between his daughter and his lover was strong enough for him to truly pursue the relationship he wanted, but hadn't yet put into words. He straddled Dean's lap and sat down, kissing him softly, not minding the salty tin taste of his split lip.

"Hey," Dean interrupted him softly, "We've got work to do."

"I don't get it... I was there when you were bleeding out, you know... I stopped traffic on the
highway for three miles to make sure nothing got between you and the hospital..." Sheriff Mills said quietly, steering the car into town, "I just don't get why you'd attack your boss like that."

Claire shrugged, "I have a history of attacking men when I'm scared. Mostly, my dad... You should ask him why that is."

"You know those rights I read you? The short version, the version your lawyer will like best, is basically 'keep your fool mouth shut.' It's to protect you."

"Yeah, well, I only did this to protect myself... Dean knows that, and as soon as I'm safe, he'll drop the charges."

"What makes you so sure?" Sheriff Mills asked, unimpressed with the smug, teenaged confidence.

Claire wanted to say that Dean had tried to get her to run before seeing her mother. That he had offered to help her get away, to get home later. She wasn't sure what could happen if she brought it up. Or what the sheriff would think, without the context that Dean was involved with her father.

"Because," Claire replied, "He knows what she did to me, and he doesn't want to let that happen again. He won't be mad at me."

"What did she do to you?"

Claire shook her head, "I don't want to talk about it... But my therapist sent my dad to talk to a judge, so, there's records."

Sheriff Mills nodded, "Okay... I'm going to get a copy, and go over them before anybody can bail you out, but you have to cooperate... Somebody told me you'd be big pain in my ass if you weren't such a clean-cut kid, and I'm starting to see why."

Alfie was slumped in the chair, his face hardly recognizable as his own, when Dean came in, bruised, blood staining his shirt.

His jaw dropped, "What happened?"

Dean looked down at himself, then back to Alfie, answering nonchalantly to get the full affect, "Claire happened... The girl oughta take up boxing..."

"Is she okay?"

"Is she okay? I'm the one bleeding, here... She's fine, but she's getting locked up for bit." Dean replied, dabbing at his nose with a wadded paper towel he carried, "Listen, close up, then I need you to take care of the dog for me, I have to go into town with Cas in case he can get this done today, but it's getting late."

Alfie looked concerned, "Locked up?"

"She punched me in front of the sheriff and her dashcam. Yeah. Locked up. Now, Nick, just get her out and let her run around, change out the newspaper, check that she's got enough water in there, and give her a chance to eat her dog food, if she won't take more than a couple pieces, bottle's in the fridge, warm it up in the sink."

"Yeah," Alfie said with a nod, "I can do that... So, Claire's in jail?"

Dean nodded, making for the door, "Yeah. But it won't stick... I'm pretty sure."
Dean thumped up the stairs to his bedroom, already dialing his brother.

He stripped off the stained shirt, throwing it into the bathroom sink, running the water to soak it, and grabbed another from his closet, struggling into it too fast as Sam picked up.

"Hey Dean, you want to talk to Ben?"

"No... No, I need your help with something." Dean replied, leaning into the bathroom to turn off the water, and stopping to check the bruising on his face.

"Uh, okay, what's up?"

"Okay, you know when you said you were tired of being the bad guy, getting kids put with the parent that could pay better, even if they were assholes?... I know you were just venting, man, but this is your area, this guy is trying to keep his daughter away from somebody who hurt her."

Sam had walked somewhat away from where Jess was showing Ben how to balance large rocks in tall formations, and motioned to her to watch Ben, and started for the cabin, "Okay, go ahead and tell me."

Alfie had finished an order on the computer, and went into the garage.

Ivan was tightening a screw on a hose-clamp with his pocket knife, and Alfie slowed to watch him, "Philips or regular?"

"I got it."

"Yeah, sure... Until you slip, put a hole in the hose, and have to start all over."

Ivan stood up, "You wanna take this outside, short stuff?"

"Um... I'm taller than you... And I'm suggesting a screwdriver. Y'know, to make your job easier?" Alfie shrugged, "But if you want to throw threats around, go ahead. I got nothing better to do."

"So you do want to take it outside?"

"Take what? This argument you seem to think we're having?... Dean said to shut it down and close up. He had to leave." Alfie replied.

"Too bad, I'm scheduled for another two hours."

"Right. Well, I'm following orders, because that's how it works around here." Alfie began closing the bay doors, and put things away as he came to them.

Ivan stepped in the way as he got to the last overhead door, "What do you think you're doing?"

"It involves dog shit and a nipple. Are you in?" Alfie deadpanned.

Ivan have him a startled look, "What the fuck...?"

"Yeah, that's what I thought. Boss' orders; pack up, go home. Hopefully we can all sort this out tomorrow."

"So Dean and the little bitch just run off any time they please, and I have to cut my hours?"
Alfie shrugged, "How bad do you need to get paid?"

"What do you care? You probably got a typical waspy home with your parents, spending all your money as fast as you get it."

"I'm serious. How bad?"

"Not bad enough to do anything with dog shit and nipples, freak."

"I'll give you fifty bucks to mow an old lady's lawn. I was going to do it myself, but I got some bad news twice today, and I don't feel like it... Still needs done."

Ivan narrowed his eyes, "You're bullshitting me."

Alfie pulled his wallet from his back pocket, retrieving three twenties, "Her name is Mrs Roberts, she lives next door to me. She's eighty-three, and has a cat named Bill. You tell her Samandriel... that's my actual first name... can't make it, and she'll let you get the mower out of the garage."

"If she's next door to you, why not just use your own mower?" Ivan asked, taking the cash from him.

"I don't have one." Alfie replied.

"So, you borrow hers, or what?"

Alfie shook his head, "Don't worry about it."

Ivan pocketed the money as Alfie rattled off the address, "You miscounted, by the way."

"Yeah, sure I did."

"How do you figure I'm even going over there, though?"

"You will, if you need it that bad, otherwise you'd be burning a bridge."

Ivan shifted his weight, "Yeah, I could have pegged you for helping out little old ladies. You look like a fucking boy scout."

Alfie shrugged, "That's better than looking like you."

Cas' frustration was growing as the woman at the desk explained again, "We only check the computer to see where the file is, we don't keep digital copies. The paper copies are out right now, they were requested by the sheriff's department."

"Why couldn't you send them a photocopy?"

"Because we're right next door, so it saves our little bit of tax dollars to just have an intern walk them upstairs and pass them to someone."

Cas rubbed at his forehead, "And what if they get lost?"

"Well, that's never happened before." she answered, "The sheriff's department doesn't tend to lose things, they just send them back at the end of the week, and we file them Monday."

"Monday?" Cas asked.

"Hey," Dean put a hand on his shoulder, "Technically, the sheriff should only have those records if
she thinks something's going on, this could help speed things up. And if not, you can get ahold of the shrink, right? Have him call his judge friend?"

Cas nodded, "I suppose I can try."

Sam was shaking his head when Jess came in with Ben, "Sorry, looks like we're going to have to cut the trip short a couple of days."

Jess looked surprised.

"Why?" Ben asked.

"There's a family in your town that's got a problem, and your dad called and asked if I could give him some advice for them. But it's tougher than I thought... I want to drive back tonight." Sam said.

Jess looked somewhat unnerved, "Ben, how about you watch some TV while I talk with him."

Ben headed for the couch as Jess pushed Sam quickly toward the bedroom, closing the door quietly behind her.

"You said you were leaving work at work, you said the vacation was straight up family time. You also said it was about us, Ben, Dean, if he could make it, and you said you needed it, because your job is going to put you in an early grave. So... what the hell, Sam?" Jess hissed.

Sam shrugged, "It's an emergency."

"Lawyers don't have emergencies!... They have court dates, and meetings in coffee shops!"

"The girl from Dean's shop? Her and her dad live up the road, the guy that stayed with Ben while Dean had to bury the dogs? Her mother is a fucked up piece of work, and she's trying to take this kid across state lines. The guy can't find the restraining order, this woman was in the house and probably took it." Sam shrugged, "This girl punched Dean in front of a cop car to get them to take her to jail to keep her safe. She's sixteen, and she's sitting in a cell right now rather than go with her mom... I can help."

"You're only getting one side of this. You don't know what her mom is like."

"No, but Dean knows her dad. And he wouldn't let anyone around Ben if he didn't trust them, and he's been through enough I think he'd spot it right away if this guy was bad news. Now a judge already gave him papers to help him keep his kid, the therapist they have said she's been through some real screwed up abuse, this is open and shut, but it's going to be a lot easier on them if they have representation. He's pretty sure the mother can't afford a lawyer for the same reason she couldn't pass a drug test, so this should be easy."

"You want to pack Ben up and make him miss out on his time with us?"

"You saw her, right?... The blonde girl? Really pretty? Do you want to know what happened to her? Her mother was going to make her do porn, and that pales in comparison to what had already happened. She was fourteen at the time."

Jess looked like she could cry, "What is this going to do to you if you run down there to be the hero and you lose this?... Sam, you're a mess. Six months ago, you would have said this is too close to home, they're in too deep with Dean and Ben."
Sam took a deep breath, "I'll quit."

"I don't know if you can."

"I will." Sam replied, "If this goes wrong, I'm gonna cut my losses, and find another line of work. Or become a hermit."

"Sam-"

"I know... But all my student loans are paid off, those investments your dad got me into are going great, it would slow things down, but... Yeah. I'll quit."

Jess searched his face for several tense moments. "Okay... Okay, fine... I'm with you on this, but I'm holding you to it."

Claire had been fingerprinted, and her information collected. She'd been sitting in a very plain, typical cell for long enough that she lost track of time.

As she was about to doze off, sitting up with her back to the wall, Sheriff Mills spoke to her, startling her slightly, "The food in here sucks. I don't recommend it... Thought you might want to come have a burger in my office instead."

"You want information?" Claire asked.

Sheriff Mills shook her head, "I'm not trying to take down an international diamond smuggling ring... I mean, I would if you have one for me, but, all I want is a better understanding of what the heck is going on."

Claire got to her feet, "Okay... you can ask anything you want, but I might not answer."

"That's fine. I just want to clear some things up." Sheriff Mills replied, opening the cell door, watching her carefully as she brought Claire through the hallway.

Claire kept a slow, steady pace with her hands in clear view until she was asked to sit in front of a desk.

Sheriff Mills dug into a large white bag, pulling out a burger for her, "They actually feed the deputies the same trays if they're stuck working through lunch, it helps rotate the stock since we don't usually have many to cook for, but this is better... And this late in the day, you might still be here come breakfast."

Claire thanked her and quietly sat, eating, and waiting for the first question.

"So... I show up to help settle which of your parents are supposed to have you, which is pretty ridiculous for a kid your age, and you punch your boss and scream at your mother... You didn't put up a fight after you yelled at your mom... Why is that? I thought for sure you'd kick like a mule."

Claire shook her head, "This is where I wanted to be."

"Street cred?" Sheriff Mills asked.

"Safety." Claire replied, "She can't drag me out of here, and if she can't get to me, my dad won't be in here, he'll be finding the restraining order."

Sheriff Mills nodded, "I've got the original in the next room. Your dad's custody papers, too... Dr
Thompson is mentioned..."

"Yeah... I was doing better about the whole violence thing. Hadn't hit my dad in a while."

"So you're in therapy for violent behavior?"

"I'm in therapy for the stuff that made me violent in the first place." Claire chuckled, "Actually, we have an appointment, I'm supposed to go tomorrow."

"If your therapist could tell me something about this, if you gave him permission, what do you think Dr Thompson would think I would need to know?"

"That I'm not safe with her. But I've been doing a lot better with my dad, and I'm safe with him."

"So, why'd you hit Mr Winchester?"

Claire shrugged, "I'm safe with him, too. And he was close... Maybe you didn't notice that look on Amelia's face? Freaked the fuck out."

"You mean your mom?"

"I don't have a mom." Claire answered, wrapping up the burger and setting it down on the desk, "Moms don't let somebody come into their house and rape their kid so they can buy heroin instead of paying the rent, and they don't tell you... They don't say it's not a big deal, or, 'it's been a week, get over it, stop crying."

Sheriff Mills nodded grimly, looking at Claire's shaking figure in the chair before her. She was upset, but she wasn't crying. Anger had taken the place of fear, which gave her hope for the girl, "Your mother said she found birth control in your room, maybe she put it there?"

"I put it there." Claire replied, almost defiantly.

"Does your dad know?"

"No. But I have a boyfriend, so, he suggested it... Gave me my medical card and said it was none of his business, but he'd listen if I needed something."

"Okay, last question, then hopefully you can calm down enough to eat... Broad spectrum, okay? Is anybody hurting you right now? Dad, boyfriend, your boss? Someone you haven't mentioned?"

Claire nodded, "Yeah, well, what my mom put me through... That's still hurting me. So she's still hurting me. And showing up like this when I'm finally getting better? That's hurting me. I'm sure Dr Thompson has some bullshit name for it."

Sheriff Mills nodded, "Yeah, I understand what you're trying to say... I have some tricks I can pull with the restraining order, so, unless ordered by a judge - highly unlikely - your mother won't be allowed to post bail for you."

Claire nodded.

Sheriff Mills set a cardboard container of fries and and to-go cup in front of her, "I figured a diet coke was probably a safe bet."

Claire shrugged.

"So, you must feel pretty safe on a normal day, huh? Dad, your boyfriend, your boss, all these big
strong guys around to protect you?"

Claire shook her head, "No... They can try, but really, I'm the only one who can protect me."

Sheriff Mills took a bite of her burger, "You think you'll still have a job after this?"

"Yeah, but I'll be pulling parts from the yard with a butterknife for a week." Claire chuckled.

It was well after one in the morning when Dean and Sam left Cas' house. Sam was sure he had a good idea of what he needed from a legal standpoint, and had made his plans to call the courthouse, the sheriff's department, and Amelia in the morning to attempt to set up an emergency hearing with Judge Cavanagh.

"So, does she hit harder than me?" Sam joked.

"Yeah, she does." Dean said with a chuckle, "I can't thank you enough for this, man, this kid is finally getting better, getting some self confidence back, and the bitch shows up and fucks up everything."

Sam shook his head, "Don't worry about it, it's gonna flesh out my fifty pro bono hours this year."

"Right."

"You know, at first, I really thought you'd picked up some barely legal cheerleader, I didn't think for a second you were looking out for her... I shouldn't have judged you like that."

"Well, I'm not a pervert, I'm old enough to be her father. Kinda puts that into perspective. And she's got a guy her age, a good one, one of those quiet, shy types, lots of patience."

"You sound like you set them up."

"Nah, just gave them a little nudge, that's all."

Sam laughed, "My brother, the matchmaker."

Dean chuckled, "Yeah, well... Truth is, I'm seeing Cas, I just haven't said anything to Ben yet."

Sam stopped in his tracks, "Wait, what?"

"Yeah."

"I thought you were into women now?"

"I'm bi, Sam. It's not about what somebody's packing." Dean replied.

Sam turned, running his hand over his face, "Why the hell would you do that? ... You have the option to make it easy on yourself, just go after women, why open yourself up to that kind of crap? I mean, do you want assholes out here talking about you and Cas behind your back? Let Ben get picked on at school for this?"

"That's not how it works, Sam."

"How is that not how it works? Pass up the hot guys, and find a girl you like. It's not that hard, and nobody's going think twice about it."
"Okay, fine, let's play that game." Dean answered, angrily, "You're marrying a blonde. You're opening yourself up for accusations of a trophy wife, people calling her a bimbo, plastic Barbie, gold digger, shallow, stupid, whatever. How about you just pass her up, and go for a brunette? Pass up the hot chick and go find one who's got 'a great personality.' It's not that hard... Y'know, aside from the whole 'love' thing, that's overrated, right? That doesn't matter to you."

"This isn't about me."

"Exactly." Dean replied, stressing the word, "I am really happy with Cas, he's a great guy, Ben likes him, and I really think we've got a shot at this, so the details are none of your business."

Sam stood quietly in the middle of the gravel road, not speaking for a while.

"So..." Dean asked, "Now what?"

Sam nodded, speaking quietly, "If we can't get the assault charges off her record, we may be able to knock them down to domestic, even though you don't live with them. On a minor's record, it would be pretty easily overlooked in the future."

"Was that you looking out for her, too, now?"

Sam took a deep breath, "Knowing you, she might be my niece eventually, so, why not?"

"You still sound pissed."

"I don't have to approve to accept it." Sam answered bluntly, resuming his walk toward the house.

"Maybe you'll come around." Dean said quietly.

"Maybe... And maybe I'll get plastic surgery and become a Cher impersonator."

Dean shrugged, "You're not far off that, now."

"Jerk."

"Bitch."
Chapter 39

Dean stretched out on the couch, having leant his room to Sam and Jess due to the late hour, wishing he was somewhere else.

His face was still painful to the touch, and he wondered if Cas was sleeping. It was going to be a long day tomorrow.

Having Ben home had already been a comfort, being able to see his child, watching him play tug-of-war with his pet, and rattle off tiny pieces of the vacation he'd clearly enjoyed. But his presence also forced a separation from Cas, who he had repeatedly fought himself not to text.

He wondered if Claire was really as safe as she thought she'd be. He hadn't had any experience with law enforcement in this town, but the sheriff seemed to be a fair woman. He hoped that the appearance was correct.

He shifted onto his side, attempting to get comfortable as something plump and furry suddenly appeared against his chest, snuffling his chin.

"So you got out again, huh?"

Nick rolled against him and settled. Dean was too tired to bother putting her back in the play pen, knowing she'd wouldn't stay in it with someone close by, and instead, let the dog stay where she was.

Again, he wondered if Cas was sleeping.

Sam sat down at the small desk in the cramped courthouse room adjacent to Judge Cavanagh's courtroom and chambers.

Cas and Amelia sat across from him, Cas looked pissed, and Amelia appeared to be a shaky mess of fear and withdrawal. She hadn't spoken since their phone call that morning.

"Okay," Sam said, gathering papers into piles to try to keep things straight, "Let me make sure I'm clear about this, I am representing Cas in this case, so, Amelia, I can answer basic questions about anything in the papers, and legallities, but I cannot give you any actual advice. Okay?"

Amelia nodded, agitated.

"Right... You're each seeking custody, Cas' orders predate Amelia's, and are attached to an order of protection barring Amelia from contact with both Claire and Cas. Of course we've agreed on both sides to put that aside during our time in the courthouse today, in order to get this over with quickly... The order of protection was granted on the advice of a psychiatrist, who stated there was clear psychological evidence of abuse, and recommended the child have no further contact with Amelia. Amelia's custody papers appear to be by default, meaning the other party simply did not appear at the hearing, and so the temporary orders requested by the petitioning party were granted... Any questions?"

Cas glowered, but shook his head.

"I have a question, but I want to ask privately." Amelia said quietly.
Sam nodded, "As long as it's not advice, I can do that."

Amelia nodded.

Cas got up and left the room.

Dean, Jess, and Ben were waiting around a bench in the hallway. Ben was seated next to Jess, bent over double, tying his shoelaces together for no obvious reason.

"That didn't take long." Dean commented.

Cas shook his head, "If only the rest of it goes this fast."

"Woah, look!" Sam said, spreading his hands defensively, "I can't recommend you do any of that. That's a big decision, you really should speak to an attorney, and if the D.A.'s office isn't swamped, maybe they can help you out, but that's not just something you can come back from."

"I didn't ask you if I should, I asked you how. So you should be able to tell me."

Sam nodded, "Yes, but what you do with that information, that has me concerned... Because it could come back on me later if you change your mind, and decide that wasn't what you wanted to do."

"He... he has poisoned my daughter's mind, okay? And I don't know if he sent her to some juvenile boot camp, or Kung Fu classes, or what, but..." she shook her head, "I know what I want to do, just tell me how."

Sam took a deep breath, "Okay, instead of telling you how, because I have no interest in getting disbarred, I strongly suggest you take a few minutes to think it over, and then talk it out with Judge Cavanagh directly before we have the hearing."

Claire was walked through back hallways to a different building, then, eventually, ushered into a nearly empty court room.

The bailiff Sheriff Mills had personally handed her off to directed her to stand close to Judge Cavanagh's high desk. It was far different from the meeting they'd had before. For one, she hadn't been cuffed.

Dean came from the back of the room, giving her a sympathetic look.

"Ms Claire Novak... you are a popular one in here today... quite a bit going on in your life right now. I've just seen your parents... And you've got a birthday coming up, happy birthday."

Claire gave a tired "Thank you."

"Mr Winchester, you wish to drop your assault charges against Ms Novak due to reasons previously discussed in chambers, is that correct?"

"Yes." Dean replied.

"Ms Novak... All things considered, what I've heard from your parents, your employer, and Sheriff Mills, I'm certain you had very good reasons for your actions. But that does not excuse them, as you made a conscious decision to violently attack someone. And considering the video taken from Sheriff Mills' vehicle, you were quite capable at it, too. That is not acceptable public behavior. I need to be certain you're not inclined to do it again... Six hours of community service by the end of the year, but"
you probably already manage that much at your father's school."

Judge Cavanagh signed a piece of paper and gestured to the bailiff, who quickly removed Claire's cuffs.

"I don't want to see you in here again, Ms Novak. Keep those fists in check." Judge Cavanagh passed the bailiff the piece of paper, and tapped his gavel on the desk before getting up and slipping out of the room.

Dean turned to the back of the room, gesturing towards the doors. Cas had come inside, or possibly had been in the room the whole time, she wasn't sure, but she went straight to him.

Cas embraced her tightly, "Are you okay?"

"Yeah... Where is she?" Claire asked, starting to let go. Cas, however, wasn't having it, and tightened his arms.

"Gone, hopefully. She... she said you were an out of control child, and she wouldn't trust you not to kill her in her sleep. She conceded custody."

"She's got a lot coming to her." Claire muttered.

Cas led her out of the courtroom as Dean followed them, "She does, but you can't be the one to supply it. You have to let it go."

Dean looked around for Ben, and shot Cas a puzzled look.

"Sam and Jess took Ben to get some lunch, they're going to text you after to find out where we are." Cas answered his silent question.

Making their way outside, the three of them piled into the Impala. Claire slumped tiredly in the back seat.

"I still can't believe my daughter got herself arrested." Cas said quietly.

"Yeah?" Claire replied with good natured teasing, "Well at least I didn't invade Poland."

Dean's eyebrows nearly met, "Watch it... The whole Hitler thing, not funny."

"Actually, she was talking about me."

The sound of his phone made Alfie stop the wrench mid turn, and check it in a hurry.

'TM OUT! And the bitch is gone!'

He hadn't realized he was smiling until Ivan spoke up, "What? Somebody sent you a dick pic?"

"Yeah... your mom." Alfie replied.

"You don't want to talk about my mom like that." Ivan replied.

"No, I really don't. But you keep setting yourself up for it, and giving me no reason to hold back... You must get that from her."

Alfie ignored Ivan's weak response as he sent back a reply, 'I want to hear all about it. Are you
working today?'

'No I just want to get home, but I'll be at Dean's in a few minutes'

Alfie stuck the wrench in his back pocket and headed for the open bay door.

"Where do you think you're going? Get back to work."

Alfie turned around, "Pretty sure if you were in charge, you'd be the one with a key. But since you keep bringing it up, maybe we should have Dean clear it up?"

"Fine. But don't take tools out of the building."

Alfie gestured outside, "You mean, like, to take parts off the salvage cars? Wow, no wonder you're a shoo-in for manager."

He took the wrench out of his back pocket and tossed it into the bay, letting it clatter across the cement floor, and turned around as the Impala drove up to the house.

Alfie approached the black car quickly, nearly getting tackled by a tight hug from Claire.

"Where's my car?"

"Paint shed."

"I told you not to touch it!"

"I didn't, it looked like rain."

"So it's still how I left it?"

Alfie nodded, "Well... I put the antenna on."

"How dare you."

Alfie didn't let go of her as he looked up, addressing Dean, "So, we're having some kind of breakdown in the chain of command. Might be a good idea to sort that out. It's getting worse."

Dean answered after a long suffering sigh, "Fine... Claire, I know you're off the clock, but this'll only take a minute."

Cas leaned against the car as the other three went into the garage.

"Okay, listen up." Dean said loudly, "I didn't think I was going to have to do this right away, but clearly this dominance game certain idiots have going is only going to make it harder to get new people in here. It's bullshit, and it stops now. I've only seen real leadership out of one of you, seniority aside, so..."

At the mention of seniority, Ivan's attention piqued.

"Claire, you're the new manager and complaint department."

"What kind of leadership is that, exactly?" Ivan scoffed.

"Well, the details are none of your business, but she had a plan, she showed good judgement on who not to accept help from, wasn't afraid to ask for help from a more appropriate person, weighed the
risks, and followed through without hesitation. That's people management in a nutshell. She's also proved to be professional about it when we've had personnel issues in the past, stuck with the facts, didn't get personal. So, complaint department... I can back down a tough guy with a pool cue in a bar most times, so if she's got the stones to punch me in the face, I know she can tell someone to shove it."

"Why do I have to be a manager?" Claire asked.

"Because Alfie's a people person, and he needs to be able to run off to Dallas for that art stuff. You, on the other hand, you're looking at being a business major, right?"

Claire shrugged, "I'm not a hundred percent on that anymore."

"That's fine. But it suits you, and if you change your mind, it's still good for your resume."

Alfie shrugged, nodding slightly with a wry smile, "You're good at being in charge."

"Yeah, okay, fine." Claire said, unimpressed by the entire situation.

"Great. So now we get to take orders from the skirt." Ivan muttered.

Claire glared at him, "Yeah, first up, kilts for everybody, that way when I tell you to shove it, nothing's in the way."

Ivan shook his head, and went back to his repair, clumsily knocking a tool he'd balanced off the grill of the car.

"Right, well," Claire started back outside, "I'm going home. The whole jail thing sucked."

Ivan froze, and stood up slowly as she walked away, rejoining Cas and heading for home, "Wait, did she say...?"

"She got arrested." Dean replied with a nod, "Spent the night in jail. I was down there with her dad to get her out."

"Why? What for?"

"That's her business."

Ivan looked back and forth between Dean and Alfie for a moment before Dean went for his office muttering about his son, and Alfie retrieved the wrench he'd tossed, and got back to work.

"Drugs? Theft?... Prostitution?" Ivan asked quietly.

Alfie could tell he sincerely wanted to know, and answered with an equally quiet voice and a surreptitious glance toward the hallway, as if he were keeping it secret from Dean, "No, the prostitution charges were on me."

After a moment, Ivan spoke again, "You're fucking with me."

"Not for free, honey."

"If you did, I bet it had to do with the dog shit and nipple thing... You're a freak, and you're disgusting."

Alfie smirked, out of sight of Ivan, "You did a great job on that lawn. Saw that this morning. Thanks
for helping her out."

"She wouldn't let me leave without a butter container of meatballs... It was weird."

"Maybe I should have mentioned that."

It was well after dark, Dean had gone out to dinner with Ben, Sam, and Jess, Ivan had left, and Claire, having had a chance to clean up, put her room back to rights, and get some sleep, had come back over to continue work on the Chevelle.

Alfie had joined her in the paint shed, and they had, predictably, made no progress on the car.

They were sitting on the trunk, much as they had at the theater the night the car was tagged, leaning heavily against each other, talking quietly.

"I know this is only as much of my business as you decide it is, but, um... when would you know?" Alfie asked in barely more than a whisper.

"Know what?"

"That thing... last week, when we... uh..."

"You can't even say it?" Claire replied with amused confidence.

Alfie chuckled and looked away shyly.

"Woah... You really can't." Claire seemed more surprised now.

Alfie licked his lips, and leaned in close to her ear to whisper, "Fine... When you fucked me senseless, and came around my dick so hard that I couldn't breathe... better?"

Claire smirked for a moment before her face fell, "I don't know how long the tests take."

"Don't they have those at the pharmacy, though?... But it would be a while, right?"

It dawned on Claire that they were discussing two different factors of possible consequences, "You mean the other thing... Right... Um... That..."

"I mean, I know that's a big deal. But any way anything like that could go, I would want to be there."

"Bullshit." Claire rolled her eyes.

"It's not bullshit."

"Right, so if you knocked me up, and I wanted to give the baby to a real family, you'd want to be there, watch me go through all that, and see that kid go to strangers? That's something you'd want?"

Despite Claire's acrid tone, he reached for her hand, "Yeah... I mean it, I would... Just so you wouldn't have to go through it alone. Because that sounds really horrible for the birthmom."

Claire's expression softened considerably, "What if I wanted an abortion?"

Alfie shrugged, "I'd drive you, take care of you. Whatever you need."

Claire looked at the ground, and gave his hand a small squeeze, "When Charlie took me to the clinic,
this one nurse kept talking about it, about my age, finishing high school, and college, and she wouldn't shut up, and I said I wasn't sure how I felt about it, and then she just started all over again... Charlie told her, she goes 'Let her think for a minute! It's none of your business!' Then she said there's two medicines, one tries not to let anything happen in the first place, but if it does happen, it can't stop it. The other just... shuts down anything that might have happened, or could happen and, just, everything out... I said I'd take the first one and this nurse goes to hand me this thing, and I was a mess, and Charlie... oh, man...

"What?" Alfie asked, listening carefully.

"She goes, 'I don't like your tone, let me see the label so I can make sure you gave her the right one before she takes it.'" Claire chuckled at the hazy, stressful memory, "I've never seen her bossy like that before... And she said if I changed my mind I can still get the other one later."

"Then you went out and rolled your car over." Alfie said quietly, "Which we were going to work on... You know you didn't mention the other option at all."

Claire scoffed, "Yeah, well, probably nothing happening anyway, since I got that pill the next day."

"So, back to the first question, when will you know?" Alfie asked, slipping off the car gracefully.

Claire shrugged, "About the same time you're back in Dallas... I guess."

Alfie nodded, "Did the clinic give you a test for at home?"

Claire shook her head, "They said I could come back in for one."

Alfie stepped in front of her, "I have to show you this, don't freak out, okay?"

Alfie pulled his phone from his pocket, digging into a folder that seemed complicated to get to. He adjusted the image several times, and looked up, "I'm not, uh... There's no way I'd show this in a gallery. And after the last time, I'm not even going to risk it by taking the file on anything with me... But..."

Alfie handed her the phone gingerly, and set his hands on her knees.

Claire studied the image carefully, but said nothing.

"I had this dream... You were a phoenix... It was the most incredible dream I ever had... You were fire, and even though you told me I'd get hurt, I kissed you, and you... You just completely washed over me, burning me alive. I could feel all of it."

Claire looked concerned, still looking at the picture on the screen, "That sounds really painful."

Lost for words, and drowning in the memory, Alfie only shook his head firmly. Looking down, his breathing deepening, he intentionally moved his hands to the car on either side of Claire's lap, leaning in close, kissing her with a soft, patient, restrained passion.

Claire tried to be careful as she set the phone down next to her, but it slid slightly as she reached for him almost before setting it down.

She shifted forward, tugging him closer, wrapping her arms around his waist, breaking the kiss to set her head on his shoulder, "It's a really amazing picture... Don't lose it, because someday I might be cool with you showing it."
"Really?... That's kind of personal, though." Alfie whispered, slowly starting to rock her side to side, wrapping his arms across her back protectively.

"Yeah, but, who knows how I'm going to see it a year from now?" Claire muttered.

"Okay... I won't lose it... Do you want me to print one out for you?"

Claire chuckled, "If I want to see myself naked, I have a mirror for that."

"That's not you, though, it's your soul, and how I feel about you." Alfie replied.

"I know you love me." Claire whispered.

She seemed about to say more, but through the open door, headlights flashed across the yard and buildings as the Impala swung into the small garage of the house.

Alfie leaned past her, scooping up his phone to deposit it in his pocket once more, and pressed a kiss to the side of her neck before stepping away, "I'm going to print it out, and hang it on the back wall of your closet, behind your clothes."

"Yeah?... So every morning, when my hair is a mess, and I look like crap, you won't even have to text me to remind me what a bad ass bitch I am?"

"It's inner beauty, you're not a bitch."

"Oh, I'm a bitch." Claire replied with a self-assured smirk.

"I'm your bitch." Alfie answered with a chuckle.

"No bitch-talk around the old guys, though... My dad and Dean are dating." Claire watched as his eyebrows shot up, "Yeah... But I don't think Ben knows yet, so for now, it has to stay quiet."

"Yeah... um... I just didn't think Dean was your dad's type." Alfie said quietly, mulling it over.

Claire looked confused, "What do you mean?"

"I dunno, it just seems like... Actually... Yeah, okay, I think I get it now." Alfie muttered.

Footsteps crunched in the dirt and loose gravel outside the door, almost too loudly.

"Taking a break?" Dean called as he got closer, finally getting to the door, looking at the car, then at the two teens, "You guys didn't get anything done, did you?"

Claire gave a tired shrug, "Not really."

Dean nodded, "Okay... New rule, if you guys aren't actually working on a car, or something, go back over there where Cas can keep an eye on you two."

"What's an 'or-something'?" Alfie asked with a smirk.

Dean pointed at him, "It's something I'm going to find for you to do in plain sight, alone, if you don't cut that out right now. It's late, you guys need to get clear out before I get in trouble with Cas."

"He wouldn't care." Claire replied, slipping down from the trunk.

"Yeah, right." Dean replied.
Friday morning, Claire sat on the passenger side of the small pickup as Ivan drove. It was mostly silent, as he'd been cracking jokes at her expense, and she had nothing to say to him, other than give directions to the small farm on the other side of town.

"So, what is that thing, anyway? In the back."

"A motor." Claire replied.

Ivan sat up a bit, looking at it through the rear view mirror where it sat in the bed of the truck.

"For what?"

"A milking machine. They sell raw milk."

Ivan shook his head, "So what happened? It got clogged up with butter chunks or something?"

"A gasket wore out." Claire replied.

Ivan took another look, "I wonder if that happens with the little ones."

Claire gave him an odd look.

He shrugged, "My cousin has a baby, left her breast pump out on the counter... that motor is a lot smaller."

"What the hell is a breast pump?" Claire asked.

"That's how you can put milk in a bottle if you don't want to use formula. I don't know, the whole thing is gross."

Claire raised an eyebrow, "You think breastfeeding is gross?"

Ivan shook his head, "No, I think machines, and bodily fluids, and just,-" he made a loud, obnoxious slurping noise, "That's fucked up... I mean, the baby's gotta eat or whatever, I know I don't have a problem with tits, but, still, it's just like, plugging yourself up to a machine..."

"Let's hope you never need dialysis." Claire replied.

After another turn and another round of silence, much to Claire's annoyance, he continued to speak,
"So, that Alfie kid, is he just a freak, or is he gay?"

"Neither."

"Yeah right... C'mon, what's the deal with that guy?"

"He's messing with you."

"Why?"

"Honestly?"

"Yeah, I wanna know."

"Because you're a jerk. He and his friend Kevin love to mess with jerks. Quit being rude all the time, and he's easy to get along with."

Ivan seemed to be thinking it over, "You didn't go running to Dean when he said you had a nice ass. Why is that?"

"Because I'm dating him."

Ivan shrugged, "Guess that explains the gay shit in the closet."

"That wasn't gay shit. My dad's gay, and he'd never do that. That was Alfie messing with you."

"So, you adopted? Or some kinda test tube kid?"

"Natural. Gay guys aren't allergic to women, they just aren't into them. And it was before he came out."

Ivan wasn't picking up on it, but Claire was beginning to lose patience.

"So where's your mom?"

"Where's your mom? And why the hell didn't she teach you some goddamn manners? Fucking interrogating me, you wanna know every detail? Come over later, you can write my memoirs."

Ivan nodded, "Sorry... No reason to be a bitch about it."

"I'll quit being a bitch if you quit being a nosy asshole."

Ivan continued to drive in silence.

Claire pointed out an open gate, "Left turn."

Ivan followed the driveway over a cattleguard, and Claire guided him to a large tan metal barn.

Getting out of the truck immediately, Claire dropped the tailgate before Ivan was close enough, and began to unfasten the tie-downs.

An older gentleman with a graying beard emerged from the building as Ivan climbed into the bed of the truck, "Nice to see you again, Miss Claire."

"Hi Mr Freemont." Claire replied with a friendly smile, stepping closer to shake his hand, "Dean said it should work fine now."
"Well, that's certainly gonna be a big help to me. Now, who've we got here?"

"This is Ivan, he's new." Claire answered.

Mr Freemont reached over the side of the bed to shake Ivan's hand. Ivan looked a bit surprised and quickly shifted the tie-downs to his left, accepting the handshake awkwardly.

"Nice to meet you, Ivan. So, are you new in town, or just new to the job?" Mr Freemont asked, looking him in the eye.

Ivan looked like he wanted to squirm, "Both. I'm from Tulsa."

Mr Freemont nodded, "I was in Tulsa once for a rodeo. Good town, nice folks there."

"Mostly people just give me crap for being from Oklahoma." Ivan replied quietly.

"Well, you won't get that from me. I'm from Little Rock, myself."

A short time later, resuming the mostly silent drive back into town, Ivan became talkative again.

"That guy seemed okay... I mean, that was weird, but he seemed okay."

"What's weird about it?" Claire asked.

Ivan shrugged, "I dunno, all the handshaking and shit."

"He's old. That's how people used to be respectful. Eye contact and whatever. It's not weird."

"I don't know anybody else who does that."

Claire's phone started to ring, and she answered it, "Hey... Yeah... Kosher, vegan, extra bacon?... And a bleu cheese salad for Dean... Yeah."

Ivan was sure he could hear a combination of grumbling and laughing from the phone, even over the noise of the road.

Claire ended the call, "We're supposed to stop for a bag of burgers on the way through town."

"Right. Who's buying?"

"Dean. Work expense."

"So, what got you arrested?"

Claire was taken aback by his sudden, blunt question, "Shut up."

"C'mon, if you can't brag about going to jail, you're gonna keep your Sunday School outcast reputation." Ivan replied, "I got busted for weed once, had my head slammed into the pavement, it was great."

"Fuck off." Claire said firmly.

"So you want to keep that quiet, then?"

"Are you asking me if I want to keep mine quiet, or to keep yours quiet?"
"You don't want anyone to know you got arrested?" Ivan clarified.

"I don't really care." Claire answered.

Ivan shrugged.

The small pickup pulled into the parking lot of the mom-and-pop burger place that had replaced the larger corporate chain, and Claire went in by herself.

As Ivan waited, he noticed a couple nearby, at an outdoor table, arguing. The young woman was noticeably outmatched by the young man, and the argument was getting more intense.

He watched with jaded interest as she got up, starting to walk away from the table. At the same time, Claire approached the truck with a take-out bag and a drink carrier.

Claire opened the passenger door and set the bag in the floor, arranging the drink carrier on the seat.

"Hey, you know those dumbasses?" Ivan asked, indicating the argument that had carried to the parking lot.

"I try to avoid them, they suck. Why?"

"He just slapped her."

Claire looked up in time to see Chaz grab Julie's arm roughly, and before Ivan could speak, she'd slammed the door.

Ivan watched with a renewed interest as she marched up to them both. He couldn't hear Claire as well as he could hear the argument the two had been in, but she seemed irritated by the girl, and was clearly telling off the guy.

The young man was making a few gruff remarks to Claire directly, and Ivan considered getting out of the truck for a brief moment, but Claire turned around and addressed the other girl, gesturing towards the pickup.

The girl seemed to hem and haw, and he could hear Claire clearly now, "Get in the damn truck, Julie!"

Julie glanced at the small pickup, but made no move to get closer, and Claire took hold of her arm, marching her across the lot in silence.

Claire opened the door and practically shoved Julie inside.

Ivan picked up the drink carrier awkwardly as a hurried shifting took place that somehow settled in the small space with Claire getting in, pressing Julie firmly to his side, and putting one boot on the dash in order to get the door shut.

"Where are we dropping you off?" Claire asked with tone that had clearly had enough.

"Abigail's house, I guess." Julie muttered.

Claire nodded, "Fine."

Ivan passed the drink carrier over Julie to get it out of the way, "No introduction, then? I kinda like to find out who I'm kidnapping."
"Ivan, this is Julie." Claire said in an overly sweet tone, "Julie's a bitch who grabs guys after they tell her to fuck off. Hopefully she's fixed that, because if she puts her hands on Alfie again, I don't mind going back to jail."

Ivan covered a laugh by clearing his throat. Julie was turning noticeably pinker, "Hi, Julie."

Julie attempted an anxious smile as Ivan got back on the road, before turning to Claire, "Why are you helping me?"

"Because I don't think you have the guts to hit back." Claire replied, resuming her growl.

It wasn't much longer before they'd dropped Julie off, and Claire had Ivan wait until Julie was actually inside the house they'd stopped at before driving away.

"So... She hit on your little freaky boyfriend, huh?"

"Something like that... She got fired for it."

"Then why the hell would you help her? I mean, why not just let her get knocked around a little?"

Claire looked out the window, but didn't answer.

"Seems like if she was hornin' in, trying to take your boyfriend, you'd want to smack her around, or let someone else do it."

Claire gave him a hard look, waiting until he looked back, "It doesn't matter what I want, if it's not right in the first place."

"Seriously?" Ivan asked, "God, you guys are all a bunch of do-gooder morons. Bet you all think you're so much better than everyone else."

"I'm a fuck up." Claire said firmly, "But anybody can choose to do the right thing. That doesn't mean I'm better than anybody, it just means I don't feel guilty about it later."

"That's bullshit... I bet you judge people all the time."

"Yeah? Why? What have I ever done to get on your bad side? I mean, aside from walk through the damn garage with the audacity to have a vagina?" Claire asked.

"You're being a bitch."

"And what are you being?"

The cab of the truck was silent until they reached the shop.

Claire got out with the burgers and drinks, slamming the door again, and heading straight for the office.

Alfie spotted her as he was coming in from the yard.

"Your girlfriend's gonna get me written up, just so you know." Ivan commented as Alfie moved past him.

Alfie stopped, "Why? What did you do?"

"Shit, I didn't do anything, I just made some observations. But she's pissed. Probably on the rag, too
bad about your weekend." Ivan said, gesturing at the building. He scoffed, "So, how many blow jobs do you think it takes to make manager?"

"More than 30, apparently." Alfie replied, running a thumb over the corner of his mouth.

Ivan gave him a disgusted look and shook his head before heading back into the shop, "Fucking teenagers."

Dr Thompson looked mortified as he read the police report. He flipped a page.

"He dropped the charges." Claire muttered in the quiet room.

"And all this erratic behavior before this?... Did you know your mother would be showing up to try to take you back with her?"

"No," Claire answered, "I've just had a lot going on lately."

"Your father said you rolled your car over, and threw mashed potatoes at his face." Dr Thompson replied, "And then you assault your employer, this doesn't look like the behavior of a healthy seventeen year old."

"Yeah, well, maybe I'm not."

"Care to get into that a little further? I'd like to know what's going on."

"My dad's friend, Charlie, she took me for an STD test and a pap smear, because... Because I guess that should have happened after... After that shit in California. And that really sucked, and I am just so tired of stuff just happening to me, and not having any say in it, and he was doing that thing again where he blames himself, so, I threw some potatoes in his face... I figured I couldn't do that when I was a baby, so, it was overdue anyway."

"And the car?"

"All I wanted to do was spin it around like in an action movie, because my boyfriend said he'd done that with the car before I got it, but he won't show me how. It didn't work... And like I told my dad, I'm not suicidal, I just had a bad day."

"Okay... Tell me about this Charlie person, is she your dad's girlfriend?"

Claire snorted, "Oh, you're barking up both the wrong trees, there."

Dr Thompson looked confused.

"Charlie likes girls. My dad doesn't. Comes in handy if one of them needs a beard."

"A beard?"

Claire ran a hand over her face, "A date, or whatever, to pretend they aren't gay."

"Your father is gay?"

Claire looked surprised, "Yeah. You can't tell?... Hell, he's dating Dean."

"...Is that why you hit Dean?"
"No. I didn't hit him to hurt him, he was in on it. He tried to get me to leave with my boyfriend, even told me to leave my phone so my dad couldn't track me if they made him try."

"This is... this whole thing is... um..."

"Maybe I should make you a flow-chart."

"Okay, let's go back to the check up you had, are you okay with that? That the exam happened? It wasn't forced or coerced?"

"I forced myself, if that's what you mean. I don't remember most of what happened, but Charlie stayed with me and made sure they gave me the right pill." Claire replied, her voice flat.

"Pill?"

"Um... I needed to get tested because... uh..."

Dr Thompson nodded, "Something happened."

"Yeah."

"And do you remember all of that?" he genuinely looked concerned.

"Yeah, that... that wasn't like... that was um..."

"Consensual?"

"Yeah."

"Okay... Okay, and I take it birth control was the pill, and the reason for the STD testing?"

"Yeah."

"Claire, I don't have many patients your age, so, this is fairly new ground for me, but, that being said, I do think you did the right thing going for that check up. I'm a little concerned about what effect that it may have had on you, considering your past, but, just making the assumption here, this happened with your boyfriend?"

Claire nodded.

"Okay, and are you going to be better prepared should that happen again?"

"Yeah... Yeah, Charlie made sure of that."

Dr Thompson was writing almost furiously, "I'd like to know, if you were to become pregnant, how do you think your father would react?"

Claire shrugged, "I really don't know."

"Any chance of violence, or kicking you out?"

"No."

"You seem pretty sure."

"I was an accident. So, really, how can he judge, right?" Claire asked.
"It's happens, sometimes... Has he ever made any comments about what his reaction might be?"

Claire thought hard about it for several minutes before getting out of her seat and moving to the door. She swung open the heavy wooden door, and leaned out, spotting Cas texting on his phone.

"Dad, what would you do if I got pregnant?"

"I'd support your decision... Likely from prison, but I'd support your decision." Cas finally looked up as a hint of suspicion crossed his face, "Why?"

"No reason." Claire replied, closing the door, and turning around, "Yeah, I think I'm good, there."

"What about your boyfriend?"

Claire shook her head as she sat down again, "I'd give him a head start to get out of town before telling my dad."

"I meant, how would he react?"

"Well, he knows I'm kind of waiting to find out about that... He said he'd help with anything I wanted to do."

"Okay... This is a lot to take in at once... is there anything else going on?"

"Uh, yeah. I got promoted, I'm a manager now, and I have a new co-worker who's an asshole, and my boyfriend said he keeps implying I'm fucking my boss-slash-dad's boyfriend because he thinks girls can't turn a wrench. He's twenty-one."

"The co-worker? Or this Dean guy?" Dr Thompson asked, concerned.

"Co-worker. Ivan. Real douchebag."

Dr Thompson's alarmed looked continued, "I think you should speak to Dean about this, this sounds like a hostile workplace."

"I think I should have him over for my birthday. Force him to be nice, at the risk of making an ass of himself in front of everyone."

"So, 'Kill him with kindness?' You know, that doesn't always work."

"Either he squirms, or he fucks up big time. Either way, I get a laugh."

Dean stood in the small back yard, cleaning his grill. It was late, and due to a few texts, he wasn't entirely surprised when footsteps approached softly, and two firm arms wrapped around his waist.

Cas pressed close, resting his lips against the side of Dean's neck.

"I still haven't told him." Dean whispered.

"No hurry." Cas replied, "Does your door lock?"

Dean smiled, "It does... but I won't be able to keep quiet."

"We can keep it simple." Cas suggested, letting his hands wander a bit.

Dean relaxed against the feel of him, setting the brush aside, putting his beer down, and letting Cas
Cas tightened slightly, and released him.

Dean looked over his shoulder, seeking Cas' face as he started to turn. The anxiety was clear on the other man's face, "Hey... What's going on?"

Cas shrugged, "I have no idea how to do this... None of my prior relationships have involved children, and..."

"And there are two involved."

"There... I didn't even consider Claire in that count." Cas replied, "I don't want to see either of them uncomfortable with this, but I have nothing to compare it to, no frame of reference. I don't know how we should be interacting with each other's children, or how much contact they should have this early, and I'm very unclear on-"

Dean answered him with a passionate kiss, forcing him to swallow his words. He wrapped his arms around Cas gently, slowly increasing pressure until he was holding him tight, and pulled his head back just enough to end the kiss.

"The kids are fine."

"Dean-"

"They're fine. Claire can grumble all over the place, and Ben can get weird about climbing things, and they're around us, and we've got this... They don't even see it yet, but they're already looking out for each other, this isn't gonna be a big deal."

"Until, ten years from now, they're each telling a shrink how we ruined their lives."

"They're already seeing shrinks, so, we have a jump on that."

"That's not an excuse."

Dean took a deep breath, and let it out slowly, before dropping his weight, pulling Cas down to the small patch of soft grass where they stood.

"Dean, what-?"

"Give me a second, just trust me." Dean replied, taking it his phone. He hit a command on an app that shut off the yard lights, and gently rolled Cas into his back, settling next to him, "Check that out."

Cas looked up into the sky. It was a clear night, and the moon hadn't yet risen, "The stars."

"Yeah." Dean said softly, "Some of them aren't even there anymore, you know? Died out millions of years ago."

Cas nodded, "And the light they made takes millions of years to reach us."

"So... grand scheme of things... that light from a dead star traveling millions of years to reach your eyes tonight... Just how bad can we possibly fuck up when we love our kids, and we want them to be happy and safe?... I drag yours out of the rain, you catch mine falling off a ladder, they share video games, and candy, and kick a ball around, even with a big age gap... This can work, Cas."
"Dean, this... It's just..." Cas took a few breaths to compose his mind, "It's way too soon for me to being falling this hard for you."

"Yeah, well, we don't have millions of years... but I have the time to lay here with you for a bit, look at the stars with you, and tell you it's going to be okay."

Cas turned toward him, kissing him softly, "What if we're both having a simultaneous midlife crisis?"

Dean shrugged, "Then at least we're on the same page."

Cas lay back, looking up at the stars again as a cool breeze washed over them gently.

"And then..." Dean continued, fumbling for his hand, "Give it a few years... We'll be synchronizing our viagra."

Cas began to laugh so hard he barely made a sound as Dean pulled him closer.

As the laughing fit calmed, Dean spoke again, "I'm gonna tell him in the morning."
Chapter 41

(A/N: Just finished a couple chapters in rapid succession, so, it's time to post another one!

Prepare yourself, Dean has the widower feels, Cas has the dad-fail feels, and we get a little deeper into Cas' side of things where Claire is concerned. Kind of dark stuff, actually.

Please take care of your mental health! Love you guys! Thanks for reading! New chapter soon... FW)

Dean woke well rested only moments before the familiar sound of Ben trotting through the upstairs carried him through the room to the bathroom.

He sat up, rubbing his eyes, and was greeted by a happy, furry face with a quickly wagging tail that had altogether snuck up onto the bed, having followed Ben into the room.

Dean wondered for a moment if Ben would even have noticed had there been someone else in the bed with him, or if he would have just continued at his quick pace, oblivious.

He wondered, had privacy been this lax with Lisa?... At what point did his son start marching through his bedroom every morning?... Did he ever actually expect Ben to knock in the first place?

The sudden shock hit him hard as it all came back at once, surfacing in his memory... Throwing the front door wide open, not knowing if it had closed behind him, hurrying straight to the bedroom. It had been a wonder he hadn't hit anyone in traffic on the way. Ben was curled into an impossibly small ball next to the bed, and Lisa, thinner than ever, a scarf over what was left of her dark hair, and every wrong color to her skin, was gone.

That was when the knocking stopped... That was when Ben could barely eat, and would cry in his sleep without waking up. That was when he needed Dean in almost constant contact. That was when it became 'just us guys.'

He'd tried. He had always tried. Dean had watched his father smack around the occasional girlfriend, but mostly they would come to their senses and leave. He'd done everything he could to teach Ben by setting an example with how he treated Lisa. But with her gone, suddenly healing from trauma had replaced manners.

The bathroom door swung open again, and Dean gestured him closer, patting the bed, which only made Nick jump up to chase his hand.

Ben scooped her up as he sat down, pulling up his legs. At the grim look on Dean's face, however, his anxiety built.

"I need to tell you something, bud."
Ben didn't reply.

"I wanted to give you a couple days, so I didn't tell you right away."

"Claire killed somebody?"

Dean looked confused, "No... God, no. Ben, seriously, Claire wouldn't... I guess I didn't really explain the whole court thing yesterday... no... This is exactly why you shouldn't watch those shows."

Ben looked a little less panicked, but not entirely convinced.

"Okay, listen... I started dating somebody... Now, I know you probably don't know this, but before I started seeing your mom, I'd dated a few other people... And they weren't always girls."

"So you're dating a guy?"

"Yeah."

"Like, gay?" Ben asked.

"Well, he is. He only dates guys."

"Are you still going to date girls?"

"Um, not while I'm with him." Dean explained, "That would be cheating, which is not okay."

"Are you going to marry him?"

"Hey, we're just dating right now. Anything else, that is... that's a long way off. That's not... Not something anybody should rush into, okay?"

Ben looked uncomfortable with the idea, "So, what if he doesn't like me?"

Dean ran a hand over his face, "It's Cas."

Ben looked disgusted, "You kissed Mr Novak?"

Unamused by Ben's reaction, Dean nodded, "I did, yeah... I have feelings for him, and I'm going to keep seeing him."

"That's gross."

"Grosser than if I was dating a girl?" Dean asked.

Ben turned it over in his head, "No. That's gross too. So, I guess it's all gross."

"Okay. Fine... But that's how it is... So... um... if..."

"Can we have waffles for breakfast?"

Dean gave a quick blink, "Sure... why not?"

After a long night of bad dreams, Claire made her way downstairs and managed to find the table.

Cas set a plate down in front of her, but it barely registered as she rubbed at her face.
"You look hungover... You weren't drinking, were you?" Cas asked.

"No... Just probably didn't get enough water yesterday."

Cas nodded, "I'm sure we've gone over this before, but alcohol use before the age of-

"Dad... Too loud... I wasn't drinking."

Claire finally looked down to find an overloaded omelette on her plate, with bacon, multiple cheeses, mushrooms, and peppers. It was barely able to close. It also happened to be her favorite breakfast, something Cas rarely took the time to make.

"Happy birthday."

Claire looked up, and abruptly asked the question, "Why were you going to adopt me?"

"What do you mean?"

"You said you thought I was somebody else's kid. You made it sound like you guys were both really sure I was that other guy's daughter, but you said you and mom decided you were going to be my dad anyway. Why?"

Cas set his coffee down on the table, "Your mother and I each had selfish reasons, I'm not sure you really want to hear this."

Claire settled back into her chair with an expression Cas recognized well. His grandmother, who Claire strongly resembled, had used it on him several times.

"All right... For my part... The world moves slowly, and changes come fast. At the time your mother found out she was pregnant, I already knew I wasn't going to be able to hide who I was for much longer... Marriage equality seemed like a pipe dream, and the stigma against a gay couple adopting... I really had no way of knowing if I'd ever have another chance at being a father."

"What about the other guy?"

"Consider the type of person your mother spends her time with."

"Well, she spent time with you."

Cas relented, "I heard he recently got out of prison, and is now a registered sex offender. He was already serving time when you were born, for drug charges... Also, I... I had the impression that your mother might not be the best person to raise a child, and I wanted to make sure she felt she had an option, if she decided she didn't want to raise you."

Claire was unnervingly still, "So... not just selfish reasons."

"No... but the selfish reasons do exist."

"A minute ago you made it sound like 'I'm just gonna steal this guy's baby,' but really you were trying to save me from the trash I was being born into."

Cas' face hardened considerably, "Why would you use that term? Trash?"

"Because that's what she is, that's her life. She treats people like garbage, because she is garbage." Claire replied, "Why are you so upset by that?"
"Because while she was pregnant, I had a nightmare that she left you in a dumpster to die," Cas answered more harshly than he had intended, his voice wavering as he continued, "And after what you've been through, I no longer think it was that slim of a possibility. But yes, it became clear it was all or nothing, thankfully she let me step into the roll... The reason I'm so attached to those pictures, even though I know you hate them... each one was a confirmation that you were still alive."

Claire stood and rounded the table, wrapping her arms around Cas' neck as he pulled her into a hug that was uncomfortably tight, and wound up with her sitting on his lap.

"I'm okay, dad."

"If I had thought, for even a moment, that a judge would have given me custody, I never would have let her take you."

"I know."

Claire couldn't see his face, but as his hand settled on the side of her head, she was sure he was crying.

"I'm sorry, this isn't how I wanted your birthday to start."

"Yeah, well, party's not till tomorrow. Call it a do-over."

"Right... Well, your omelette's getting cold."

"Yeah, but you're freaking out."

Cas shook his head, attempting to compose himself, "I'm not."

"Yeah you are." Claire said softly, "I'm gonna put you on psychoactive drugs... But if you're gonna roll a car, use mine, it can't get much worse."

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"Yo! Sandman!"

Ivan looked up as Kevin happily bounced through the dark hallway, "Can I help you?"

"Yeah, looking for Alfie." Kevin replied.

"He's pulling a part from the yard. You wanna wait in the office?"

"You're the new dude?"

"Yeah. You don't work here, do you?"

Kevin shook his head, "No, I just come out here to hit on Dean and get Claire to fix my nails."

"Then why are you looking for Alfie?"

"Because he's my baby-daddy, so, chill."

Ivan shook his head, "Great, another idiot."

The front office door opened again as Claire came inside, stopping at the computer before proceeding to the garage.

"Claire, you got some joker in here for a manicure. Says your man knocked him up."
"Go home, Kevin." Claire replied, heading for her coveralls.

"Don't get jealous, Claire, you knew how it was before you guys got serious." Kevin followed her into the store room.

"Hey!" Ivan called after them, "Dean said only one person in there at a time."

"He said one employee," Claire called back, through the open door, "This goof doesn't work here."

"Okay, I can tell, what's going on?" Kevin asked, once they were inside.

"Nothing is going on."

"You're fighting?"

"We're not fighting."

"Good, 'cause I can't have him and Margaret fighting over me..."

Claire turned to leave the room, but Kevin blocked the door, "C'mon, I got work."

"Claire..."

"Move."

"I can see it in your face, you know."

"See what?" Claire asked, tired of the conversation.

"Something's bothering you. Is it that guy? It's that's guy, isn't it? Because I can mess with him."

Claire swung an arm aimlessly in exasperation, "You're already messing with him, Alfie, too. And anyway, he's not that big a problem."

"Okay, so, if he's a bug bite, where's the broken bone?"

"The middle of your face if you don't move."

Kevin nodded and wrapped his arms around her shoulders, "You want to know what Margaret's getting you?"

"No."

"You want me to guess what's wrong so you don't have to talk?"

"No."

"Fine, I'll get it out of Sandman. Don't worry about it."

Claire shook him loose, "Why do you have to be so strange?"

She pushed past him, out of the room.

Ivan gave them a look, but remained focused on the car.

Kevin stayed off to the side as she checked the chart in the hallway.
"Okay, that yellow Sentra got done?" Claire asked, turning in time to see the look Ivan was giving Kevin.

Ivan shrugged, "Guess so. It wasn't here when I got here."

"And the Jetta?"

"Jetta's still out front."

"And where's Dean?"

Ivan dropped the wrench into a toolbox, "He's picking up a wreck... Why? Trying to make some more time with your other boyfriend? How many do you have?"

"Hey, fuck off, man," Kevin said loudly, "She could be screwing the whole town, still none of your business."

"She probably is." Ivan said with a shrug, "Which makes the prude act so much weirder."

Kevin started to speak, but Claire cut him off, "You are a sad, pathetic, and probably lonely person... You should come over for cake tomorrow. My dad's making a brisket."

Kevin threw Claire a shocked look, "Are you seriously inviting the asshole who's sole entertainment right now seems to be calling you horrible things, to your damn birthday?"

"Yeah. I'm inviting him." Claire replied, "Maybe he'll stop being a bitch, and he might even stop calling me one."

"Yeah, I'm not going." Ivan said with an aire of certainty.

"Yeah, you are." Claire answered, "Let's call it a team-building exercise... You're the only one who hasn't been a team player... Unless you want me to suddenly care the next time you call me a whore."

"Technically it was 'slut,' whores do it professionally." Ivan replied.

"Oh, sorry, I didn't see that in the past job experience on your resume." Claire answered him with a nasty tone, "I'll be more careful next time, I'd hate to offend you. Don't bring anything, just show up at four."

Kevin's jaw dropped, quickly changing to an ear-to-ear grin at Claire's reply, as Alfie came in through one of the large open doors.

"And there's the baby-daddy." Ivan commented with an eye roll.

It only took a second as Alfie glanced at Claire, but Kevin caught his look, "The what, now?"

"The baby-daddy," Ivan reiterated, "I don't know what you morons have been doing, but that's not how it works."

"Shut up." Kevin barked, "Our love knows no bounds."

"You don't love me, you left me for Margaret." Alfie said quietly, "Claire would never leave me for Margaret."

"Yeah, well, you left me for Claire." Kevin replied.
Ivan looked to Claire with something bordering on sympathy as the two continued, "You really put up with this shit?"

Claire shrugged, "Kind of like watching a two-legged kitten trying to chase a laser pointer, all cute, sad, and horrifying."

"Holy shit, you're all freaks." Ivan breathed.

"He's jealous." Kevin commented to Alfie.

"We should make out in the back of his truck." Alfie replied, "Claire? You wanna take pictures?"

"No, that's okay." Claire answered.

"You two dumbfucks stay the hell away from my truck," Ivan said, pointing the handle of the ratchet he was holding at the two of them, "I mean it."

"Don't," Claire warned, "You're just going to make it worse."

Kevin and Alfie seemed to break down into the same fit of laughter.

"Oh, man, you remember that time with Mr Singer?" Kevin choked out, "That asshole customer kept riding your ass-"

"Yeah, I remember, you tried to do the same, but literally."

"And he was all yelling, 'You idjits don't do that homo stuff in public,'...but that was only after he told that guy to get out and stop calling us... y'know, that word."

"Yeah... that was..." Alfie's laughter calmed, "I miss Bobby, he was great."

Ivan, unimpressed, looked between them both, "You guys are the gayest thing ever."

Ben ran around the side of the house to the back yard, catching Cas in a fast, unexpected hug around his waist, before he was suddenly off again without a word, headed for Claire, Kevin, Alfie, and Margaret, where they all sat quietly, unaware they were about to be bombarded with the behavior of a child, followed closely by Nick, who had seemed to sprout longer legs over the past few days, if only to keep up with Ben.

Ivan sat nearby, not fitting in well with the teens, and even worse with the older adults. Ben held little interest for him, but he supposed the puppy could prove a pleasant distraction until he'd been present long enough to leave.

He looked up just as Dean stepped closer to Cas, pressing a quick, gentle kiss to his lips, and looked away from them again, uncomfortable.

"What was that about?" Cas asked, gesturing vaguely at the direction Ben had gone.

"Well, it wasn't a punch to the face, but..." Dean replied with a shrug. He set the bags of chips and ice he held on the folding table, and started inside, "Ivan, you want a beer?"

"Sure," he replied, "Thanks."

Dean returned with three bottles, passing one to Cas as he moved to sit down, "So, you settling in okay?"
"I guess... I mean, I've only been in town for a couple weeks, I still need to get a place, get off my uncle's couch, but there's a waiting list at the one apartment complex."

"You could see if Alfie's up for a roommate, he's got space." Dean suggested.

"I can't stand that guy... Or his weird-ass little friend."

Dean nodded, "Yeah, I guess that shit gets old fast."

"I was looking around online, somebody had a small used camper up for sale." Ivan said.

"Probably not the best idea." Cas answered, "They require quite a bit of upkeep to be livable full time, and for stationary living, you'd be best off at an RV park. There isn't one in the county. Are you using the local community board online?"

"Uh, Craigslist."

Cas shook his head, "Most of the people in the area use the bulletin board on the county website. Not to say you shouldn't check both, but you'll likely have better luck with it."

As Alfie came outside with another soda, Cas waved him over to a more isolated part of the yard.

Alfie followed after him with a glance toward Ivan, "What's up?"

"Well, I noticed that necklace Claire's wearing, and I can't imagine she would have received it from anyone else."

"Oh... Yeah, it's her birthstone. And I guess she likes it okay." Alfie replied.

Cas nodded, "Yes, well... Claire doesn't wear much actual jewelry, as she tends to break it or lose it, so I don't expect she'd notice, but I worked in a jewelry shop through college, and I have a good idea what an alexandrite of that size and quality, in that setting would run."

Alfie shrugged, "I just thought she'd like the necklace."

"I'm certain she does. However, I wanted to be certain you understood what my thoughts would be if I thought for even a moment that you were trying to purchase my daughter's affection."

"Um... No. It's not like that. See, Dean said... I mean, Kevin said not to get her anything too fancy because we haven't been dating long, but, um, Dean said she doesn't handle gifts well, and that I should get her something nice and stick to birthdays and Christmas so she's not uncomfortable."

"Is that right?"

Alfie nodded, "I'm sorry, if that looked like... uh..."

Cas considered offering him a few helpful words, but decided he'd rather let the boy sink or swim.

"I guess I wasn't really thinking about it too much, how that would look... But, you're right, that, um... You won't tell her, right? I mean, I don't want her to feel weird about it." Alfie quietly pleaded.

Cas nodded, almost reluctantly.

Across the yard, Margaret had brought up the same gemstone, "So that's your birthstone?"

"One of them," Claire replied, "Apparently pearl works, too."
Margaret, sitting on the arm of Kevin's chair, burst out laughing, "Oh, man... good thing he picked that one, huh?"

"Why? What's so funny?" Claire asked, amused by her reaction.

"Because a guy should always ask first before he gives you a pearl necklace." Margaret had barely gotten all the words out when Kevin's hand came up, quickly covering her mouth.

"Dude!... Jeez..." Kevin said, shooting a glance at Ben, who seemed to be distracted.

Claire looked surprised and somewhat unnerved by Kevin's sudden movement, and tried to continue the conversation, "Should I know what that is?"

Margaret shrugged, jerked her head toward Ben, and in a less jovial tone, said "I'll tell you later."

"Oh, god." Kevin said quietly, "Careful, Claire, she starts talking about some stuff, there's no delete button."

"You love it." Margaret smirked.

"Yeah, but that's different, I'm me. Claire might not be as interested in you as I am. At least, I hope not, she stole the last guy."

"Yeah, I'm a real homewrecker." Claire said with a chuckle.

"You're not a homewrecker," Alfie said quietly as he joined them again, "Clearly, I'm a loose woman."

Nick had found a small stick, and Ben was tugging at it as he looked up, "What's a homewrecker?"

"Don't worry about it." Kevin replied, "It's a joke."

"But what does it mean?" Ben asked again.

"It's somebody single who gets someone to cheat with them." Claire answered, "But like Kevin said, it's just a joke."

Ben seemed to accept her answer, and tossed the stick for the puppy, "That doesn't sound like a joke. That sounds mean."

Alfie and Kevin exchanged looks, neither looked comfortable.

"Well, in this case, it's a joke." Alfie said, "And everybody involved in the joke gets it. Nobody's being picked on."

"You want to blow up some stuff?" Claire asked abruptly.

"What kind of stuff?" Ben asked.

"My dad has fireworks in the garage."

Margaret chuckled at Ben's reaction, "Oh, that's cute, he's a little pyro."

"C'mon," Claire said, getting up, "You can help me carry. We'll put the dog in the downstairs bathroom so she doesn't freak out."
Claire got up and led him into the house, taking a bowl from the kitchen, filling it with water in the bathroom sink, and setting it down on the floor, letting Ben close the puppy inside.

"So, dogs don't like the noises, right?"

"No, they don't. Some don't care, but a lot will run away, so, better safe than sorry." Claire answered, continuing to the garage.

She pulled a box off a low shelf and passed it to him.

"It's kind of weird that our dads are dating, right?"

Claire picked up a second box, setting it on top of the first, "Why would that be weird?"

Ben shrugged, "I don't know... I mean, at least I already know you guys, so, maybe that's better than if he was dating somebody I didn't know."

Claire shoved her hair back over her shoulder, "Okay, yeah... It's a little weird, but life is weird. And kids are absolutely going to give you shit over this, especially when you get to middle school, but that just makes them the asshole, it doesn't mean anything about you. Just roll with it, and stick with the friends who don't do that, okay?"

Ben nodded, unsure how to reply.

"Okay, we need the grill lighter, so, back out to the back yard, but we'll set them off in the road."
Claire stopped at the grill to get the lighter as Ben followed her out into the back yard with the boxes of fireworks.

"You might want to let them wait until the sun is all the way down." Cas suggested.

"Yeah, but not for the M-80s." Claire replied. She tried to point Ben towards one of the folding tables, but Kevin had already taken the top box with a gleeful grin. He set it down and immediately began to dig through it.

"Bottle rockets... Hey, Mr Novak, we got a bottle for this, or does somebody need to run one out?" Kevin asked with a smirk.

Claire pulled a sooty, scorched Jim Beam bottle from the box Ben carried, and set it down heavily in front of him. "Crap."

"You don't drink, why do you care?" Claire asked.

"Have you seen how Sandman gets after he's had a few?" Kevin asked, raising an eyebrow.

"Yeah, actually, I hid the bourbon from him last time I was over there." Claire replied. Alfie looked as though he wanted to slink away.

Cas looked up, "Bourbon?"

Claire scoffed, "I wasn't drinking it, and he's not your kid, so technically no rules were broken."

"You shouldn't be drinking anyway," Ivan said, "You're like, twelve."
"Looks like someone skipped his remedial math class." Alfie muttered, causing Margaret to choke on her soda, wipe her mouth, and continue to laugh.

"That's cute... I bet you think you're real special." Ivan replied.

"I am special." Alfie said with a grin.

"Yeah? Your mom tell you that?"

"No, yours did." Alfie chuckled.

Ivan sat back, "Okay, then, what makes you think you're so awesome?"

Alfie shook his head slightly, and replied, "J'ai des manières, la classe, et une grosse bite."

Cas immediately cringed, putting a hand to his face.

Dean looked back and forth between the two, "What?... What was that?"

"Apparently my boyfriend speaks French." Claire said quietly.

Dean looked at Cas again, almost concerned by his reaction, "That might not be a good thing."

"Comment peux-tu te vanter de la dernière si tu as les deux premiers?" Cas asked, "Surveille tes mots."

Kevin looked at Alfie's now crimson face with a grin he couldn't control, "Been nice knowing you, man. Too bad it had to end like this."

"What the hell did he say?" Margaret asked.

"Later." Kevin said, hushing her.

"Where did you learn it?" Claire asked quietly.

Alfie shrugged, "My mom's English sucks... And she doesn't mince words."

"Wait," Dean spoke up, "Your uncle sounds like he's from England, and Naomi sounds like she's from here, I thought your mom's side was American?"

Alfie shook his head, "Nope... Her given name was Noémie. She ditched for the states as soon as she could. Tick her off enough to swear, the accent slips."

Dean chuckled, "That explains it. I thought she was just too pissed off to put two words together."

After dinner and cake, Kevin had started to help Ben launch a few bottle rockets in front of the house on the gravel road, but let Ivan take over as he'd been receiving some obvious looks from Margaret.

Stepping over, he bumped a clumsy kiss against her ear, "You look like you miss me."

"Nah, I just want a turn to set something on fire." she muttered.

Kevin took a quick look around to see that no one was paying attention, and quickly tugged her out of sight behind Cas' Ford. "Okay, go for it."

"Go for what?"
"That thing you've been wanting to do."

Margaret laughed, "So, what, you have a thing for explosions?"

"No, I have a thing for you. Which is totally normal. And you keep looking at me like you'd eat my clothes just to get them off of me, so..." Kevin put his arms around her shoulders and pulled her closer as she started to smirk.

"Do you think Claire would mind if we snuck into her room?" Margaret asked.

"Um..."

"Nevermind." Margaret said with a quick grin, slipping her hand into Kevin's clothing, cupping him fast enough to make him jump and squirm, leaning heavily against the car.

Kevin squeezed her tighter once he could breathe again, "That was kind of fast."

"You told me to go for it." Margaret looked up at him, wrapping her left arm around his waist as her right hand gave a brief squeeze.

Kevin nodded, "Yeah... I did..."

He pressed his cheek against her head as she gently started to move her hand, "Feels good?"

"Mm-hm." Kevin whimpered slightly. He shivered, and tried to focus on his breathing.

"You wanna sneak in my window tonight?" Margaret whispered.

"How early are you leaving?"

"Six a.m."

"No... you're going to need your sleep." Kevin gave a quiet gasp as she hit a particularly sensitive spot.

"And what are you going to need?" Margaret chuckled.

Kevin dipped his head lower, kissing her passionately as she tried to keep touching him, his movements making it difficult.

Suddenly something much larger than a bottle rocket went off overhead, making Margaret jump, nipping Kevin's lip hard with her teeth. He pulled back the moment he felt it, and tried to pull her hand away, "Are you okay?"

Margaret looked a little shaken, "That was loud."

Kevin carefully took her hand from his waistband, and held her close, "That was fun, but I need a minute."

"Yeah, I can tell."

"So... roses?"

Margaret shook her head, "Dork."

Claire sat on the steps of the front porch, watching the small flickers that loudly filled the sky.
Alfie had been sitting about a foot away for several minutes, in silence.

"What did you say to him?"

Alfie shook his head, "Doesn't matter."

"My dad heard it, so, yeah, it does."

"I had no idea your dad knew French... He knows German, too, doesn't he?"

"How did you know?" Claire asked.

"Because his French has a German accent."

Claire leaned a little closer, "German boarding school... So why do you sound like you're from here?"

Alfie chuckled, "Nannies, housekeepers... The people who actually raised me would get hired and fired... So..."

"It made you clingy enough to keep Kevin around."

Alfie chuckled, looking down at his boots, "Well, at least he's consistent."

"So, the place I went... I guess I gave them my new email, because they sent me an update on Friday, I found it this morning... I don't have anything." Claire said softly, "So, do you go and get checked sometimes, or?"

"I'm... well... Not exactly popular with the ladies... Other than you... I mean, one time I let somebody do something, but it wasn't that."

Claire looked confused, "What was it, then?"

Dean looked around and spotted Claire and Alfie on the steps with a comfortable space between them, and Margaret sitting on the bumper of Cas' car, looking rattled.

He lit a couple of sparklers for Ben, and went closer to the driveway, "You okay? You can head inside if it's too loud."

Margaret shook her head once more.

Turning back around, Ivan was showing Ben how to bend the end of the wire to a ninety degree angle to spin the sparkler.

He was well aware that Ivan was having a difficult time fitting in, but he had no idea what else to suggest. The few jobs available around town would likely be taken by people who'd lived in the area their whole lives, and it was clear that he'd been pawned off on his uncle. Ivan's work ethic seemed
to be on track, but he also seemed to be hitting stumbling blocks beginning his adult life, and needed to distance himself from his family.

Dean had been waiting for Claire to bring up a complaint, but none had come up.

"You have to tell him." Claire said frantically in a hushed voice.

"He doesn't remember." Alfie replied.

"That's exactly why you have to tell him."

"I don't know if I can... It was a really bad night."

"Alfie,-"

"I just... I don't want to lose my best friend over this."

"How can you call him your best friend and hide something like that?"

Alfie shrugged, "I'll try."

Claire continued to watch the fireworks, until a movement caught her eye. Kevin had reappeared at the back of Cas' car, passing Margaret a soda, slipping an arm around her waist. She leaned in a little closer to Alfie.

"You're not weirded out, are you?"

"No."

"Because if you want to talk about it..."

"Maybe after you sort it out with him first."

Alfie took a deep breath, "Okay... Um... I was also wondering about that other thing... And work... Should you be taking it easy? You look tired lately."

"There's no way to know yet. And I'm tired because of my mom, and jail, and Ivan being an asshat."

Claire replied.

Alfie nodded, "Okay, just, if you find out you are, you'll take it easy, right?"

"I still don't know what I want to do if it happens."

"I mean for you." he said, "Just, whatever you need to do, you're my main concern. So... Will you call me when I'm in Dallas?"

"Why? You want updates on the weather?"

"You know what I want updates on."

"You'll get updates if I decide to give you updates."

Alfie nodded, "I'm okay with that... Just as long as you understand that I'm here, and I want to be involved."

"You made that really clear."
The sky stayed dark for several minutes as the ones in the road set something up by flashlight.

Alfie pulled Claire tightly against his side, and whispered, "If it happens, do you want to talk about that third option?"

Alfie averted his eyes as Kevin and Margaret commenced their usual face-sucking farewell at the curb before Margaret got out of the car.

Kevin waited until Margaret waved from the door before pulling away, heading back to their street.

"I gotta tell you something." Kevin said.

"Dude, I would totally make a Green Hornet joke right now, but we haven't had time to talk privately... Did you knock her up?!... I mean, fucking seriously? And don't try to deny it, I saw that look on your face, man." Kevin let loose all at once.

"What the hell?" Alfie asked.

"The shop, I made a joke, called you my baby-daddy, Ivan said it when you came in, and you looked straight at Claire." Kevin was worked up at this point, "And you looked worried."

"I didn't look worried."

"You better look worried, she's got two dads now, and it looks like they both lift."

"This isn't what I needed to talk to you about."

"Bullshit. You need to talk to somebody about it."

Alfie sat forward, leaning on the back of the front seat, "Okay, fine. I slept with her, we both totally spaced, and she's waiting to find out. So... I guess it's like Schrodinger's cat, okay?"

"So she doesn't know yet? Or is this some kind of box joke?"

"She doesn't know yet."

"So help me, if you knocked her up... She hasn't even started senior year!"

Alfie intentionally bumped his head into the seat back, "Okay, I think it's great you care this much, but, you have to keep your damn mouth shut, okay?... Don't even tell Margaret... But I'm going to Dallas, and it's right at the time she's probably going to find out. So, if she needs something-"

"I'm there. You don't have to ask."

"Thanks, Kev...That means a lot-"

"Fuck off." Kevin replied, "Get condoms, get her on the pill, don't let this happen again, I mean it. Women still die having babies, it's serious shit. And she wants to go to college, so, if you screw that up for her, I'll kick your ass myself."

Alfie nodded, "Yeah, I kinda got that part."

"What was the other thing you wanted to tell me?" Kevin asked, putting the car in park.

"Um... shit, this is not going to be easy for you to hear..."
"Worse? What, did you knock up Margaret, too?"

"No! ... Okay, look, you remember that night you don't remember, the reason you won't go near anything with alcohol anymore?"

"If I remembered it, I'd probably still drink."

Alfie nodded, "Yeah, well... Look, things got really stupid that night."

"I woke up on your couch, naked, and Crowley was acting like it was nothing... It had to be pretty fucking stupid."

"Yeah... well, the stuff you don't remember-"

"I don't think I want to know." Kevin replied.

"Look, we were both wasted, you wanted to see if you could..."

"Could what?"

"Um... just... I was drunk too, y'know... I never would have let you, but..."

"Oh my god... It was you... You, not Crowley, right?"

Alfie nodded, unsure of what else to say.

"Holy shit."

"Anyway, then you got in the pool, and... Crowley came in, spotted you out there, you were floating on your back, but you were unconscious, so he pulled you out and put you on the couch... He probably saved your life."

Kevin put his hands on the top of the steering wheel and set his forehead on his knuckles, "All I remembered was somebody's dick in my mouth, him trying to wake me up, and waking up naked in the living room."

"Oh, no... You thought he did something to you?"

"What else would I think? I mean, what would you think?"

"I am so sorry... I mean, you said you didn't remember anything, if I knew you remembered any part of it, I would have told you."

Kevin's shoulders started to shake hard, and Alfie grabbed the closer one as Kevin sat up, rubbing his eyes.

"You okay, Kev?"

"Was I any good?" Kevin asked, his voice giving away his relieved laughter.

"Shit, I don't know. It was a year ago, I was plastered, and I had nothing to compare it to." Alfie replied with confusion.

"Well, we're both sober, you should let me try again." Kevin continued to laugh.

"Okay, so you're fine. Great, I'm going home."
"Was that a no?"

"That's a no."

"Is it a firm, hard no?" Kevin laughed louder.

"I'm gone, man." Alfie said, popping open the door.

"Hang on, just tell me, did I get you off? You gotta tell me that."

Alfie shrugged, "I don't know. I don't really remember. But if I didn't stop you from getting in the pool, then... probably."

"Fuck yeah, I did. I bet I'm good at it, too."

"What the hell, man? A minute ago you thought somebody took advantage of you."

"Yeah, but this makes a lot more sense. And knowing you, sounds like I started it."

Alfie shook his head, standing up, "Okay, whatever, but the next time you think some guy in his fifties molested you, would you tell somebody? Please?"

Kevin was still laughing somewhat as he got out, "Does Claire know?"

"Yeah, Claire knows... She said I had to tell you."

"Okay... Nobody else, okay?"

Alfie shrugged, "C'mon, everyone thinks that about us anyway."

"No, they think that we do that shit all the time. If they find out it went too far one time, they won't be as surprised in the future."

Alfie chuckled and made his way across the street.

As Kevin's car pulled away, Claire started back into the yard, and almost passed by Ivan completely.

"Thanks for coming out." she said, quietly.

"Yeah, sure... I guess blowing stuff up was fun... What the hell did your scrawny twerp say to me, anyway?"

Claire shook her head, "No idea. My dad might tell you, but I doubt it."

Ivan shook his head, "Nevermind... Anyway... You really piss me off most of the time, but, I guess, if you can help out that Julie chick after what she did, maybe you aren't a shitty person."

"So we can get along?"

"Yeah... Keep your boyfriend and his boyfriend off my truck, though, that's not negotiable."

"I'm only the boss of one of them, and only at work, so, good luck with that."

Ivan chuckled, "Yeah, okay... Later."

"Later." she called after him as he started back to where he'd left his truck by the repair shop.
She made her way up the porch steps where Dean was perched on the railing, and Cas sat on the swing with Ben, who was going on about some computer game that Cas had absolutely no interest in. Nick sat under the swing, tugging one of Ben's shoelaces.

Claire smiled as she watched Cas trying to keep up with the information pouring from the boy, and attempting to seem interested.

"How'd that go, with Ivan just now?" Dean asked quietly.

"He said I'm not a shitty person."

"Wow... Big complement."

Claire chuckled.

"No, really, looks like Alfie might have some competition. Shoot, if I'd called more people 'not a shitty person,' I would have had an easier time asking people out in high school."

"Yeah, no. He sucks. Sticking with Alfie." Claire replied.

Cas gave an irritated look at both of them, but said nothing.

"So, I get the idea he gets on your nerves. He doesn't have the right to talk down to anyone, and if he starts anything, he's gone."

"Yeah, I know. I think I got this, though."

"Still on the fence about business school?" Dean asked.

Claire shrugged, "I don't know, I just know I don't have a better plan."

"Well, people change majors all the time. I never thought I'd still be working on cars, but you do what you're good at."

"But it's different, right? I mean, you didn't plan on owning a shop, it just kind of fell on you."

Dean shrugged, "Well, my brother managed to become a lawyer, he's been working at the same firm for over a decade, and he hates it. So, even when you're thirty-something, you still might change your mind."

Claire nodded, "I guess I stick with the plan and watch my options."

"Good plan." Dean said with a nod, "Ben, buddy, you should have been asleep an hour ago."

After some scrambling, and pleading for a little more conversation about the computer game, Ben relented, and started for the gate. Claire ducked inside quickly, predicting that Cas and Dean would both appreciate a moment, and went for the kitchen.

Cas came in a few moments later.

"What did Alfie say?"

Cas shook his head, "Goodnight, Claire."

"What did you say?"
Cas shook his head again, and headed upstairs.

"He was hitting on Ivan, wasn't he?... C'mon, I wanna know."

"Check that the smoke box is out, please." Cas called down, "And be careful you don't burn yourself."

"Yeah, okay."

Claire went into the back yard and used a large oven mitt to pull a wire basket of wood pieces from the side of the smoker, setting it on cinder blocks next to the grill. She dumped the dregs of a pitcher of lemonade over it, and went back inside.

Chapter End Notes

(Intended translation:

Ivan sat back, "Okay, then, what makes you think you're so awesome?"

Alfie shook his head slightly, and replied, "I have manners, class, and a really big dick."

Cas immediately cringed, putting a hand to his face.

Dean looked back and forth between the two, "What?... What was that?"

"Apparently my boyfriend speaks French." Claire said quietly.

Dean looked at Cas again, almost concerned by his reaction, "That might not be a good thing."

"How can you brag about the last if you have the first two?" Cas asked, "Watch your words."

Kevin looked at Alfie's now crimson face with a grin he couldn't control, "Been nice knowing you, man. Too bad it had to end like this.")
Kevin kept the phone to his ear as he got out of bed, looking for his jeans from the night before, "Put her on the phone."

"She won't listen."

"It's fine, just put her on the phone." Kevin struggled into his clothes as he could hear people arguing in the background.

Then he heard it. An elderly woman was clearly doing her best to be insulting. Vaguely, he heard Mr Danes tell the woman to 'shut her trap,' but it was half-hearted at best.

"Okay, I'm headed there now. Just stay calm."

"It's a four hour drive." Margaret said through a hushed sob.

"And I'll be there in three."

Alfie was groggily chewing on a toaster pastry, half awake, when Kevin was suddenly tearing through the house.

He waited patiently, figuring Kevin would find him eventually.

On his third pass through the living room, Kevin spotted Alfie standing in the kitchen, leaning back against the counter. He hadn't moved far from the toaster.

"I need your credit card." Kevin said bluntly.

Alfie gave him a confused and sleepy look.

"Margaret's grandma called her a Jap-fucking whore."

"But... you're not Japanese."

"No, I'm not."

"So... Are we going after the Japanese guy? I mean, what's happening?"

"I'm driving up there to pick her up."

"Oh... What about the Japanese guy?"

"Dude, coffee." Kevin pleaded, "How late were you up?"

Alfie shrugged, and pulled his wallet from his back pocket, passing it to Kevin, who removed a card and gave it back to him.

"I'll pay you back." Kevin said loudly on his way to the door.

"Whatever." Alfie mumbled, pulling a soda from the fridge.
Claire didn't bother stopping at the computer, ducking her head into Dean's office, "Hey... are we still out of customers?"

Dean nodded, not looking up, "Yeah, until we get fifteen at once. Give it time, keep busy."

"Busy, how?"

"Interview at one o'clock, you want to sit in?"

"That's three hours away... I guess I'll come back at one."

"A little before one, in case he's early." Dean replied.

"Okay." Claire answered, going back through the front office, and pulling the door shut behind her.

She was almost back on the road when she spotted Ben sitting on the front porch with Nick, and after a moment's hesitation, changed her course.

"Hey... You bored?"

Ben nodded.

"Okay." Claire answered, going back through the front office, and pulling the door shut behind her.

She was almost back on the road when she spotted Ben sitting on the front porch with Nick, and after a moment's hesitation, changed her course.

"Hey... You bored?"

Ben nodded.

Claire waved at him to follow her, and Ben, with Nick in tow, scrambled off the porch.

Cas was thoroughly tired of Gabe's voice in his ear, and continued to take notes while checking items on district policy and schedules, both online, and on paper.

Finally they'd come to a break, and he muted his phone, the hands-free set still keeping him wired in.

As he turned the corner coming off the stairs, he found Claire and Ben in the kitchen, discussing ingredients going into a large mixing bowl.

"Just keep stirring," Claire said, dumping another load of chocolate chips into the bowl.

Ben did as he was told, and continued to stir at the loose dough in the bowl as Claire got a cookie sheet.

"I thought you were at the shop." Cas said, getting a bottle of water.

"Nothing to do until the next interview, and I wanted some cookies."

"You're making cookies?"

"Yeah, they don't magically appear by themselves, you know." Claire replied.

Cas nodded, glancing at Ben before heading back to the stairs, "Okay."

He considered Dean's words from a few nights prior as he went, and found them to be correct. The kids were fine.

Kevin double-checked the address, but Margaret was already opening the door before he was up the front walk.

"Hey," he said, in a worried and sympathetic tone. Her face looked as though she'd been crying the entire time, "Your dad still here?"
Margaret nodded, leaning into his hug, her backpack somewhat in the way of his arms.

"Go get in, I'll be out in a minute."

"What are you gonna do?" she asked.

Kevin shook his head, "Just talk, I swear."

Margaret looked too shaken to argue, and went for the car as Kevin knocked firmly on the door.

Margaret's mother answered, surprised to see Kevin.

"Hi, Mrs Danes." Kevin said cheerfully, "Got a problem, was wondering if I could talk to Mr Danes for a minute."

Mrs Danes looked over his shoulder, spotting her daughter in the car, "You're going to get her home safe, right?"

Kevin nodded, "Yes, ma'am, safe and sound, you have my word on it."

With an anxious nod, Mrs Danes turned into the house, "Henry?... Kevin wants to speak to you."

Kevin waited patiently, his falsely pleasant smile glued to his face as Mr Danes filled the doorway.

"Yeah?"

"Sir, I just wanted to tell you, I may not have your life experience, or have kids of my own, but I babysit two little girls, and if my mother - who I love dearly, by the way - called either one of them a whore, a slut, or a cock-sucking street-walker, well, she would be dead to me... just sayin'... Have a nice day, Mr Danes."

Kevin had expected some kind of retort, but received none as he went back to his car, circling the back of it to get in. He sat down and took Margaret's hand in both of his, trying to give her some encouragement.

A tap sounded on the glass of Margaret's window, making them both look up.

Mr Danes motioned for Margaret to get out of the car, and Kevin gave her hand a squeeze.

Margaret got out slowly, and Mr Danes pulled her into a tight hug, engulfing her small frame, "I'm sorry, Maggie. I can't shut her up, but you don't have to come out here anymore. You already showed us we can trust you to stay home, and I should have let you... You've got your keys, right?"

Margaret nodded.

"Okay..." Mr Danes touched her cheek softly, then leaned down to speak to Kevin, "So help me, son, if I get back to town and I don't find her exactly as I left her, I will be finding you. You got that?"

"I got your meaning, sir." Kevin replied with harsh tone.

Margaret got back into the car, and Mr Danes shut the door.

Watching her father return to the house, his shoulders somewhat slumped in defeat, Margaret asked in a hushed tone, "What did you say to him?"
Kevin shrugged, "...Told you I could preach."

Cas gathered himself for a break, and went downstairs again, finding the kitchen empty, and several wax paper sheets on the table with chocolate chip cookies cooling. One had already had most of the cookies removed, and he helped himself to one.

Sam had been courteous enough to call and talk him through it, but there was no way around it. To get Amelia's papers formally dismissed, he would be required to appear in person in California, and request it, providing certified copies of the orders he'd been granted at home.

Claire had sleeping fitfully, and he was concerned what even the mention of a trip to California would do.

He looked up as Claire and Ben came in from the back yard.

"Pretty good, huh?" Claire asked, "I found the recipe online."

Cas nodded, "Something's different."

"Maple syrup."

"Really?"

Ben nodded, "Crazy, huh?"

"Not too crazy, I suppose... Claire, I have a trip coming up, how do you feel about Charlie house-sitting?"

"You mean baby-sitting, don't you?"

Cas tilted his head slightly in response.

"Yeah, sure."

Claire made certain Nick was following Ben rather than herself before heading into the shop. She was early, but Ivan had arrived while she was gone.

She slipped quietly through the front door and clocked in. She could hear hushed voices in Dean’s office, but boots sounded in the hallway before she turned around.

Claire was about to head down the hallway when she found herself face to face with Ivan. He looked worse for wear, his ponytail had a few loose strands, and he had a bruise beginning to show on his eyebrow, likely turning into a black eye.

"Hey."

"Hey." Claire replied, holding up the large plastic container, "Want a cookie?"

"No." Ivan said, looking away.

"Bullshit." Claire opened the container, and waited until he gave in, and removed two from the box.

She moved aside to let him through, and leaned in to Dean's office, finding him on the phone, holding the box out to him as he took one. Claire put the lid back on and left it on the filing cabinet
next to the front desk.

Ivan had sat down on the old sofa, stretching out a little, obviously trying to get comfortable.

"So..." Claire started.

"I don't want to talk about it."

"I was going to ask why Dean's on the phone when he's expecting a new recruit."

Ivan shrugged, taking a bite of the second cookie, "He's trying to help me find a place."

"In a hurry?"

Ivan shrugged again.

Claire dropped into the desk chair, "For somebody who asks a lot of personal questions, you don't answer much."

Ivan chuckled, "Yeah, well, I'm trying to keep that whole mysterious thing going."

Claire smirked, "Got any info on the person coming in for the interview?"

"Only that he's older than me," Ivan replied.

"Damn. If this keeps up, Dean's never going to let me redecorate with Hello Kitty in here."

Ivan laughed, and for once it sounded genuine, "There's no way you're into that. Alfie, maybe, but not you."

"Yeah? What am I into?"

"Probably horror movies," Ivan guessed.

"Yeah, actually. Old sci-fi, too."

"Chaney or Lugosi?"

"Lugosi, no question. Favorite Living Dead movie?"

"The one in the mall."

"Crap." Claire replied with an eye roll, "Just when I thought we could be friends."

Dean appeared in the opening of the hallway, having just gotten off the phone, "He rented it out two weeks ago, but he said there might be another opening up in a week. He'll try to hold it for you."

"Great... Thanks for trying, Dean."

Dean nodded fairly helplessly, and went back to his office.

"You're the black sheep, aren't you?" Claire asked, breaking the stillness of the room.

Ivan nodded and got up, heading to the garage.

Claire slouched and sat quietly until the familiar sound of Alfie's bike roared in, rattling the window. She waited as the door opened, and Alfie stepped inside, carrying his helmet and working his hand
out of one of his gloves with his teeth.

She thought back to his appearance at her side in the hospital, and had no qualms admitting she preferred the look. A sly grin took over her face as his eyes adjusted.

"Hey... What's going on?" Alfie asked.

Claire turned the chair slightly, backing up from the desk, stifling a giggle, "Trade you a cookie for a lap dance."

Ivan came through, headed for the water cooler, "That's rough, man. She gave me two cookies."

Alfie shrugged, "Must have been one hell of a lap dance."

Margaret had fallen asleep, and Kevin pulled over to refuel.

Hating to wake her up, he leaned close and stroked the side of her face gently, "Wake up... Stopped for gas, you want anything?"

Margaret shook her head, but didn't open her eyes.

"This place looks a little seedy, I'm gonna lock it while I run in."

Kevin received only a hint of a comfortable hum in response, and got out, closing the door quietly.

After filling the tank, he did as he said he would, locking the doors and going inside.

He'd barely grabbed a couple of drinks and a bag of Margaret's favorite baked chips when he came out to find a suspicious figure far too close to his car.

The man was obviously staring, and made Kevin uneasy. He moved to the driver's door, opening it with the key rather than the button on the key fob.

He'd barely set the drinks and chips down before getting immediately back on the road.

A few miles down the highway, Margaret began to wake, finding the drinks and chips, "Did we stop?"

"Yeah."

"You didn't wake me up?"

"I tried to, you were out of it." Kevin replied.

Margaret yawned, "Don't leave me in the car again, okay?"

Kevin nodded, "Yeah, don't worry, I won't."

The door closed behind the young man who had come in to interview, and Dean turned to Claire, who was leaning against the wall. She'd been making notes on a clipboard and pretending to be interested and involved with the interview, but Dean knew her well enough to know she had been observing carefully.

"Why'd you ask him about football?" she asked.
"To see if he'd talk about anything other than snakes."

She nodded, "If you had a rattler in one of the junkers, and you needed to take it out, that guy would flip."

Dean looked at the door, "Yeah... He seem jumpy to you?"

"Yeah. He was tweaking."

Dean shot her a suspicious look, "Are you sure?"

Claire turned the clipboard around to face him. In her notes, most of the page had been filled with possible stimulants, including 'crack' and 'too much coffee,' but they'd all been scratched out, aside from the word 'meth' that had been underlined and circled three times.

"Wow... How much of that shit were you around?"

"A lot. I couldn't go on my seventh grade field trip, so she tried to cheer me up with acid."

"How did that go?"

Claire shook her head, "Not good."

"Okay... How about Ivan? You think he's on anything?"

"No, he's clean. Said he got busted for pot, but he might have made it up."

"And Alfie?"

"Aside from alcohol? Nothing. And he's drinking less than he was."

Dean nodded, "Okay, just because I'm curious, what about me?"

Claire shrugged, "Mild prescription painkiller, not much stronger than the over the counter stuff. For your back, right? And you don't usually take it."

Dean looked surprised, "How do you know all that?"

"You threw me into your bathroom. You didn't think I wasn't going to snoop, did you?... The bottle was two months old and still half full."

Dean chuckled, "Okay... You know, maybe if business school doesn't look so good, you could see if the sheriff needs a drugs expert."

Claire shook her head, "You can't be a cop if you have a record."

"I can't."

"Why not?"

"I just..."

Alfie raised an eyebrow, "Just get on."

Claire shook her head.
Alfie glanced around the yard, and finding it completely empty, leaned a little closer to her, whispering, "Just climb on the bike the way you climbed on me... but with pants on."

Claire looked down at the passenger footpegs he'd unfolded. He sat with all of his weight holding the motorcycle steady. She desperately wanted to take him up on his offer.

"You're not going to start it, right?" Claire asked.

Alfie shook his head.

Ivan looked up from inside the garage, "What's the matter, Claire? You don't wanna feel the power between your legs?"

"What was that?" Claire called back over her shoulder, "Something, something, sexual harassment?"

"Well I was gonna get you a couple of male strippers as a late birthday present, but if you're gonna be like that, forget it." Ivan said, tossing a broken part onto the workbench and heading for the store room.

"No, wait! Come back! I need strippers!" Claire teased.

Alfie chuckled, "Yeah, don't worry about it, me and Kevin will start taking pole dancing lessons."

Claire took a deep breath and put her hand on his shoulder, exactly as he'd told her, and stepped up onto the first peg, swinging her leg over the bike, and sitting down carefully.

Alfie turned to speak over his shoulder, shifting the weight of the bike, and she immediately clutched at his waist.

"Are you okay?"

"Don't drop it." Claire replied breathlessly.

"Claire, that's kind of tight."

Ivan re-emerged from the store room with the replacement part, shaking his head at them, "You know why they call that the bitch seat?... Because she's riding your ass."

"People really call it the bitch seat?" Claire whispered close to Alfie's neck.

"Yeah, but it's just a phrase." Alfie answered. On the side of the bike away from Ivan's view, he dropped his hand and gave Claire's thigh a quick squeeze, pressing it against his hip.

Claire could feel it, a deep warmth spreading through her, making her shaky. "I should head home, I think I've have enough for today."

"I'll walk you over." Alfie said quietly.

He held the bike still again as Claire dismounted, nearly stumbling over her own feet. He set the kickstand back down, and leaned it into place.

Claire felt her reaction intensifying as he got off the bike, his jeans snug against the form of his legs.

"Hey, I'll be back in a few minutes, I wanna try to get that engine out of the Passat." Alfie called over to Ivan, who nodded, before putting an arm around Claire and headed to the road.
Further away from the shop, he ran his hand up her back a bit, which, unbeknownst to him, was not helping her whatsoever, "Okay, I have to ask... Did you really get Ivan to give you a lap dance earlier?"

"Hell no. He's clumsy, he'd probably fall on me." Claire replied, "And in case you're hinting about something else, I'm not into him at all, so..."

"I wasn't worried about that." Alfie lied.

"Okay, good... I mean, he's an asshole, but I figured if we both do what Dean's been doing, and try to give him a chance to act like a person, and not be a jerk, maybe he'll take it."

"Why'd you make cookies?"

Claire shrugged, "Ben... well, he looked lonely. When I was little I would go to my best friend's house and her mom would make cookies with us, so, just..."

"You're adopting him as a little brother." Alfie smiled.

"I guess." Claire said quietly, "And I just really wanted some chocolate."

"You know I'm heading out in the morning, right?"

"Yeah."

"Kevin... Um..."

"You told him?"

"Oh, yeah, that's fine, but, um," Alfie swallowed and tried to ease into the subject, "He said I looked at you funny the other day... When the word baby-daddy was getting thrown around... He yelled at me, actually."

"Kevin yelled at you?" Claire looked up.

Alfie nodded, "Yeah. Said if I ruined college for you, he'd kick my ass."

Claire laughed, "All that non-violent stuff... Does he get how much of a hypocrite he is sometimes?"

"No... But he means well. I mean, he gets stupid sometimes, but who doesn't?"

"Yeah, I guess he tries." Claire chuckled, "So you told him about this?"

"Only because he guessed that you already were, so I set him straight." Alfie answered, "I'm sorry, just, I know he'll keep his mouth shut, and I hate the idea of you being alone here when I'm stuck in Dallas... and I know you trust him."

"I'm not alone, you know?"

Alfie stopped, "Who would you tell?"

Claire shrugged.

"I'm serious, Claire, who would you tell?... I mean, if it was an emergency, if you woke up in the middle of the night, miscarrying or something, you'd wake your dad up, right?"
She didn't answer.
"I'm not sure you would, and that scares me."
"Do you want me to tell my dad about this?"
"I... I don't know."
Claire continued walking toward her house. Alfie followed after her.
"Are you mad at me? For telling Kevin?"
"No... Like you said, he'll keep his mouth shut. And anyway, if anyone would figure it out, it would be him."
Alfie shrugged, "Actually, I would have put my money on Dean."
"Why?"
"Because we're both around him a lot, and since he has a kid, he'd probably pick up on the little stuff."
Claire shrugged, "I still think Kevin would figure it out before Dean would."
"So... Will you call me when you know?" Alfie asked softly.
"I don't know."
"Right..."
"I'm not trying to shut you out, I swear... I just really don't know what I'm going to do before I do it lately... Stuff just keeps happening, and I don't want to make any promises."
Alfie paused, noticing the empty driveway. He looked up at the house, the window he knew to be hers, and then caught her eyes, "Your dad's not home... I could keep you company."
"Is that code for something?"
"Yeah. Code for anything you want."
"That's how we got into this in the first place." Claire replied, her skepticism obvious.
Alfie pulled Claire close, kissing her softly, "I love you, anyway."
"I love you, too... but you better go."
"Call Kevin if you need something? He already said he'd do it."
Claire nodded, "Yeah."
Alfie kissed her once more before heading back to the shop.
The alarm sounded at half past four in the morning, prompting Dean to untangle himself from Cas' arms, easing the discomfort of his impending absence with gentle kisses, "I gotta go."

Cas mumbled an incoherent objection, and attempted to pull him closer.

Dean stroked a hand through Cas' hair, "C'mon, darlin', you know I gotta get home before he wakes up."

Cas nuzzled into the space between Dean's face and the pillow, pressing a quick kiss to his jaw before dragging his arm from Dean's waist.

After dressing, he left quietly, thankful the stairs by Claire's door didn't squeak.

He made his way back down the gravel road to his own home, slipping inside.

Dean was standing at the foot of the stairs, about to head to his room for another hour or two when Nick came bounding down the stairs, loudly expressing her joy at his arrival.

The lamp in Ben's room clicked on.

"Shit." Dean grumbled.

"Two days." Claire answered, trying to keep her breathing under control.

"But stress can do that, right?" Alfie asked through the phone.

"Yeah, the pills could do that, too, but that doesn't mean something else isn't happening."

"Okay... So you need a test?"

Claire pulled a pillow to her chest, rolling onto her side, "I'm just kind of freaking out. I mean, I can just wait and see."

"Just call up that clinic you went to, or call Charlie, maybe?"

Claire shook her head, taking a shuddering breath, "I don't want to... They were really pushy, and I
just don't want to deal with Charlie right now. Especially because she's going to be staying here for, I dunno, a week, and she likes to chat."

Alfie couldn't help but notice the irritation in her last word, "Okay, just try to relax, call in sick, and maybe take a nap, okay? Not like you can make it go faster... Right? I mean, I don't know, is there a way to make it go faster?"

"Yeah, boil a live crow in a big cauldron full of the blood of calico cats under a full moon at midnight, everybody knows that, duh."

"Sorry, I just... I don't have a uterus, I don't know how the maintenance works." Alfie replied, "Look, everything's been difficult, maybe you just need to take a day. So, breathe. And when I get back, I'm gonna put super glue all over my arms and give you a big hug, okay?"

"Right... Because you're duct tape."

"Yeah."

"I miss you."

"I miss you, too."

After a few more words, Alfie ended the call, and began another.

Kevin answered, "Sandman... 'sup?"

"Hey, can you go get a poster from my house and take it to Claire?"

Kevin ran a hand over his face and sat up, yawning, "Is it the naked fire one?"

"It's private, and if you open the tube, I will kill you."

"So it is the naked fire one."

"Yeah, well, that's for Claire, not you. And there's something else in there, so, yeah, don't open it."

Kevin scoffed, "Dude, I'm not your dildo delivery service."

Alfie rolled his eyes, "It's not a dildo, jerkwad."

"Yeah, don't worry about it. I just figured out what it is... You want me to wait with her?"

"Yeah."

"Cool, but if she says not to tell you, I'm not going to tell you."

Alfie nodded, "Yeah, well, if I thought she couldn't trust you, I wouldn't send you over there in the first place."

Kevin got up, heading for his closet, "So which tube is it?"

"It's the one that says 'this is the naked fire one, fuck off, Kevin.'" Alfie answered sarcastically.

"Really?"

"No. It has her name on it. There's a post-it note on the cap."
"Lame. You should have rolled the damn thing in glitter, that would make it stand out."

"I tried," Alfie replied, "But all the glitter was stuck on you."

"Yeah, well, I'm fabulous like that."

Claire opened the door looking miserable.

"Hey." Kevin said softly, "I don't know if it's going to help any, but, here, I brought you a naked picture of yourself."

Claire gave him a look of confusion and disgust as he passed her the cardboard tube, "What?"

"Your man says 'hi.'" Kevin continued, following her into the house as she started back to her room, "That's not the only thing in there, either."

"Go home, Kevin."

"I would, but you don't mean it."

Claire hung her head, "Yeah, I don't."

"So... Can I see the poster?"

"Why would you even ask that?" Claire asked, going through her doorway.

"Um, the crayon version was amazing, and he wouldn't let me see the other one on the screen. Which is weird, because usually I get to see all the stuff he makes."

"Right, melt-your-brain beautiful."

Kevin shrugged, "I'm a huge fan, yeah. His stuff is really terrific. But at the same time, I got sac-tapped for reaching for the crayon one after I already saw it on accident, so, pretty sure you'd do a lot worse if I saw the real one without permission."

"He hit you?"

"Okay, actually, I said something really inappropriate... Had it coming."

Claire shook her head.

"Okay, look, nobody else is here, right? And we both know there's a pregnancy test in there. He asked me to wait with you. Now, whatever comes up is your business, but you're kind of a mess right now, so..."

Claire was still for a moment, holding the cardboard tube with one end on her bed, the other near her shoulder. She seemed to brace herself, or possibly shut down, before popping off the cap, "Yeah, you can stay."

"Okay."

She turned the tube over, and a small cardboard box slid out into her hand.

Claire lay the open tube on her bed, and tapped the box into her empty hand, then headed for the door, "Stay out of my clothes."
"They'd be too small for me." Kevin called after her, "...Maybe... Probably a better fit than Margaret's."

Kevin sat down at her desk, and looked at the cardboard tube for a long moment before pulling out his phone, sending a message to Margaret, 'Yo gorgeous, full disclosure, I'm at Claire's house. Just she needs a friend. No boobs'

After waiting a few minutes, his phone chirped with her reply, 'If boobs happen, better be platonic or you won't have mine for a while'

'OK, so, we got a platonic litmus test? I'm confused' Kevin replied.

'You wouldn't care if i saw your friends with no shirt but if I was pawing at some hunky guy's chest, not cool, right? So, same'

Kevin shrugged and started to reply to comment that the arrangement seemed both socially progressive and equitable, but suddenly found himself looking at a picture of a banana in Margaret's hand at a specific angle, with her legs and the floor in the background.

'M, girl, did you just dick pic me?'

'I was bored'

'Ur awesome'

'Your turn lol'

Kevin was considering his options when the bathroom door opened and Claire returned to the room. Her face was pale and tear streaked, her breathing uneven, "I'm not..."

Kevin set his phone down and got up, wrapping her in a hug, "That's good, right?... I mean, if you were, you know he'd be right there the whole time, he'd want to help you raise a kid, but, man, high school? College? One thing at a time."

Claire shook her head, "I can't be somebody's mom, ever... I'd mess it all up."

"Why?"

"Because of all the shit my mom did to me, I wouldn't know how." Claire was shaking somewhat with the stress, and he pulled her over to sit on the bed.

"So what? I don't have a dad, I still want to be one someday... Not like right now, but eventually. And if that happens, I think I could do a pretty good job."

Claire tugged the cardboard tube into her lap, pulling the rolled poster out of it, "He said he was going to hang it up in my closet, behind the clothes."

Kevin gave her a squeeze, "You want me to leave room for a minute?"

Claire scoffed, "It's a poster of a crayon drawing he did, it's not like I'm changing."

"So I get to see it?"

"I don't care."
Kevin stood up and took the top edge of the poster, stepping back as Claire unrolled it.

"Shit... This might be his best one yet, and that's saying something." Kevin said softly, "That's really incredible."

The image spread before her was far clearer and much more detailed than what she'd been able to see on Alfie's phone.

Tears continued to well in her eyes as she looked over the picture, "You know what?... He said it was about my soul, and the way he feels about me."

"Phhht. Don't listen to him, he's just trying to get in your pants." Kevin replied jokingly, "So, do you want to hang it up? Or put it back in the tube and get him to frame it?"

Claire shrugged, still shaking a bit, "I don't know."

Kevin took the poster gently, rolling it carefully, putting it into the tube again, and setting it aside. He sat down with her once more, pulling her close, "You're still crying."

Claire didn't answer.

"Stress, right?"

"I guess."

"You gonna call him?"

"I don't want to talk to him right now."

Kevin nodded against her hair, "So, you need to get rid of that test so your dad doesn't see it?"

Claire shook her head, "He never goes in there, and I buried it in the trash can. He won't see it."

"You need a nap."

"Probably."

Kevin got up and grabbed his phone, dropping back onto the bed, and pulling Claire into a hug next to him, "You know he's stressing, too, right?"

Claire wrapped her arms around her middle and curled into a ball.

"You look like you need like a bear or something."

Claire shook her head, letting her eyes drop closed, "No... I haven't had a bear since I was eight."

"What? Why?"

"My mom's boyfriend let his dog chew it up."

Kevin looked horrified, "They didn't get you a new one?"

Claire shook her head against his shoulder.

"I'm texting Samandriel, telling him to bring you back a damn bear."

"No, he'll think it's because... Look, just don't."
"Yeah, fine... But you need a stuffed animal or something."

"No, I don't."

Kevin considered sending Alfie a text concerning the results, but as Claire drifted off, concluded that it wasn't his news to share, and made a mental note to suggest she call Alfie rather than text him when she woke up.

Tired, but with nothing better to do, he made several attempts at a selfie of his mouth with the tip of his tongue stuck between his teeth toward one side, barely breaching his lips and sent the sideways photo to Margaret.

Soon came a reply, 'Omg! Imma be all over that later. Is Claire ok?'

'Yeahwhy?'

'Uh, cuz yor on her bed, the pillow shows'

'K, well, she's not ok, but that's her business. Im just hanging'

Kevin set his phone down on his chest, adjusted the pillow below his head, and wondered if Margaret was actually as comfortable with their relaxed boundaries and trust as she implied she was.

Claire was breathing deeply and likely dead to the world, overwrought with stress, some of which she'd been hiding for weeks, and some, years.

Kevin's phone chirped again.

'Give her a hug for me, and if you need to wait til her dad gets home we can resched for tmrrw'

With a relieved smile, he sent back an affirmative, and got comfortable.

Dean looked around the garage, "Did Claire come in yet?"

"She called in," Ivan replied, "I heard the machine get it... She take a lot of sick days?"

"Only when she's had a car fall on her, or nearly died." Dean answered, heading for the front desk, "She's tough stuff."

He played Claire's message back on the machine and sent Cas a text before heading back into the garage.

"Okay, so we make do. I have to run out and tow somebody, Ben's in the house. If you have to leave for any reason, call Claire and tell her to come down here. She doesn't sound too sick to get out of an emergency."

"So I guess I just keep plugging away?"

"Right." Dean started toward the truck, before stopping at the door, "Hey, did you hear anything back on Johnson's extra room?"

Ivan shook his head, "No, but it hasn't been too bad lately."

"It's a cycle, kid, it's gonna get bad again if you wait too long."
"I can handle it." Ivan said, setting a metal and plastic part to the side.

Dean scratched at his forehead, "All right, well, play it safe. I got a couch if you need it."

Ivan nodded and continued his work.

Somewhat concerned that Claire wasn't answering her phone, Cas was thankful for a particularly light day, and headed home. He wasn't entirely surprised to see Kevin's car parked on the road past the driveway.

He noticed right away that the living room was empty, as was the rest of the downstairs.

Cas made for his office to leave a stack of paper on his desk, and turned around to see Claire's door was standing open.

Inside, however, he was surprised to see Kevin stretched out on the bed next to her. He had an arm around her, and she was curled into a ball against his side.

Concerned, he went back downstairs.

"It's closer to the gallery." Alfie said quietly, attempting to ignore her as he adjusted the image.

"Yes, but I'm driving here anyway. Then you wouldn't have to find parking." Naomi fusses.

Alfie shrugged, "I don't see why it matters, it's not like you actually want to spend any time with me."

Naomi changed the subject abruptly, "Is Kevin going to be here this time?"

"I don't know. Maybe." Alfie continued to work on the display and lighting, humming to himself.

"You got a lot of attention when you threw that fit and pulled that one picture."

"I turned off the screen, I didn't throw a fit."

"You came off as over emotional and touchy. And the gay rumor, well, that didn't hurt, either... Unless it's true?"

"I'm not gay." Alfie said flatly.

"Fine, but it could give your future a boost if you run with it. Besides, some women would throw themselves at you just to see if it's true."

Alfie laughed, "I didn't realize you were into the Bloodhound Gang."

Naomi gave a confused look.

"You know, that song...? Nevermind."

Naomi rolled her eyes, "Just be subtle. You don't want to let your antics get in the way, distracting from your work. This isn't a performance piece."

"No, performance was when I got to cover a Bowie cover of the Pixies last weekend." Alfie replied, "Claire liked it."
"Right, Claire..." Naomi said dryly, "But she didn't come out last time... Is she the reason for the hotel?"

"Last time we weren't on good terms, and the hotel is to get some space from you." Alfie replied, "She probably won't be here this time because she has something important going on."

Naomi looked carefully at the display, and turned around, noting for the millionth time the locations of his other works scattered throughout the large room amid many others. "None of these are as good as the one you shut off last time. Are you sure these are the ones you want people to see?"

"I chose carefully."

"Why not show the one with the girl in the car?"

"I didn't ask her if I could."

"I'm sure she won't care. Or she doesn't need to know."

Alfie turned around slowly, his voice soft, "You've never met her, you don't know jack shit about her, and you obviously don't know jack shit about me. That would be forgivable if you made any effort to correct it, but you've had nearly eighteen years, if you haven't cared by now, you never will... So, as we're not close enough to be actual family, let me spell it out for you... Claire matters to me. Her privacy matters to me. She's not some model selling her image, she's a private person, and she doesn't have to share that beauty with the world. She chooses to share that with me, and I respect her too much to ask her if I can put her on display, to use her to get a jump on a career. There's only one print of that picture, her dad's boyfriend bought it for him, it's hanging in his office... If you aren't close enough to her to be welcomed into their home, you have no business seeing her like that."

Naomi gave him a hard look, "Fine. I'm trying to give you sound advice here, whether you take it is up to you."

Alfie rubbed at his forehead, "I think we should put a label on this. You might make a good agent, but the whole family thing is a joke... And obviously we're never going to see eye to eye on personal stuff."

"You're suggesting we adjust our arrangement to be strictly business?"

"Yes."

Naomi relented with a nod, "That would certainly be more comfortable for me."

Alfie nodded in response, and she walked away.

Kevin's phone buzzed, slowly pulling him out of a restful sleep. He answered, sitting up, pulling his arm out from under Claire, "Hey mom... No, I'm at Claire's house... Yeah."

Claire shifted to roll onto her stomach once his arm was free.

"No, I can stop on the way home. You want me to make dinner?... Yeah... 'Kay... 'Kay, love you, bye."

Kevin ended the call, and put a hand on Claire's back. She jumped at the unexpected contact and pulled away.

"Sorry... Are you okay?"
Claire nodded and rubbed her eyes.

"I gotta go... You should call Samandriel, you know?... I mean, there's nothing to find out, and it'll be easier for him to focus on the art thing if he's not worried about you."

"Yeah... I'll call him." Claire replied, getting up, straightening her hair.

"And tell him to bring you a bear. Or a stuffed armadillo, or something. Something Dallasy."

"Right."

"I mean it," he said following her down the stairs, "You're looking more exhausted every time I see you. You have to fix that."

Claire wasn't entirely surprised to find Cas sitting on the couch, with the news on the television, texting on his phone. He hardly looked up as Kevin left.

Claire started for the kitchen, but Cas turned off the television, and set his phone down, "Sit."

"You got me confused with Nick."

"We need to talk."

Concerned he may have found the test, she quickly dropped the attitude, rounded the end of the couch, and sat down.

"I know you mentioned that Alfie's in Dallas right now, is there any correlation between that, and the fact that Kevin was in your bed?"

"It's Kevin, dad. We took a nap. And it wasn't 'in bed,' it was more like 'on bed.'"

Cas looked increasingly uncomfortable, "Claire, I don't know what to think, I only know what I see."

"I'm not cheating on Alfie, he's not cheating on Margaret. He's just a close friend."

"A close friend?... I was a teenaged boy once, myself, that's what makes it so difficult to trust them."

Claire rolled her eyes, "Again, it's Kevin. If he, or I had any interest in each other, it would have come up a long time ago."

"Claire, there are many factors I'm sure you don't want to discuss, but while I understand some less conventional arrangements exist, I'm concerned that you haven't had enough experience being in a regular relationship to handle something more complex."

"You just completely lost me."

"I don't know what's going on, if it's some sort of polyamorous arrangement, which I won't say is inherently wrong, just more difficult, but I also worry about what effect your upbringing may have had on the development of your ethics in this matter... Also, from what I've read, it's not uncommon for rape survivors to go to extremes to attempt to regain a feeling of control."

"So you think I'm a swinger or a cheater, or a slut because I was raised wrong. Great."

Cas took a deep breath, "Perhaps this should have waited for therapy."
"No, this is fine. We can get into this right now." Claire replied, loaded with agitation, "You think I don't know right from wrong? Because I'm fucked in the head, right?"

"Obviously you have a moral grounding, however if you made excuses to bypass it, you wouldn't be the first person to do so."

"And you think I'm screwing a bunch of people."

"Claire-"

"No, you brought it up. You said your bit, time for you to hear me out. Me and Kevin? Just like you and Charlie. Just because the equipment is there doesn't mean anybody wants to use it, okay?"

"It's very different from my friendship with Charlie."

"Because we're straight?... Are you seriously going there?" Claire growled.

"It's different because your mind is wired."

"No. It's not different! It's a friend-type of love that has nothing to do with sex, he's a good person, and neither one of us want to be involved like that."

Cas didn't respond, but he still looked skeptical.

"Believe whatever you want, okay? Because I know damn well I haven't done anything wrong, and what you think I'm doing matters a whole lot less than what I actually do. I don't use people, and I don't cheat on my boyfriend."

Claire got up from the couch, and Cas sat quietly as she went upstairs.

A few moments later, she came down again, and was out the front door before he had time to ask where she was going.
"So, are they on a date, or what?" Ben asked as Claire passed him a large bowl of macaroni and cheese.

"Who cares? Grown ups are boring, right?" she answered as she plopped onto the couch next to him with her own bowl. She pulled up Ren and Stimpy on the television, and settled in.

"I taught Nick to bark three times in a row today. You wanna see?"

"Sure."

Ben called Nick to him, and had her sit in front of him, "Okay, watch. Nick... five minus two..."

He held his fist out, and flicked three fingers at her in a fanning motion, and she barked three times in response.

"Cool." Claire said quietly, as Ben rewarded the dog with a noodle from his bowl, "You should teach her to put your clothes in a basket, then you could clean your room easier."

"No way, she chews up socks."

"Gross."

"Yeah. But my dad said she's probably going to stop when she's bigger." Ben was quiet for a moment, "I heard you tell my dad you had a fight with your dad."

"Yeah." Claire replied non-committally, taking a large bite.

"What did you fight about?"

"Teenager stuff."

"Like what?"

Claire shrugged, "He thought I did something, or was going to do something, that he said he wasn't
even sure was wrong, and he flipped out."

"Oh... That's weird."

"Yeah."

Alfie got out of a long shower to find a voice-mail from Claire, and listened to it immediately.

He'd been waiting to hear from her since he'd called Kevin, and had been anxious all day.

Her voice came through the phone's recording fairly clear, and he was grateful there would be no chance of misheard words due to a bad signal. He could tell she'd had been walking from the sound of the gravel under her shoes in the background.

"Hey, sorry I didn't call sooner, I was a mess. It's negative... So, I'm not.. y'know... So I guess everything's fine... Except I took a nap with Kevin, now my dad seems to think I'm messing around with him, or that we're switching partners or some stupid shit like that... And please don't freak out, I let Kevin see the poster. He wasn't a creep about it... I love you..."

Alfie sat down on the bed and took a few long deep breaths as the recording played a second time, as the relief sank in.

He sent her a text response, 'ily2. Not freaking out, it's yours to show anyone you want just w/e you're comfortable with. Your dad will calm down'

A few moments later he pulled up a video of the song Wish You Were There by REO Speedwagon, and sent her the link with the words 'Miss you'

Almost the moment the door closed behind him, Cas spotted Charlie at the bar, giving off every signal she possibly could that she had no interest in the drunken man leaning in much too close to her.

"I'm sorry, this will only take a minute." he apologized to Dean, who waited, hanging back, curious.

Cas went straight for Charlie, slipping hand around her waist protectively, and pressed a kiss to the side of her head.

"There you are, honey, what took you so long?" she squeaked. "I'm sorry... flat tire." Cas shot the man a stern look as he sat down next to her, "Who's this?"

"Somebody really persistent." she answered with more than a hint of irritation.

The drunken man backed up considerably, "Woah, she didn't say she was taken."

"Is that right?" Cas asked.

The man held his hands up, palms outward, and gave a defensive shrug, "She said she was into girls, I should've known it was a joke."

"Why would she joke about that?" Cas asked with a chuckle, "She is into girls. She certainly doesn't come out here to find me."
Dean took a seat on the other side of Cas as the man wondered off in search of a new distraction. "Thanks," Charlie said, "That guy smelled like burnt popcorn... Let me get you a drink?"

"Actually, I'm on a date." Cas replied, gesturing past himself as Dean waved. "Oh, hey!... How's Ben?"

Dean nodded, pulling out his phone to show his lock screen, which was set to a photo of Ben holding Nick, "His cast is off, he had a vacation with my brother, and he got a puppy, so, he's doing great."

"Aw, they're adorable." Charlie cooed, "Well, I'll let you guys get back to it. Thanks again, Cas!"

Cas turned to face the bar as Dean was, and leaned in a bit, "She's right, he smelled like burnt popcorn."

Dean chucked, "So does that happen regularly?"

"Regularly enough." Cas admitted, "She's a good friend."

Ivan slammed the door as he got into his truck, and sped off.

He'd barely knocked his cousin over on his ass, without even hitting the guy, and only after he'd been cornered and had taken a punch or two.

Unfortunately the threat of calling in the altercation was enough to chill his blood.

Recalling something Dean had mentioned about vagrancy, and private property, he headed for the shop.

On arrival he parked in his usual spot, deciding he might as well be early for work and ask for a few extra hours in the morning, knowing he'd need it soon enough if anyone managed to get back to him with a chance to put down a deposit.

Claire noticed the headlights flash on the wall that paralleled the front door. It was far too early to expect Cas and Dean to be back already without an emergency.

She got off the couch and headed to the front door, instantly spotting Ivan's truck. "Ben, I gotta check on something, stay in the house, okay? I'll be right back."

From the couch came a distracted, giggling "Okay."

Claire went outside, crossing the small front yard, and picking her way carefully across the uneven ground.

She spotted Ivan in the back of his pickup, looking at the night sky and sipping a small bottle of Dr Pepper. "Hey." she called, "You're off the clock, you're supposed to go home."

"You're not at home."
"No, I'm babysitting. Totally normal thing for me. Meanwhile, you're about twelve hours early for your next shift."

"Right..."

Claire thought carefully, "You want some mac and cheese? I made way too much for me and Ben."

"I'm good." Ivan muttered.

"C'mon, man, that stuff doesn't reheat. Get in there and get some dinner so it's not wasted."

Reluctantly, Ivan got out of the bed of the truck and followed her to the house.

Dean took a moment to check his phone while he waited outside near the side door of the bar for Cas.

Claire had sent him a text that Ivan had come by, and planned to sleep in his truck. Dean sent back a message to give Ivan his space.

He looked up as the door opened, and Charlie came through.

"So, what do you think?" Charlie asked with a shrug, "After an hour and a half, with no 'Hey, I'm gonna be late,' she stood me up, right?"

"Yeah... Sorry." Dean replied, "But better to know she'll flake on you now than get attached and then wind up miserable later."

Charlie gave an irritated sigh of frustration as movement through the glass door caught his attention.

"Shit, burnt popcorn guy... C'mere."

Charlie looked concerned and started to turn to look, but Dean pulled her further away from the door, "Woah, where are we going?"

"Right here," Dean replied, stepping into a shadow and tugging her along, "I'll make it believable, um, tell me a joke. Any joke you got. But whisper."

Charlie was flustered even before Dean picked her up, pinning her to the wall.

"Still need to hear that joke, Charlie." Dean said, close to her neck.

"Um..." Charlie faltered nervously, "Why... why are P.C. gamers always sad?"

Dean heard the door squeak as it opened, and tugged her knee up to his hip, "Dunno, why?"

"Because they can't console each other."

Dean turned his head toward the drunken man who's glances, and downright lurid stares at Charlie had not gone unnoticed through the evening, even from the table Dean and Cas had moved to. And now he was staring at them, wide-eyed.

"She's not your type." Dean growled, "Keep walking, if you know what's good for you."

The man skittered away through the parking lot, only to reveal Cas had come through the door behind him.
"Hey, Cas... um," Charlie glanced at Dean, "No hetero... Wasn't trying to hit on your date."

Dean set Charlie down carefully as Cas gave a slight chuckle, "Of course. Calling it a night, then?"

"Yeah. No luck tonight. I'm probably going to try a different website, this one hasn't been working."

Cas nodded, glancing in the direction the man had gone, "Well, at least let us see you to your car."

After a short spate of friendly joking as the three crossed the parking lot, Charlie pulled away, and Cas and Dean continued to where they'd left the Impala.

"Y'know, the last time we were out here, I had you up against a wall." Dean chuckled, reaching for Cas.

"Yes, but since then I've had you up against a wall, so we're fairly even there... I want you to know I appreciate you helping my friend, Dean. You're a very kind person."

"Yeah, well, she helped Ben, too, so I owe her."

Dean had parked on the road outside Cas' house, and followed him inside, quietly. The house was dark, and no moves were made to turn on the lights.

"You know that wasn't... I wasn't trying to have fun back there, right? I mean it was supposed to look... uh..."

"Intense?" Cas offered, "It's Charlie, if I had to guess, she's probably a six on the Kinsey scale."

"Yeah, but I'm not... And... I want you to trust me." Dean replied with a nearly pleading tone.

Cas pulled him close as they both reached the top of the stairs, "Did you kiss her?"

Dean shook his head, "No."

"Did you touch her inappropriately?"

"Of course not."

"Why?"

"Because I'd rather do that to you. And I'm pretty sure she wouldn't have wanted that."

"Were you turned on at all?" Cas asked.

"No." Dean said softly, "It was all... fake, y'know? Forced. For show."

"That's funny." Cas replied with a hint of amusement in his voice.

Dean looked confused, "How is that funny?"

"Because it was working for me." Cas answered, pulling Dean along slowly toward his bedroom.

"But... With your friend? That's kind of-

"No, you. Seeing you more in control, that... That got me curious."

Dean chuckled, "Sweetheart, you're a few lightyears past curious."
"You top sometimes, right?" Cas asked, pressing a kiss to Dean's neck as they reached the door.

"Mm... I thought we went over preferences already."

"Very curious." Cas mumbled against his skin.

Dean kept his arms tight around Cas as he opened the door, backing Cas into the room, shifting to kiss him deeply and forcefully, "I should have guessed it would come up."

"That what would come up?" Cas asked, "I mean, aside from the obvious."

Dean quickly started peeling Cas' clothes off, still backing him toward the bed, "Well, you thought I was a top when this started, and you were still up for a date."

Cas gasped as Dean grabbed him, putting him onto the bed roughly, dragging his shirt off and landing on Cas' bare chest a moment later. Dean dropped his mouth to Cas' collar bone, giving a quick nibble followed by a hard suck. Cas groaned, and bucked against him.

Dean could feel how hard Cas had gotten in the short time they'd been in the room, and found it encouraging as he moved to work his belt open. He was vaguely aware that Cas was kicking his shoes off somewhere behind him to speed the process. He had been about to tear Cas' slacks from his legs, but instead, pulled away.

"Too fast." Dean muttered.

Cas rolled up onto an elbow, reaching for his bare chest, his breathing heavy, "Sorry... if this isn't what you want right now, then-"

Dean cut him off with a firm kiss, "Not stopping, just slowing down."

Cas nodded in response as Dean pushed him back down onto the bed, and kissed him once more, tangling his fingers in Cas' hair, nudging his legs open with a knee to settle between them slowly, pleased with Cas' reaction to the gentle pressure.

Cas dragged his fingertips up and down Dean's ribs as Dean moved his soft lips to Cas' neck, prompting him to wrap his arms further around Dean, exploring the muscles of his back, seeking out the curves and dips, and sensitive places.

Dean raised his head, his lips wet and parted, "Tell me how you want this go, Cas. I gotta know what you need."

"Rough to start, but still slow... I want to know what you're capable of."

"And later on?" Dean asked before dipping his head down to Cas' chest, sucking some of his skin up between his teeth, and biting down with a light pressure before soothing the bruise with a quick slather of his tongue.

Cas squirmed beneath him, his voice straining to hold back a growl that hinted at an escape, "Softer later, maybe... We can take our time getting there, figure it out then."

Dean ran his hands over Cas' firmly clenched abs as he took hold of Cas' nipple ring with his teeth and gave a small tug.

Cas dug his fingers into Dean's shoulder, catching the back of his neck with the other hand, pressing him down onto it, encouraging him to continue with a hushed whimper.
Dean opened his mouth and ran his tongue over it thickly, making Cas shiver.

Cas' hands were going for his jeans, and Dean shifted enough to let him get them open, but then stepped away to stand next to the bed. His jeans clung to his narrow hips and a hint of sweat graced his skin.

Cas started to get up, but he hadn't gotten far when Dean quickly dragged his slacks off of him, and removed his socks and boxers, looking over every inch of his body, "You're really fucking hot, Cas."

"I can tell you mean that." Cas answered, giving one side of his open zipper a tug, "If you'll come a little closer, I can make it more obvious."

Dean stepped closer, putting one knee on the edge of the bed as Cas shifted his jeans and the waist of his boxers to sit lower, pulling him out gently, already half hard and progressing further. He dropped his hand to run it up the back of Dean's thigh, feeling the seams of the denim. "Did you know you have a Bruce Springsteen thing going for you?" Cas asked, taking a firm hold of Dean’s thigh and pulling his leg across his chest to straddle him, taking Dean into his mouth.

"Didn't realize the blue jeans were doing it for you." Dean breathed, picking up Cas' motion, as Cas' hand moved to a hard grip on Dean's ass, "That's good... Cas, that's... oh, damn..."

Dean gave him a bit longer before he pulled his head away, moving it back by his hair, "That's enough for right now, I got more I wanna do... move over."

Cas backed up a bit, and Dean sat down, taking his boots off in record time, standing up again to shuck off the rest of his clothing. Cas started to reach past him, but Dean stopped him. He opened the small cabinet in the bottom of Cas' nightstand himself, and retrieved a flip-top bottle and a soft towel, setting them on top of the nightstand, and getting back on to the bed.

He was all over Cas in a heartbeat, kissing deeply, tugging at his limbs to put him exactly where he wanted him, letting his hands and his mouth roam, listening closely for each little involuntary sound that escaped Cas' lips every time he accidentally bumped into the one area of Cas' body he was purposefully neglecting.

Dean stumbled slightly as Cas wrapped a heavy arm around him, pulling him down to claim his mouth in a desperate, greedy, begging kiss.

Dean set his hands on Cas' chest and pushed himself up, hard, pushing Cas down into the bed as he went, snatching the bottle from the nightstand, "Don't get impatient."

"I'm trying, I swear." Cas replied shakily.

Dean ran a hand up the inside of Cas' thigh with a delicate, slow graze, reaching the crease of his thigh, and veering off, making Cas breathe harder.

"Dean, please!" Cas fussed, shifting on instinct, trying for contact.

"You're dying for it right now, aren't you?"

"You win." Cas answered, "What do want from me?"
Dean flipped open the top of the bottle with a smirk, "Not a damn thing, I just want to keep going like this."

He dripped a small amount of lube onto his fingers, just out of Cas' sight, and came back up to his face.

"Dean?"

"You ready to take this further?"

There was something in Dean's expression that told him Dean was still teasing, "Yes."

Dean kissed him roughly, as he began to slip his fingers across Cas' scrotum with the lightest touch he could manage. Cas shook and gave a small whimper of a moan as Dean continued his motions, swirling gently across the soft skin, but brought his mouth down to Cas' ear, "Don't think I didn't notice you got the flavored kind."

Cas gasped as Dean moved lower rather abruptly, setting his nerves on edge. Suddenly a textured, wet heat replaced Dean's fingers, making Cas writhe and moan as he tongued the delicate flesh.

Panting, Cas hardly noticed until he opened his eyes that Dean was above him once more.

He could feel his fingers again, gently passing in soft, slippery circles around and across his entrance. Dean was watching his eyes.

"Go ahead." Cas answered the silent question.

"Deep breaths." Dean said softly.

Cas took several deep, slow breaths, willing his body to relax as Dean's touches became firmer.

Finally Dean pressed one finger inside, feeling Cas grip his shoulder firmly, he leaned down to kiss him again, and found his mouth stifling a moan. Carefully, he slid his finger though the tight muscles, getting Cas' body used to the movement, relaxing him, creating an expectation.

Cas nodded as he felt another finger on the edge of the opening, and continued to breathe deeply, but lost for words.

Dean pressed inside again, feeling him tighten reflexively and waited for it to stop.

He shifted his hand, searching for the best angle, when suddenly Cas gave a feral growl.

"I think I found it." Dean said with a quiet smirk.

"Find it again!" Cas' words came out strained and desperate.

Dean gave Cas a gentle pressure, rocking back and forth over the sweet spot he'd found, and listened carefully to the broken words in Cas' shuddering moans before he slid down his body, taking Cas into his mouth.

Cas grasped the blanket beneath him as his body took on a life of it's own, his every nerve in a state of electric fire. Dean’s free arm hooked under Cas' knee, coming to rest on his pubic bone to keep him from thrusting too hard as he moaned deeply.

"Dean..! mnHarder!" his vocalizations were roughened with pleasure and lust, and steadily grew louder.
Dean felt him loosen further and slipped a third finger inside.

If Dean were to attempt to pinpoint the moment Cas seemed to lose his mind that evening - which he did in fact attempt later in the effort of repeating the effect - it was when he spread two of his fingers apart and attempted a gentle squeeze of the nerves deep within Cas' body.

Suddenly the growling and moaning, the gasps and whimpers were replaced with a shaken pleading, "Don't! Dean, please! Not yet! I need it!"

At the sound of the word 'don't,' Dean had withdrawn completely, as gently as he could manage, "What's the matter, baby?"

"Please...!" Cas panted roughly, "Dean, you had me so close, I need it! I you inside me!"

"Okay, hang on." Dean tried to give him a comforting pat on the thigh as he reached for the lube that had rolled off the bed.

"Now!" Cas demanded.

"No. Lube first, all of it if you have to, you know that."

"Dean!" Cas whimpered.

Dean slathered plenty over himself, and muttered, "Goddamn, Cas... I fucked you silly, and we haven't even gotten to that point yet."

Cas lifted his head, the sweat on his face obvious, and swept his gaze over Dean's body hovering between his legs. The sight of him made him twitch hard enough to give a whimper.

Dean looked up at Cas' face and shifted his body into position, stretching out over the top of him. One at a time he brought Cas' knees up, guiding Cas to take hold of them before aligning himself, and giving a firm press, barely breaching the opening.

Cas tilted his head back, his mouth fell open, and his chest heaved with quiet gasping. It took him a moment to gather his words. Dean took advantage of his opened mouth, and kissed him on the lower lip and teeth, darting his tongue out to stroke over the tip of Cas' tongue.

"More... Dean, please, I need it..."

"Shhh... look at me...Cas, look at me..."

Cas gathered his wits and found Dean’s eyes before Dean pressed in deeper. It didn't take much effort for either of them, and despite Dean's intent to move slowly, he was soon seated as deeply as he could go.

"Kiss me." Cas whispered.

Dean complied immediately, the small movement enough to start them both moving at a slow pace.

Cas was certainly enjoying himself, but not to the degree of intensity Dean was aiming for. He slowly picked up speed, adjusting his angle, as Cas' reaction became one of enraptured bliss and complete insanity.

Dean pushed into him over and over as Cas pleaded with a fading voice and mangled words, a few of which were actually coherent.
Lost in his motions, the tight, wet warmth of his lover's flesh, Dean had barely realized he wouldn't be able to go much longer when Cas suddenly wrapped around him with a pleasured near-scream.

Dean lost his rhythm and halfway in, mid-thrust, stopping as his body released, dropping his head against Cas' chest as he shook hard.

Cas was still groaning as he grasped at the back of Dean's head and shoulders.

Finding himself still conscious after a moment, Dean pressed a soft kiss to Cas' chest as they both tried to catch their breath.

"Hey... Breathe..." Dean said softly, pushing himself up onto his arms. He felt Cas relax, and slipped out of his body, feeling Cas tremble for a moment.

Dean ran a firm hand through Cas' hair, now drenched with sweat, and gave him a soft kiss before he moved away.

He reached for the towel on the nightstand and carefully set about cleaning up the mess they'd made. Cas seemed to still be somewhere between a state of shock and waking up from a good dream.

Cas edged over to the side of the bed toward the window, reaching clumsily for the drawer of the other nightstand, "I need a cigarette."

"I didn't think you smoked." Dean said softly.

"Only when it's that good." Cas replied, chuckling.

He'd barely managed to get an ashtray, lighter, and unopened pack into his hand before his boneless frame slid off the bed and landed in a sweaty heap of giddy laughter on the floor.

"Oh, baby... I really did fuck you silly, huh?" Dean asked, getting up from the bed. He moved to stand in front of Cas, who was clearly still coming down, and heaved him to his feet, "Where were you trying to get to with those?"

Cas gestured to the low bench under the window, and Dean kept him upright as he got there, setting him down gently, and opening the window to the warm summer night.

The moonlight coming in was brighter than what his eyes had become accustomed to, and he looked down at the objects Cas fumbled with on the sill. He sat down on the bench next to Cas, and took the plastic off the box for him.

"That's the cleanest looking ashtray I've ever seen... How often is it that good?"

Cas considered the question carefully, and seemed to be counting in his head, "Um.... five... I guess."

"Five years?"

"No, that's probably the fifth time it's... More like seven years." Cas replied, lighting up, and pulling his foot up next to Dean's hip. He leaned heavily on the windowsill.

Dean ran a hand along Cas' thigh to his raised knee as Cas gave a comfortable hum that was nearly a purr, "So how old are those?"

Cas chuckled, "Not very... I picked them up after you brought me flowers."

"You were hopeful." Dean said with a soft laugh.
"I was right." Cas replied, breaking down into a silent giggle.

Dean sat quietly, listening to the wind stir the leaves in the trees for several minutes before giving Cas' calf a squeeze and going back to the bed, stripping the blanket away, "This is going to need washed."

Cas shrugged, "It's too hot for a blanket anyway."

Putting out the tiny bit he had left in the ashtray, Cas started to stand. He wound up leaning heavily on the windowsill as Dean came closer, and pulled him into an embrace.
"Take it, he's not gonna care." Claire insisted.

Ivan's face was a visual grumble, but he accepted the pillow and blanket Claire passed him from the cabinet below the stairs.

"When's he getting back?"

"No idea. But if I wasn't pissed at my dad, I'd head home so you could take the couch, so, sorry."

"What happened with your dad?"

Claire shrugged, "He said the same shit about me that you say. Except I expect better from him."

"He called you a slut?"

"You need to go." Claire gestured to the door.

"Hang on, why?"

"None of your business."

"I can come up with a few fake reasons."

"You do that." Claire replied, opening the front door wide, and pointing to the interior door in the wall just to the right of it, "I'll leave it unlocked, in case you need the bathroom. Don't wake me up, though, I get cranky."

"Right... Thanks." Ivan replied, and stepped through.

Dean settled in under the sheet next to Cas, both barely dry from their much-needed shower. Cas seemed to have regained his senses, even if he was now far more relaxed.
"You said something, earlier..." Dean said quietly, almost a whisper.

"I said enough to mess up my voice. You'll need to be more specific." Cas answered grittily, rolling onto his side, putting an arm across Dean's chest.

Dean chuckled, "You know what you said... I just... I wasn't sure if that was you talking, or if it was just the sex."

Cas stiffened slightly, "Dean..."

"I'm okay with it, either way. I care about you, but if this is too soon for you, I get it, just-"

"It... was me talking." Cas confessed.

"I'm in love with you, too." Dean whispered.

Cas kissed him, and pulled him close, as they both wrapped around each other, deeply content.

"If you're going to sleep, we should set an alarm." Cas muttered.

Dean shook his head, "What's the point?... Claire was pretty clear she was staying over, regardless."

"Well, if you're ready for more questions from Ben..."

"He'll ignore it, or he'll ask anyway... But he'll probably ignore it." Dean replied, "Just something to get used to."

"How did he take it when you told him you weren't seeing a woman?"

"Well, first he asked if I meant I was gay, and then he asked what if you didn't like him. I said it was you, so that went right out the window."

"So he's comfortable with it, that's good."

"No," Dean laughed, "He's comfortable with you. He said it's gross, but if I was seeing a woman, that would be gross too, so, yeah. Best you're gonna get, but probably with a healthy dose of denial."

Cas shifted to get an arm under Dean's back, and pressed his cheek against Dean's shoulder.

"So, you want to tell me your side with this whole thing with Claire?"

"What did she tell you?"

"Um... I don't know if I want to repeat what she said, but the gist was you accusing her of something you don't find wrong, exactly, but that she does, and wouldn't do in the first place."

Cas shrugged, "...I worry."

"You're supposed to, she's your baby. But Kevin? No. Those two, you put them in the same room without Alfie and Margaret and it's like puberty never happened."

"You think straight people of opposite genders of the same age can have a friendship that close without sexual tension?"

"I would hope so, otherwise, that would mean I'm into everybody... And since I'm not, then I guess, yeah... I've had a bunch of friends I wasn't into like that... And they both have people they're seeing,
so, that probably helps with the tension side of things..." Dean grimaced, "And I think we need a new subject or I'm gonna need some clothes, because I can't just lay here naked talking about your daughter's personal life."

Cas gripped his ribs, "Stay here... talk about anything else, but, that was helpful."

"So, The Boss..."

"I had a poster... Spent a lot of time with it..."

Dean chuckled, "Red ball cap in the back pocket?"

Cas grinned, "It's a good album."

"Right. That's why you were tracing my back pocket earlier..."

Cas looked away sheepishly until Dean kissed him, dragging Cas' hand down to his ass, and squirming as Cas grabbed a handful.

Alfie shouldered his backpack, closed his locker, and headed to the secondary parking lot, as he had several months before.

Bobby's face was still etched in his mind, the grief fresh, not that many of the other students even knew who the guy was. Kevin had been close by for a few days, but he was starting to ease off.

As he passed the back edge of one of the portable buildings, mainly used for storage, he could hear voices.

A white goose passed by him as he went around the corner, walking by a sight very similar to one he'd attempted to ignore the first time. One that had weighed heavily on him ever since.

Ivan, not Will, had Claire backed up to the wall, avoiding his eyes. Unlike the first time, Alfie stopped. He knew what was coming, he had heard it before, and he nearly mouthed the words as they left Ivan's lips.

"Just like every other lying tramp, I'm gonna keep you around until you make it clear for the whole world to see you for the bullshit cunt you are, and then I'm gonna drop you like somebody else's used rubber, and move on to the next bitch... You're not special, Claire."

Alfie was shaking where he stood as the words ate away at him for the millionth time. He dropped his backpack as he stepped forward, his jaw set, but suddenly Kevin shouldered Ivan out of the way, kissing Claire deeply and pulling her body tight against his own.

"Oh, what the fuck is this? Kevin?" Ivan asked loudly, stepping back as the two of them landed nearly on Ivan's shoes, as Kevin slipped a hand up Claire's shirt, nibbling her earlobe.

Alfie got closer, spotting a few more geese where Jim and Chaz had been chuckling, but were now only staring as Claire dragged Kevin's hands from her body and peeled away her shirt. She had rolled them both over and straddled his lap, pulling him upright again for another kiss as he slipped her bra straps off her shoulders.

"Okay, I'm out. This just got to be too much. Keep her." Ivan said, walking away.

"Kev, c'mon, knock it off." Alfie said, stepping closer, trying to take Claire's hand to help her up from the ground.
Claire looked up at him with a look that scared him. She had no idea who he was.

Kevin was sliding his hands up her thighs, which got her attention and caused her to pin his hands above his head.

"Sorry, man, you took too long." Kevin mumbled, "Don't worry, though, it's me."

Alfie woke up before he could make his objections, a shaking mess.

He got out of the bed, passing the television which was running a nature show involving the oddly appearing geese, setting his mind at ease on only one front, and went to wash his face in an attempt to clear his head.

Alfie came back into the room and turned off the television, sitting down on the floor with his back to the foot of the bed. The dream still bothered him. The words were echoing in his mind, sometimes in Will's voice, sometimes in Ivan's, and worst of all, his own.

He stood up and found his phone, figuring it was late enough in the morning to send a text.

'You're special to me, Claire. Wanted you to know'

He turned off the screen and tossed the phone on the bed, finding only slight relief. He made a note to speak to her about it when he saw her again, and prayed he wouldn't chicken out.

Dr Thompson had barely sat down when a simple look at the faces of the two Novaks before him made it perfectly clear that something was wrong.

"So... since our last appointment..." he started.

"He called me a tramp."

"Claire-"

"You basically did. And I told you what was really going on, and you wouldn't listen."

"So you're going to hide out at Dean's house rather than actually discuss it?"

"Not like he was there, he was our house."

"What does that have to do with this?"

"Wait," Dr Thompson interjected, "What happened?"

"She had a boy in her room-"

"Yeah, with the door open and clothes on, and suddenly-"

"-he's a close friend of her boyfriend-"

"-I'm the world's biggest slut, because-"

"-they regularly hang out as a group-"

"-clearly that means I'm screwing the whole neighborhood."

"-and it's turned into this."
Dr Thompson held his hands up, palms outward to slow them both down, "Okay, hold on, hold on... Cas, I really need you to stay quiet for a few minutes, okay?... Claire... Are you okay right now?"

"No, my head just fell off." she replied sarcastically.

"Claire, are you okay to talk about this with your father in the room, or do we need him to wait outside?" Dr Thompson asked slowly.

"I'm fine. He's fine, if he'll actually listen."

"Okay... Cas?"

Cas nodded in response.

"Right... This is a friend of your boyfriend?"

"He's my friend, too. He set us up for prom. He actually told me to dump the last guy for being a jerk, and said I should date Alfie."

"Okay, and did he hurt you, or pressure you to do anything that you didn't want to do? Even something small, something that might not have seemed like a big deal?"

"No, he wouldn't do that... I was having a really bad day, I felt awful, and Alfie's in Dallas, so he asked Kevin to come check on me. I haven't been sleeping much, and we took a nap."

"And you told your father this?"

Claire nodded, "The door was open, and nothing happened."

"To be fair," Cas said quietly, "She didn't tell me she hasn't been sleeping well."

"Okay." Dr Thompson nodded at Cas, and turned back to Claire, "Did it help? Did you get some rest?"

"Yeah. It was only a couple of hours, but it helped."

"Okay... Now, of course, your dad has been around, he has a good idea how the world works, he's supposed to keep you safe, sometimes that leads to seeing a threat where there isn't one, especially with your history taken into account. But at the same time, he's dad, he makes the rules, and so far he's seemed pretty reasonable about it. So, unless there's more to address, I want to hear from him how he handled it."

Claire shrugged and stared off into space.

Cas shifted in his seat with a shake of his head to Dr Thompson, and addressed Claire instead, "I was not trying to call you that. I'm sorry that's how it seemed... I wasn't home when he got there, all I know was you were asleep on your bed, and there was a boy with you, who, as far as I know, you're not even seeing. All I was trying to get across is that I don't think you're at a point in your life where it would be healthy for you to attempt a relationship with multiple partners."

Claire continued her attempt to ignore him, but wore a look of disgust.

"Multiple partners?" Dr Thompson choked out.

Cas straightened in his chair, "I understand it's an arrangement that works for some, but I think at her age, she should focus on her own wellbeing, and learning healthy boundaries."
"Why the fuck would you even bring that up?" Claire asked, "Is it really that hard for you to understand he's just a friend?"

"Claire-"

"No! I don't want to hear any more of this crap! That's not what's going on!"

"Cas," Dr Thompson said, "Do you see how Claire would be upset by this?"

"I suppose so."

"Why do you think that is?"

"Tell him the rest, dad, because there was more to it." Claire said firmly.

"Well... I worry that, with the way her mother raised her, she may not have as firm a grasp on more complex morality as she should."

"Right from wrong?" Dr Thompson asked.

"Yes."

"Lying, cheating, stealing? Does she do that sort of thing?"

Cas started to open his mouth but faltered.

"Cas, would your daughter do well in politics, as a senator or perhaps in congress?"

Cas chuckled, and shook his head, "I see your point."

"And she's obviously less than comfortable with the idea that you think she might be involved with someone other than her boyfriend, in fact she's insulted by it... And Claire, didn't you say your co-worker was making comments along the same line?"

"Yeah... He, um... he asked my boyfriend how many blow jobs you have to do to get a promotion, right after I made manager."

Dr Thompson gave a small cringe, "So you're being harassed about this at work, and now you hear this from your dad, at home, how does that make you feel?"

"Like shit."

"Cas?... Has this made Claire's mindset any clearer for you?"

"I think so, yes." Cas replied with a nod.

"Well, thank goodness for that." Dr Thompson said, relieved. "So, anything else to say about this?"

"Claire... I'm sorry. I misread the situation, and, yes, I didn't completely believe you when you explained it. I would have no objection to you dating Kevin, if that were happening, I would just hope you'd be honest and upfront with Alfie about it, and that he'd do the same with his current girlfriend."

Claire slowly put her hands to her face, "For the last time, I'm not cheating, and we're not swingers."

"I don't mean to imply that you are, but I am trying to make it clear that I wouldn't judge you for that."
I would want you to have a clear idea of what a healthy relationship is, first. That's all.

Wordlessly, Claire looked to Dr Thompson, and gestured to her father.

Dr Thompson was shaking his head, "Cas, it seems like, and Claire, feel free to correct me, she's trying to say that, to whatever degree of a relationship she has with the guy she's been seeing, they're monogamous about it."

"Yeah, that..." Claire gestured to Dr Thompson, ". Just seeing the one guy."

"And, if I'm reading this right," Dr Thompson continued carefully, "That's what you would prefer for her at this early stage of her life, is that right?"

"In short, yes."

"Okay..." Dr Thompson said slowly, "I'm almost scared to ask, but what else is going on?"

Claire pulled her phone out of her pocket as she unlocked the Chevelle, and sprawled comfortably in the driver's seat as she sat down, the door open wide, one foot still on the ground as she checked her messages.

She was aware of Cas approaching her car, but didn't look up. He put a hand on the top corner of the door as he stopped to speak to her, "I never meant to upset you."

"Yeah, but you did."

"I'm very sorry... And you're being harassed at work?"

"I was. He's calming down now."

Cas nodded, "You should tell Dean."

"Leave your boyfriend out of it, I can handle this."

Cas ducked his head slightly, "Are you going to be home for dinner?"

"Maybe not. Margaret's having a rough time, and Kevin asked me to stop by... And, no, I'm not sleeping with her, either."

"I understand you're in a bad mood."

"You really don't."

Cas shifted in place as Claire typed a text. "You can tell me anything, I've said that, right?"

"Sure you have. But how can I believe you'll trust me?"

Cas nodded, "I'll work on that."

Claire settled her phone down, "The part I don't get, and this is really confusing, is you seem like on one hand, you're saying it's none of your business, sleeping with someone isn't the worst thing I could be doing, and I could be doing that with whoever I want, and on the flip side, I can't take a nap with a friend without you freaking out... Pick a side, already."

"This isn't an easy subject."
"It is. Either you trust me to make my own choices or you don't."

"Nothing in life is that black and white, dear." Cas said firmly, "Now, what about your sleep? That's important."

Claire shrugged, "I have no idea how to fix that."

Behind a second floor window, Dr Thompson watched as Claire got out of the Chevelle and hugged Cas before getting back in and driving away.

He shook his head and pulled his ulcer medication from his pocket.

"So he's there by himself?" Claire asked.

"Yeah. But, he's a big boy, he can handle it." Kevin replied.

Margaret shifted where she leaned back against him, as the three of them were chilling out on the living room floor in more or less of a heap, "You don't have to stay here for me, you know."

"Yeah, actually, it's a requirement. Otherwise they kick me out of the non-asshole-boyfriend-club... And anyway, he's got Naomi, not much, but still something."

"He hates Naomi." Claire replied.

"He doesn't hate her, he doesn't hate anybody in his family. He just wishes they'd quit treating him like crap." Kevin clarified.

"Yeah, well..." Margaret muttered half-heartedly.

Kevin gave her a tight squeeze, "Chill."

"I could run up there... I know my car would make the trip just fine." Claire mused.

Kevin raised an eyebrow, "What would your dad say?"

Claire shrugged, "Why would I tell him?"

"Don't do that, Claire. Don't screw up with your dad over this. I mean, I'll talk to him if you want me to, but some shit never goes back to how it was, and a road trip like that, without telling him?"

Claire shrugged.

Steps sounded on the front porch and Kevin jolted as Margaret suddenly stuck her hand up the back of his shirt at an angle that was obvious from the front door.

Mrs Danes came through with a bag, closely followed Mr Danes, who looked less than thrilled with his daughter's hand placement.

"Hi daddy. You're back early."

"Yeah, well, she's not exactly the most pleasant person to spend time with." Mr Danes replied.

"...You noticed?" Margaret asked, acid in her usually sweet voice.

"She's old, Margaret. Somebody has to take care of her, and my sister has her own problems... Now, quit feeling up your boyfriend and help unload the car."
It was late at night when he got Claire's text, and called her immediately.

"Hey... How's the gallery thing looking?"

"It's good, I've got all my stuff set up how it's supposed to look. The big party is tomorrow night."

"Kevin said he might not make it for this one. Are you doing okay?"

Alfie settled the phone against his shoulder and tried to continue his sketch, "Yeah... Yeah, don't worry about me... Mostly I'm just hanging out away from Naomi... I really got on her case the other day, and basically it boiled down to, she's going to help me with the career side of things, but she's going to butt out of the rest of my life."

Claire went silent for a moment, "Sorry, that sounds awful."

"Yeah, well, she's a bitch, so, not somebody who I'd want to spend time with... Not someone who'd want to spend time with me, either."

"I was thinking, I have my own car, I could come out there, go to the gallery with you." Claire said softly.

Alfie's smile spread across his face at the idea, "I would love that, but would your dad be okay with it?"

Claire gave a groan, "You're going to tell me the same thing Kevin said..."

"Yeah, don't."

"Next time I'm not going to say anything, I'm just going to show up at your hotel."

Alfie smirked, "Eventually, I really would like to take you to one of these."

"What do people wear to that kind of thing?"

"Uh... somewhere between nightclub and business wear."

Claire chuckled, "What if I show up in my coveralls?"

Alfie laughed but didn't answer.

"You think that'd be funny? If I showed up at your hotel in my coveralls?"

"Well, my hotel room isn't a gallery, you could wear whatever you want here."

"Yeah? Why? What are you wearing right now?" Claire asked with a smirk. She could hear him chuckling on the other end of the line.

"Um... A feather boa."

Claire laughed, "Liar."

"I'd send you a picture, but my camera lens broke in a mysterious sky-snorkeling accident."

"Okay, so, what besides the boa?"

Alfie glanced down at himself, "Uh..."
"Nice." Claire replied quickly, making him crack up again, "I really am thinking about coming out there."

"I know."

"If only to tell you to put some pants on."

"Oh. Well, I'll do that now. But, it's not that I don't want you here, just, if you ran off like that, I'm pretty sure your dad and Dean would hunt me down, so... Stay put?... I'll be back in a couple days."
Late Sunday evening, Alfie opened the door, confused. Kevin would have walked right in.

Claire was standing on the porch holding a large box, "I got a helmet. For, well, eventually."

Alfie smiled softly, "That's great. I'm looking forward to eventually."

Claire gestured the clothing he was still wearing, having removed his shirt once he'd gotten home, "Is that what you wore to the gallery?"

Alfie smirked, "Well... More than just this."

Claire tried hard not to be obvious, but Alfie was wearing the black jeans again, and with his slender frame and mussed hair, he better resembled a male model rather than a goofy boy from the local small town car repair place.

Alfie swung the door open wider, beckoning her inside.

Claire followed him into the living room, trying not to stare at the large scars on his back, and wondering about how far the larger one continued past his waistband. She still hadn't seen much of the back of him.

"Did you get someone to make sure it's your size?" he asked softly.

Claire set the box down on the coffee table, "Yeah, one of the sales folks did that for me."

"I still think we should start small, let me drive your car sometime." he said, sitting down.

"Why? Are you finally going to show me how...?"

"Not a chance." he laughed.

Claire climbed onto his lap and kissed him firmly.

"You missed me."

Claire nodded.
"That, um... Kind of hurts my wrist."

She looked down to find she'd pulled his hand away from her waist without realizing it, and was digging her fingers in over his tendons.

Surprised at herself, she let go, a guilty feeling washing over her as she noticed the reddish marks her fingers left on his creamy skin.

Alfie carefully sat up, putting his hands flat on her back, and kissed her softly, taking his time, and slowly moving to her neck. He brought one hand up to tangle in her hair, and still moving slowly, tried to get them both laying down on the couch with her below him.

In a moment of panic as her back came down, Claire whimpered and thrashed, shoving him away, causing a sharp pull from strands that hadn't come free of his fingers, making her yelp in pain.

Claire clutched at the back of her scalp as angry tears tried to surface, and she fought hard against the urge to kick him away and run.

"... Claire?"

She looked up, finding him resting his chin on her raised knee.

"I don't want to push, but... can you tell me about what happened to you?"

Claire didn't answer, instead sitting up, well away from him, grimly shaking her head.

Alfie leaned back into the couch, looking at the box on the coffee table, anything to keep his eyes focused somewhere else to give her some semblance of space.

"I get it, y'know, if you can't talk about it, it's just that... I'm really scared I'm going to do something that's going to hurt you or scare you... And I don't feel like you can really be safe from that if I don't know what all happened." Alfie slowly turned his head to look at her as she kept silent, and tried to measure her mood, "I mean... I guess after that, nothing's going to happen, but... I don't know what you need right now."

Claire bumped the back of her hand against his, prompting him to take hold of it. Alfie lifted the back of her hand to his lips, kissing it softly before resting it against his bare chest.

Slowly, Claire seemed to come out of her almost shock like state, scooting a bit closer to put her head down on his shoulder.

Gathered around the table in the Winchester's kitchen, Cas helped Ben with a second serving of meatloaf as Dean and Ivan continued to talk shop.

"Thanks, Mr Novak."

"I think at this point, apart from school, just 'Cas' would be appropriate." Cas replied.

Ben nodded in acceptance as he began to plow into his second round of food, "This is awesome. Dad tries to make meatloaf, but he always tries to make it like mom did, and it never... um..."

"What?" Cas asked with genuine interest.

Ben looked away, clearly unsure of himself, "Sorry... I don't know if it's okay to talk about her with you."
Dean dropped his conversation with Ivan mid sentence, alarmed.

"Why wouldn't that be okay?" Cas asked gently.

Ben shrugged shyly, "Because you're dating my dad... and they used to be married."

"Ben," Cas said softly, "I was about your age when both of my parents passed, I could never ask you not to talk about your mother. I know from experience how hard it can be to loose your mom before you're grown up. And as for your father, I'm very glad he had your mother in his life, because that was several happy years for him. I wouldn't want him to have been lonely and miserable the whole time before we met, because I care about him. So don't worry about talking about your mother. And from what I've heard, she was a wonderful person."

Dean breathed easier and shot Cas a grateful look as Ben continued into his diatribe as to why Dean's meatloaf sucked, and resumed his dropped conversation with Ivan.

Claire looked at the side of the bottle she'd opened, as Alfie came back into the room.

"This stuff is really tangy."

Alfie paused on his way back to the couch, "You know that's a wine-cooler, right?"

Claire looked up at him quizzically, "You're kidding, right?"

"No... Sorry, when I said just grab whatever, I didn't know there were any left in there."

Claire shrugged, "It was way in the back."

Alfie sat down next to her, and she took one more experimental drink from the small bottle she'd found, "You're really not used to it, might want to slow down."

"My face feels warm."

"Um..." Alfie attempted to reply regarding the alcohol, but instead changed the subject, "How are you feeling apart from that?"

Claire set the nearly empty bottle on the coffee table and wrapped her arms around his bare shoulders, resting her head again, "Better... like it's easier not to care now."

"Yeah, that's kind of a side effect... Did you know that had booze in it?"

"Not until you told me a minute ago."

"Um... Okay."

Claire lifted her head, bumping against his ear as she did, "Do you still want to know?"

"Maybe now's not the best time. Maybe we should talk about it when you didn't just shove me off of you?" Alfie suggested.

Claire gave him a quick peck on the cheek, "I'd show you, but I don't want to hurt you."

"You'd show me?"

Claire answered with a hum and a nod against his shoulder.
"Okay, I don't think you'll hurt me. If you want to show me, that's fine. If it's too much, just stop and we'll watch a movie or something." Alfie said quietly, "But clothes stay on, because... I don't know how you're gonna be with..."

Alfie gestured to the nearly empty bottle in front of them as Claire got up from the couch. Despite being used to harder drinks and straight liquor, he was still very aware that she was not.

He got up and followed her as she went to his bedroom doorway, stepping inside and waiting for him.

Claire set one hand on his upper arm and another on his back, guiding him gently to stand in an open area of the floor, and stepped behind him.

She wrapped an arm around the bottom of his ribs snuggly, and with the other hand, took a firm grasp in his hair, just above the back of his neck.

Alfie felt a mixture of dread and anticipation as it dawned on him that he was about to learn something he wished he never had cause to know. It was going to hurt. Perhaps not physically, but it was going to hurt.

Claire tipped his head back, gently, though he rightfully assumed her own experience had been far more painful, even at this early point. She walked him forcefully to the side of the bed as his instinct to struggle kicked in and was quickly shoved to the back of his mind.

Alfie was surprised by her strength as she continued, pushing him onto the bed on his side, clearly not as hard as she was capable of, but still roughly, and grabbed the waistband of his jeans giving a hard yank down toward his legs.

Her expression seemed to go blank, and he was unsure if she was still aware of her actions, though he assumed she meant, as she let go of his jeans, that this had been the point when her clothes had been taken from her.

Alfie reached for her hand, forgetting himself, and she pinned his arm to his chest, pulling one of his legs up, as if he were sitting cross-legged, and held it in place with her ribs as she straddled the leg she'd left alone.

Keeping his arm pinned, she grabbed his lower leg, pressing it up against him as far as his hip would allow, holding it in place, and backed up a few inches, looking down.

Despite his jeans and boots, he felt naked and exposed. The stretch was causing a burning pain to build in his hip. He felt a growing fear in the back of his mind, wondering how far Claire would possibly take her actions, and if she was aware of them still, or if he would have to stop her, and what effect it would have if he did. It wasn't difficult for him to imagine the feeling of violation as he continued to remind himself of his purpose in asking her to share her experience in the first place.

"He..." Claire said barely breathed as her tears began to fall, and her voice broke, "... He spit on me... and..."

Alfie could see she’d hit her limit, and adjusted his position, straightening the leg he had between them, pulling her between his legs to lay on his chest, and rolled onto his side. He wrapped around her, trying to become another layer protecting her from the outside world.

"It's okay... You're safe right now, right here..." Alfie kissed her forehead, "I'm right here, whatever you need..."
"I'm sorry..." Claire sobbed.

Alfie shook his head, "Don't... It's not your fault."

She pressed a kiss to his lips even as the tears continued. He stroked her hair back from her face and pulled her closer.

After much protesting from Ben, bedtime was enforced, and Dean came back downstairs with a deck of cards and a set of chips, setting up on the now cleared table.

"Okay, so... Thanks," he added as Cas set a fresh beer in front of him, "Still no luck, huh?"

Cas had been tactful enough not to mention Ivan's rough appearance at dinner, and Ben hadn't noticed.

Ivan shook his head, "Honestly, I came out here trying to get away from it, but at this point, I might as well go back to Tulsa."

"I assume you do what you can to defend yourself." Cas said in a questioning manner.

Ivan tightened his mouth and gave a small shake of his head, reaching for his beer, "If I hit anybody, they're gonna call the cops, and I've got a prior, so..."

"Weed, right?" Dean asked, "Claire mentioned something about it, said you probably made it up."

"Yeah, well, I was never using it... See, one of my cousins got pulled over, and she's got a baby. You know they figure anything in the car... Well, her boyfriend left a bag in there, and... She was nursing, she couldn't go to jail."

Dean's eyebrows went up, "You took the fall for her, and this is how your family treats you?"

"This is how they've always treated me, nothing new... And I didn't do it for her, I did it for the kid."

Cas nodded, "That was certainly an honorable intention."

"Yeah, too bad they don't seem to give a shit." Ivan replied.

"I'm sorry, kid, but they won't... Best thing for you is to get out of there." Dean said, as he finished shuffling and began to deal.

"Easier said than done. I gotta have a place to go to when I go." Ivan answered, picking up his cards.

Dean shrugged, "Believe me, I've been there. Out on my ass after some time in juvie, and I wasn't old enough to sign a lease. Waiting isn't going to make it any easier."

"You know, I was really thinking with the college, there'd be more apartments opening up when summer started."

Cas shrugged, "It's a small school. They usually go for local students, and the lack of short term housing in the area reflects that."

"I know you don't want to hear it, but I really think you should ask Alfie, it's a big house, and ninety percent of the time he's the only one there." Dean said, "Just until something opens up."

"The guy's a fuckwit." Ivan replied.
"He's odd, I'll admit that," Cas said quietly, "But Claire has dated far worse. I think if you give him a chance, he's not that bad."

"Maybe you should be pickier about who you let her leave the house with." Ivan replied with a laugh.

"Well, I've known him longer than either of you, and I'll tell you, he's a good kid, he just has no direction, no drive. He seems to be coming around on that, the trips to Dallas, he's not doing that for fun. He comes back tired of dealing with people, but that's what he has to do to make it work." Dean said quietly, "But, you know, three, four months of living with a fuckwit making stupid comments is a lot better than getting your face busted in because you loaded the dishwasher wrong."

Ivan sighed and hung his head, "You know I'm gonna get all kinds of shit if I do this, right?"

"He give you any shit about the old lady's lawn?" Dean asked.

Ivan shrugged, "No, he didn't... Yeah, I guess I'll talk to him tomorrow. I might be able to put up with his bullshit for a little while."

Alfie waited until Claire was calm, stroking her hair away from her face, "Anything I can do?"

"I wanna go home." Claire whispered.

Alfie nodded, "I'll drive you, we can get your car tomorrow."

"I can drive."

"No... No, it takes about an hour per drink, it's only been half an hour, and you're not used to drinking. Also, you can't tell me this wasn't just horrible for you, so, let me drive you home." Alfie waited for her nod, and slowly let go, getting up from the bed and pulling a shirt from his dresser.

Claire didn't sit up right away, "I hung up the poster."

Alfie pulled the soft tshirt over his head and sat down next to her, "Yeah?"

She nodded, "I put it on the back of my door."

"Um... Your dad will kill me."

"He's never going to see it. And even if he did, I'd just tell him to shove it."

"I don't... I don't know if you're still drunk or if you're fucking with me."

"Could be both," Claire chuckled, and looked down, "Nope, my pants are still on."

"Keep them on. C'mon..." Alfie stood, gently pulling her to her feet, and leading her to the garage, "Why did you put it up on the back of your door?"

"I like looking at it. Kevin asked if Margaret can see it, and-" Alfie made an odd noise, "What?"

"Um... You said he wasn't a creep about it, right? What did you mean?" Alfie asked, opening the car door for her.

Claire shrugged, "He didn't act creepy about it. It's just a really beautiful picture. He said it was probably the best you've done."
"He didn't make you uncomfortable?"

Claire shook her head, "No... Is him seeing it making you uncomfortable?"

"It's more complicated than that." Alfie replied. He closed the car door gently after she had gotten in before settling behind the wheel.

Claire sank back into the seat and buckled in, too overworn to be anxious about someone else driving.

"I did say it was yours to show anybody, it's not like I'm asking you to keep it private. I... You just... you barely let me put a hand on you, and I can tell when you don't want to be looked at, and if you don't want someone to see you like that, then I'd want to keep you safe from that... That's all. If you want something to be private, I want to support that."

"What if I want to join a nudist colony? Or make porn?"

Alfie began to turn red as he turned the key, "Then do it, but if even if you did, if you don't want that picture up in a gallery, you say the word, it never sees the light of day."

Alfie turned to look at her as the garage door opened slowly, and she reached for his face, running her thumb over the small mole next to his nose, "What if I wanted it in a gallery?"

"Then the whole world would know how much I love you, but you'd also run the risk of the image being stolen and duplicated and hanging in just any old creep's house."

Claire shrugged, "I'll keep thinking about it."

On the dark front porch, Cas had pressed Dean firmly against the wall, and each was doing their best to keep their affections silent.

"Hey," Dean whispered duskily in Cas' ear, "I still gotta walk upstairs."

"Be patient, and I'll make sure you can." Cas replied against his neck.

Dean chuckled and shrugged to get him to back up, "Yeah, that's not happening on the front porch."

"I suppose I should get home. If Claire's not back by now, she's in for it."

"She's gotta start spreading her wings at some point." Dean replied, "That's life."

"I'll remind you of that when Ben starts coming home late." Cas answered with more snark than he intended.

"She's a good kid, Cas... And the wrong crowd wants nothing to do with her. You can relax a little."

Cas nodded, "You have a point."

Dean pulled him into a hug, running a hand across the back of his shoulders, "Thank you for what you said to Ben tonight."

"It's only been a year, I'm sure it's still very painful... for both of you." Cas said softly.

Dean shifted uncomfortably, "Maybe this is something we should talk about?"
"What's to discuss? You lost a spouse, that pain isn't going to disappear. Watching your child grieve, that adds to it, I'm sure. I'd hazard a guess you wore your wedding band for months after she was gone. But that grief, that residual love, that's part of who you are, and I understand."

Dean backed up with a slightly choked nod and kissed him deeply, "You're awesome."

Cas was concerned the moment he saw the Monte Carlo in Claire's spot in the driveway, and picked up his pace as he made for the front door.

Inside, Claire was curled up on the couch, with Alfie sitting next to her, her head laying on his shoulder.

"Where's your car?"

"He wouldn't let me drive." Claire replied.

Cas looked at Alfie expectantly.

"It was completely on accident, she got one of my mom's old wine-coolers from the fridge, she didn't know."

Cas nodded as the room went silent, "So you went to your boyfriend's house and there was alcohol involved. And no supervision, either?"

"It could have happened at Margaret's house on Friday, I didn't know, I though it was like a soda." Claire answered.

"If there had been an adult around, I'm sure someone would have mentioned it had alcohol in it." Cas said irately.

"I would have said something," Alfie said quietly, "But it was almost gone before I came back in the room... sorry."

"You?... She hid bourbon from you to get you to slow down, so I don't want to hear it." Cas replied, "At any rate, it's after ten, that's too late for company on a school night."

"It's summer." Claire complained.

"A work night, then." Cas answered with an eye roll.

Alfie patted Claire's knee gently, "See you tomorrow."

"Thank you for making sure she got home in one piece." Cas saw him out, shutting the door firmly, and watched through the front window until his car left.

"At least one of you is lying." Cas said quietly, "One wine-cooler isn't enough to make even a lightweight this messed up. How much did you drink?"

"I didn't even finish the bottle." Claire answered.

"You look pretty gray and queasy to me." Cas said, trying not to pace, "So if it was only the one drink, entirely on accident, and he was out of the room, what else happened?"

"He wanted to know." Claire said grimly.
"Know what?"

Claire squirmed slightly where she sat, and rubbed a low spot on the back of her head, "His hand got caught in my hair, and I freaked out, it wasn't his fault... And he said he wanted to know, so... um..."

"This is about...?"

Claire nodded, "Yeah... He's trying to learn not to set me off... Telling him everything was really hard, but, now he knows, more than you, even, and..."

Cas watched as she ran a hand over her still dry cheek. He considered her behavior, her speech, and her ashen face, then sat down next to her, gently pulling her upper body across him, carefully parting her blonde locks. The skin beneath where her hand had been was reddened.

Despite their awkward position, he wrapped his arms around Claire's shoulders. He was half surprised she didn't move or pull away.

"So he's trying not to hurt you?"

Claire nodded.

"If he ever does-"

"He knows. And he knows that goes double, because Dean."

"Good."
Ivan set the wrench down as he heard Alfie clock in and approached the hallway.

Alfie came through, not stopping to glance at the glass window of Dean's closed office door.

"Another interview?" he asked, pointing.

"Yeah." Ivan replied, "They just got started. Listen, I got a question."

"Sorry, man, I know Kevin's hot and all, but his girlfriend, Margaret, well, you know, short girls are vicious."

Ivan rolled his eyes, "No... Look, Dean says you have space, I wanted to find out if you'd rent me a room for a couple of months while I'm looking for an apartment. I'll stay out of the way of whatever freak show you guys have going on, and I probably won't call the cops as long as you leave me out of it."

Alfie sobered immediately, "Um... Sure... Yeah. When do you need it?"

Ivan shrugged, "I'm crashing on Dean's couch, so... soon?... How much do you want for rent?"

"Uh..." Alfie shrugged, "I dunno, what's normal for here?"

"Well the old ads for places I've been getting told aren't empty any more usually ask for two hundred a month."

Alfie nodded, "Yeah, okay. I'll pull up some papers off the web, just give me a couple hours after work to set it up."

Ivan gave him a skeptical look, "Why do I feel like this is some kind of prank?"

Alfie shrugged, "Because you're used to assholes?"

Ivan shook his head, "You might be right about that... You're gonna keep out of my stuff, right?"

"Yeah, don't worry about it."

"And Kevin?"

"Yeah, I'll stay out of his stuff, too." Alfie smirked.
Cas was working quietly at his desk typing a long email, when Gabe slipped through the door and dropped dramatically into one of the chairs across from him.

"Yes, Gabe?"

"It can wait."

Cas stopped typing and faced him more directly.

"You really like working here, right?... Making a difference in the world, pushing the papers that keep the school running? Making sure the little booger-brains get a decent education? ...Word has it the guy who made the call on that Timothy kid last year was you."

"That's confidential, unless a judge says otherwise." Cas replied.

"You put your fabulous ass on the line for a student more than once, probably more often than anyone knows... I can see why they want to get you out of here."

"I might be alarmed by that if I were speaking to anyone else."

"You got me." Gabe replied, "Truth be told, we are never going to get along, that's just how it is. And I really don't want to work with you anymore. We can't make a good team if we can't cooperate, and unfortunately I messed that up a long time ago. So... The new middle school... The gal they wanted is moving. They need somebody, fast. I'm their first choice, but honestly, I don't want it."

"What does this have to do with me?"

"I threw your name out there, and told them I'd think about it... Kids, the little ones, I can deal with. They're fun, they have no filter, and they usually don't want to be a jerk. Assholes, which is pretty much every middle school kid ever, nooo thank you."

"Too much competition?" Cas asked sarcastically.

"Heh... I'm inclined to stay put. I like it here. There's more that needs whipped into shape, and if I turn them down, they'll be looking at you."

"And if you don't?"

"You get my office." Gabe said with a jerk of his thumb toward the wall in the direction of his office, "Either way, it's a promotion, and you've damn sure earned it."

Cas took a moment to gather his thoughts, "Why are you coming to me with this? Why not turn them down and let the district approach me on their own?"

Gabe shrugged, "Profesional courtesy?"

"I'm not sure you're capable of either."

Gabe laughed hard, "Got that right. So, two positions on the table, I'm giving you the chance to choose. What's it going to be?"

"Turn them down... I'll go to the middle school." Cas said quietly.

"Hold on... is it just because I don't want it?"
Cas let out a long suffering sigh, "Partially... If you don't want to be there, you certainly won't give it your all. But this also allows me the chance to put down a strong foundation in the new facility, and make sure the school gets off on the right foot. Too often, we do things the way we've always done them because that's how we've always done them, and that model of education is why Gail tells her students to decide for themselves about Pluto."

"You're into this." Gabe said, surprised, "You don't just want to do a good job, this is a big deal to you. You want to get in there and structure this thing from the start."

Cas nodded, almost embarrassed, "Yes."

Gabe spread his hands, incredulous, "So show a little enthusiasm, c'mon! What the hell are you doing? A brand new school, step in there and shake up the whole damn district and show them how it's done! How are you not freaking out right now?"

With a laugh, Cas grinned, "You're right... But, I'll celebrate after I get the official offer."

"Yeah, well, I can hear the nicknames starting for you already, Principal Shop-vac."

"That's fairly tame for middle school." Cas replied.

Ivan's nerves were on edge as the door swung open, and Alfie gestured him inside.

"I stopped at the hardware store, switched out the doorknob for one with a key..." he said, as Ivan followed him through the large house, "If you want the cleaning service to go in there, though, you'll need to leave it open during the day, and I mean, door open, not just unlocked. I close most of the doors so they know which rooms they can skip, it saves them time, like, my uncle's coming, so I leave the guest room open, and then I close it when he leaves again..."

They stopped at an open door with a knob that didn't match the others, and Alfie led him inside, "My dad took most of his stuff the last time he was here, and my uncle took a few things out, so I just threw the rest into a box in the garage, so, dresser, closet, no problem."

"You have a cleaning service?"

"Yeah. Lawn and pool, too. That's why no lawnmower."

"Damn." Ivan muttered, "So, what, your dad's a drug-lord?"

Alfie shrugged, "Might as well be. But he wouldn't take that kind of risk."

Alfie gathered up some cardboard and plastic packaging from the new doorknob he'd forgotten on top of the dresser, and started out of the room, "C'mon, I'll show you the rest of the house."

Ivan set his bag down on the floor by the foot of the bed and followed him out.

"Down this hallway is the guest room, both of these rooms have their own bathroom, over there is the office, just ignore it... kitchen and living room, I don't know what that weird nook is called, but, um..."

"You play piano?" Ivan asked, looking at the piano sized electric keyboard in the alcove near the front door.

"I try not to. My dad does, but never sober." Alfie replied with a shrug, "As long as it's not the middle of the night, though, I'm not gonna care. There's some old books with easy instructions if you
want to give it a shot."

Ivan nodded, and Alfie continued, "Pool, hot tub, patio, all out there, use at your own risk, and then
this side of the house is my mom's room, mine, the main bathroom, and the garage. If you park in the
left side of the driveway and leave a few feet in front of the garage door, you won't block in the car
or the bike... So, I pulled a basic lease off the web, and printed it up. Technically it wouldn't matter
as I'm still under eighteen, but I'm pretty sure my uncle could make it stick. Basic crap saying how,
when and why you'd leave, and I can't kick you out over nothing."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah... I don't care if you drink, but keep it separated so you don't get any shit for giving it to a
minor, no drugs, and don't bug the neighbors. Apart from that, whatever."

Ivan pointed at the two stacks of paper on the coffee table, "That's month by month, right?"

"Yeah."

"So, deposit, first and last month's rent, that sort of thing?"

Alfie shrugged, "Nah, don't worry about it. Just start on the first."

"Okay, great. I'm in."

"Cool... I'm gonna be out tonight, driving over to the next town, and when I get back, my uncle is
gonna be here, too. He's coming in for a couple nights, and he wants to meet Claire, so we're going
to dinner." Alfie said, sitting down and starting to flip through the papers.

"She's meeting your family?"

"Um... pretty much... if I ever had one, he'd be what's left of it."

"Nervous?"

"Uh, a little, I guess. But Claire's pretty cool, I think if he says something snotty, she'll roll with it."

Ivan scoffed, "No, I mean, what if she's bitchy, or he doesn't like her?"

"I don't really care what he thinks, I know her better than he does."

"You're not completely off the hook, you understand? I don't know his uncle, and after what
happened last time..." Cas trailed off and shook his head, "You're not going to his house, you're
getting dropped off on the way back. Is that understood?"

"Yeah, I got you." Claire replied, twisting the small piece in her hand harder.

"What is that?" Cas asked, gesturing to the object.

"Distributor cap."

"Why is it on the kitchen table?"

"Because Dean's trunk is full of dead strippers, dad, we've been over this. So where else am I gonna
put it?" Claire sighed, setting it down on the spread newsprint.
"You might want to get cleaned up, he'll be here any time." Cas looked down at her hands, "I'm actually fairly impressed you didn't get any grease on your dress. I'm not sure how you managed that."

Claire stood, making for the downstairs bathroom, careful not to touch anything, the skirt of her dark blue dress swinging gracefully as she walked, "I just started scotch-guarding everything before I wear it. Wipes right off now. It's gonna make my next murder spree an easy clean up."

"Make sure you find a new place to hide the bodies." Cas said distractedly, "If the trunk is too full for a distributor cap, it won't hold another corpse."

"What, you mean you didn't find the last one?" Claire called through the open door as the sink ran, "I thought for sure you'd find it by now."

Cas went to answer the door as he called back over his shoulder, "Maybe you scotch-guarded it, resulting in chemical mummification."

When Cas opened the door, he found himself unexpectedly unnerved by Alfie's appearance. He was used to seeing Alfie following his daughter around with a shy smile and cheerful eyes, normally in a uniform shirt from the shop that seemed to predate Dean's acquisition, or very basic street clothes. For the prom, Alfie had been dressed up, but both nervous and easily tired, getting around only with the help of crutches.

Now, Alfie stood comfortably and, even worse, confidently, under his own power, in a well fitted suit with a narrow tie nearly the same dark color of his shirt. His hair was tidy, and he looked as though he was about a task that he'd done a million times before. In short, smooth.

And Cas, generally being attracted to men in the first place, had no difficulty whatsoever acknowledging exactly what Claire saw in him.

Fighting the urge to shut the door in the boy's face and call Dean to beg a handgun and shovel to keep this smug - he was smug, right? He had to be to have that much confidence - devil away from his little girl, he opened the door wider, and let him in.

"Claire was just working on a distributor cap. She'll be out in a moment." Cas said, closing the door behind him, "Of course neither of you are entirely back in my good graces just yet. I want her home at eleven, no speeding, no side trips."

"Well, if he's delayed at the airport, then-"

"Then it had better be a big enough deal to be on the evening news, otherwise, eleven... And no alcohol this time." Cas said firmly.

"Yes, sir."

Cas felt a little better at seeing a small touch of nervous behavior from the dashing young man in the suit.

Of course it didn't last, as Claire came around the corner from the kitchen, prompting a tiny choked sound followed by a wide grin from Alfie. Cas didn't like it one bit.

Alfie opened the door for her, as Cas made one more quiet comment to him, "Eleven. Earlier if you want to impress me."

"I understand." Alfie replied with a nod as he slipped through the door.
Once Cas shut the door behind them, Alfie turned to Claire, "Are you okay with me driving?"
"Yeah, well, I'm trying to get used to it. But, highway miles, it might be better if we take my car."
"Why's that?"
"So we get there on time." Claire replied.

Alfie started toward the Chevelle with her, circling to the passenger side, opening the door to let her get in, "So you're dising my car, huh?"
"I've been doing that for a while." Claire laughed.

She fished the keys out of her purse and passed them to him as he got in.
"You look beautiful, y'know. In case I was too distracted to say so earlier." Alfie said softly as he started the engine, "Very distracting..."
"Better than the coveralls, then?"
"Um... I dunno, I like those, too."

"No way," Claire laughed, "They make me look like a walking bag of potatoes."
"Don't take this the wrong way, but... I'll take any opportunity to watch you take off a layer of clothes."
"Is there a right way to take that?"
Alfie shrugged, and changed the subject, "So, anyway... Ivan moved into my dad's old room... So I guess, for now, I have a roommate."
"Same arrangement as Kevin?"
Alfie chuckled, "There's no arrangement with Kevin, he just shows up. You know that."
"This is going to make making out on the couch a lot more awkward."
"There's a million other places we could do that... Places that might be easier."

When Claire didn't reply, he hazarded a glance at her face. Her cheerful mood had fallen away, leaving an unintended sour look on her features.
"Something's wrong?" Alfie asked.
"I, um... I don't... like beds."
"You don't like beds... Okay? I'm not really sure what that means."
"Um..." Claire's voice took on a nervous tone, "I can sleep in them, but... I can't, uh... relax. Or have fun... Does that make any sense?"

Alfie took a deep breath, "You see a therapist, right? Did they check you out for PTSD?"
"Jesus Christ, don't ask me that." Claire muttered.

Alfie shot her another glance to try to gauge how comfortable she was with the situation, "Sorry, that
was none of my business."

"No, I'm sorry, the other thing is none of your business, either." Claire replied quietly.

"Now that's where you're wrong. I mean, not completely wrong, but if I'm involved with you, um... relaxing and having fun, it helps to know... So... I'm gonna go home tonight and move the couch into my room, and get rid of my bed. Okay? No pressure, just making it available."

"Don't do that."

"I'm serious."

"Alfie..."

"I don't want you to cry again... I know that could happen, and it probably will sometimes, and I'll stay with you the whole time again, but... the more I know about it, the easier it's going to be."

"The easier what's going to be?"

"Being close with you... sex... Falling asleep together sometimes..."

Claire shifted as her energy became anxious, "So, you think this is going to be a regular thing, huh?"

"You climbed on me the other day, remember?... Usually that means things are picking up, but you're the one who starts it. And I figured a few weeks ago when you told me what happened, that it was probably a good idea to just do whatever you want to do, so, if you slow down, everything slows down, okay?" Alfie waited a moment before he continued, "I'm starting to wonder if it's really a good idea, though... I mean, maybe we shouldn't be doing that yet if you have trouble with me even touching you."

"I'm not sure I want to talk about this." Claire replied.

Alfie shrugged, "We have to sometime. And nothing's going to happen right now, we have time, and we're alone, so... If there's anything you want to say, or ask, or, well, anything, I think it's a good time for that."

"I have no idea what to tell you."

"Okay... Well, then, I'll tell you, I got a book about it... And this, with you and me... already not the worst case scenario."

Claire's eyebrows went up, "You got a book about it?"

"Yeah... I mean, how else am I gonna learn this stuff? If you have a, um... like a flashback, or a panic attack or something, you can't just calm down for a minute and tell me what to do... And you said you don't want to talk about it that much, so, I'll read up, and we try to take it easy."

Claire shook her head, "Why does it have to be that complicated? We can just figure it out."

Alfie reached across the center of the car carefully to be sure Claire could see what he was doing, and dragged his fingertips down her bare upper arm.

"What are you doing?"

"Not grabbing you."
Claire scoffed, "Is that from the book?"

"Not exactly."

After a few miles in silence, as Claire stared out the window, she asked, "What's the worst case scenario?"

Alfie tilted his head a little. "There's a few stories in there, and one, they were married for fifteen years, she goes on a girls night out, gets separated from her friends, and got attacked. Then she was like a completely different person, it just ruined everything for them, and they wound up getting divorced."

"That's horrible."

"Yeah... But I didn't know you before, I only met you after you had a while to recover, so, who you are now, that's how I know you. There's no person you used to be to be in my head to miss... Not that I don't wonder about it."

"About what I was like before?"

"Yeah."

"Well... I was a kid. Not much to tell."

Alfie tightened his grip on the steering wheel for a moment, "I'm sorry, just, it really pisses me off that it was before you were even in high school... I mean, not that it would have been any better, and it shouldn't have happened at all, but..."

"Yeah... I get what you mean... We should talk about something else for a while, I spent too much time on my makeup today, I don't want to have to fix it."

"I don't want to just drop this, so can I just ask, are you okay with me getting that book?"

"Yeah, I guess," Claire answered, "But I'm not a car, so don't try to act like it's a repair manual, people are a lot more complicated than that."

"Okay."

"So, your uncle... Dean said he sounds like he's from England?"

"That's where my dad's family is from."

"Are you a first generation American?" Claire asked.

Alfie shrugged, "I never thought of it that way."

"Or are you American at all? On paper, I mean, obviously you lived here since you were three, and you said you were born in New York."

"Uh, I'd have to ask my uncle, but I'm pretty sure I've got dual citizenship with France. I know my parents had a big fight about it, and my mom was angry because my dad said I should have British citizenship, and yelling at him is how she went into labor."

"You can't have three?"

"I have no idea."
Claire chuckled, "Your family sounds crazy."

Alfie nodded, "Maybe it's a good thing they don't bring it around here anymore."

Kevin stretched out on the floor, "You really need more practice, Margaret. It won't stay up on it's own."

Margaret lay down next to him, looking up at the bottom of the blanket they'd stretched between his bed, desk, and dresser, the fourth side only slightly supported by his desk chair.

"That's what he said." she giggled.

"What?" Kevin looked at her quizzically before grabbing a loose pillow by his hip and giving her a gentle pop in the face with it, "You're a pervert."

"Hey, you asked me to come over. How was I supposed to know all you wanted to do was build a pillow fort?"

"That's not all I wanted to do. God, it's like you don't even know me at all." Kevin teased, "Clearly the ice cream sundaes were the big part of the evening."

"Could have been bigger, if you hadn't made me leave the whipped cream can in the fridge."

Kevin rolled onto his side, closer to her, "Are you pressuring me?"

"No." Margaret giggled again.

"Are you sure?"

"You would know if I was." Margaret replied.

"I really don't think I would. I can't even tell when you're making a move on me."

"Liar."

"No, really, I can't." Kevin did his best to sound genuine, "I'm too busy thinking of you as a person."

Margaret laughed hard for a moment before climbing onto him roughly enough to roll him onto his back, while trying not to disturb the blanket above them, "Take my clothes off."

"Okay, now I feel pressured."

"I said take them off." Margaret did her best to contain her laughter.

"Ohmigawd! I'm totally pressured right now."

Margaret shifted her weight lower, as though to check, "Not enough to buy me roses."

Kevin wrapped an arm around her before raising his hips, rolling onto his other elbow, and reversing their positions as though her weight was nothing.

"I was going to do that anyway."

"What? Buy me roses or poke me with your boner?"

Kevin shrugged, "I figure if one leads to the other..."
"So, both?"

"Well, I've been thinking about it, just, uh..." Kevin looked down at her, hoping she'd say something, but gave up, "Just, since I haven't done this-"

"I'm too hot for you to go for very long?"

"That. Yep."

"That's not gonna matter."

"What? No, it matters." Kevin argued, "It absolutely matters."

"You're gonna make yourself nervous, and then the whole thing is going to suck."

"I can suck. I can prove it... Were you serious?"

"About what?"

"Taking off your clothes." Kevin said with a gentle tug on her shirt. Margaret glanced toward the door, "When is your mom getting home?"

"She's gotta work late, so she's staying with my aunt so she doesn't have to commute."

"And you have stuff?"

"Yeah." Kevin said softly, "I have a plan, too."

"Don't over think it." Margaret advised, pulling his shirt up his ribs, "Any more tattoos I should know about ahead of time?"

Kevin shook his head, awkwardly trying to kiss her and get out of his shirt at the same time, "Nope. Thinking about getting my dick pierced, though."

"Really?"

"No! Jeez, no! In fact, I wish I didn't just say that..."

"I can distract you." Margaret said confidently, giving his hips a quick squeeze with her thighs. Kevin grabbed the collar of her hoodie with his teeth and pulled the zipper down with one hand, slipping it inside her tshirt when he got to her waist, "Anything you don't want me to do?"

Margaret shivered as the flesh of her midriff developed goosebumps at his touch, "Don't squeeze my boobs too hard, and don't slap my butt. In fact, no slapping anything."

Kevin caught her eyes, horrified, "Who does that?... God, some people... That's not happening."

Margaret struggled out of her hoodie, and managed to stay up on her elbows well enough to let him push her tshirt up over her breasts, pulling it off of her as she lay back down. Kevin settled over her again, kissing her softly, his body reacting immediately to the feel of her skin. She leaned to one side as he reached below her, quickly unfastening her bra, slipping it off of her with slow gentle movements.

"How did you do that so fast?" she asked.
"I swiped one from Sandman's mom's room one time, and practiced for a while." Kevin admitted, "I was really bored that day."

Margaret gave him a confused look, "What?"

"It was stupid, I put it on a pillow, and just started popping it off until I could do it without really trying."

"His mom's bra?"

Kevin shrugged, "It was in the dresser, not like out of her hamper or something."

Margaret shrugged, "Okay, stop talking."

Kevin complied, continuing to kiss her. He dropped his face close to her neck, pressing several kisses against it before whispering in her ear, "Promise me you'll tell me if I'm going too fast."

"Yeah, I promise." Margaret replied as her breathing changed noticeably.

Deciding to treat her reaction as a new toy, Kevin stayed at her ear, "You know you're a really sweet person, and I like you a lot."

Margaret shivered at the feeling of his warm breath, too frazzled to form an immediate reply.

"I like touching you... Your skin is so soft." Kevin slowly dragged a hand from the opposite side of her neck down to her bare breast, "Does this feel okay?"

"Feels good." she replied, in almost a pant. She was well aware of the heat building within her body.

"You know I'll stop any time you want, right?" Kevin continued to whisper as he let his hand slide down her side slowly.

"Why are you whispering?" Margaret squeaked slightly, as a tiny moan caught in her throat.

"Because you like it." Kevin rasped breathily into her ear before coming up onto his elbows, gently cupping her breasts with his hands, "These are fantastic..."

"I really thought you'd have my pants off by now."

"Psh! Yeah, right. I haven't even put them on yet. And they're small, so that'll take a while."

"Ke... Kevin... there's such a thing as too slow, even for girls."

Kevin gently pressed her breasts in at the sides, planting innocent kisses higher on her chest and neck, thumbs barely touching her nipples as he went back up to her ear, "I wanna take your pants off with my teeth, how about it?"

"Oh, god." she whimpered.

"No pressure... For you, anyway. You can pressure me all you want."

"Kevin, hurry up, or I'm gonna take them off myself."

Kevin set his hands on the floor on either side of her and moved down, getting close to her waistband, but instead went for her navel, making her squirm as he unfastened her jeans and began to peel them down her legs.
"Holy crap..." Kevin said softly, "You didn't tell me you had sparkly panties... So do I make a wish, or what happens?"

"Okay, I'm done messing around," Margaret said, sitting up fast, struggling out of her tight jeans, and pulling Kevin closer by his shoulders, "You're driving me up the wall."

"Actually, I was thinking wall sex should wait until I get the hang of i-"

Margaret cut him off with a rough kiss, "You're nervous, I get it."

"I'm not."

"Then why are you taking forever?"

"Umm... I was looking at this fashion magazine, and it said girls who are relaxed and take a long time first, they get off easier."

"We can go another round later!" Margaret said, exasperated.

"But... why would you want to, if you're not getting anything out of it?"

Margaret nearly gaped at him, "Is it that big a deal to you?"

"Yeah."

"Take off your pants."

"But, are you-"

"Trust me. Take 'em off."

Kevin quickly squirmed out of his jeans and boxers in the small space, as Margaret adjusted the pillows to her liking. He reached into a small space below the dresser, pulled out a flat box that barely fit inside, and flipped open the top.

"You didn't see that." he said, grabbing an adult magazine and quickly flipping it back under the dresser, "Not allergic to latex, right?"

"Right." Margaret replied, leaning over to look into the box, "What the hell?"

"Sandman left his computer up, and I ordered a bunch of crazy crap on his Amazon to mess with him. He tried to get me back by giving the box of stuff to my mom when I wasn't home, but she didn't open it. Took months to get rid of it."

"Rainbow condoms, astroglide... Is that a candy thong?"

"This is just the stuff I kept."

"...Why the thong?"

"It's like those candy necklaces. Why throw it out?"

"How many did you order?"

"Not counting the ones we left all over the principal's car? Um-"

"Nevermind. Condom, c'mon."
Kevin grabbed one of the colorful prophylactics, and shifted his position, "So, just, I wanna make sure I do this right."

"You haven't?"

Kevin shook his head. Margaret took the condom from him, opening it and scooting closer. After a moment's fiddling with the wrapper, and then with the condom itself, she leaned in, kissing him slowly.

At the feel of her hands, he let himself relax into the kiss, growing more intense with each moment. Margaret reached for his waist, guiding him to roll with her, back to the pillows on the floor.

Margaret reached between them, putting his tip to her frustrated body, "Whenever you want."

"You're sure?" Kevin asked, nearly breathless.

"I'm sure."

Kevin pressed in slowly, breathing heavily next to her ear, "Damn, Margaret...Do you get any hotter than this?"

"Is it still a big deal?" she asked quietly.

"Yes. Very big deal."

"Okay, try not to move too much just yet."

"Why?" Kevin held still as she wet two of her fingertips in her mouth, moving her hand between their bodies.

"Move slow." she said, using her free hand to guide his hip into a gentle motion she found comfortable.

Kevin could feel her hand seeming to flutter in the gap he held as he tried to move in time with the hand on his hip, "Can I try that on you?"

"Next time." Margaret answered, her voice straining, "Right now, just kiss me, and go a little faster."

Margaret let go of his hip, wrapping her arms around him as he leaned in to kiss her gently. He could feel her legs changing positions as she gave a quiet squeak against his lips and a small writhe beneath him.

Tension built quickly within his body, even as he tried to fight it. He leaned in, kissing her neck, still trying to whisper in her ear, but losing track of the words he was actually saying.

She pulled her very busy hand away, pulling him closer to her, "Harder!"

Kevin wanted nothing else, and did exactly as she requested, when she quickly brought her hand to her mouth, biting down on two knuckles as her other hand gripped the back of his neck hard enough to leave the imprints of her fingernails.

Her entire body convulsed, tightening around him, stroking at him inside of her, as she gasped and whimpered around her knuckles.

As her body seemed to settle after what seemed to him like a long time, he briefly found the ability to speak. "Holy shit... Was that...?"
"Keep going." Margaret groaned, tearing her hand away, "You're close, right?"

Kevin kissed her hard, giving just a few more thrusts before pressing his body fully against hers as he fell apart within her.

Panting and shaky, he pulled away, pulling the condom off, throwing it into a trash can below his desk, and leaning close to kiss her again as he attempted to kick his jeans closer.

Finally getting ahold of his pants, he dug into one of the pockets, retrieving something, and passing it to her.

"What's this?" Margaret asked.

"What does it look like?" Kevin replied, gesturing to the children's flash card bearing the letter V, "Obviously it's my V. card."

"I'm keeping this." Margaret giggled as he pulled her closer, "I just popped your cherry in a pillow fort."

"Do girls always squeeze like that?"

"I dunno, probably. If I'm ever in another girl, I'll let you know."

"That was hot as fuck... literally."
The dinner had been a pleasant one, and it didn't take long after the initial introduction for all three of them to ease into a very comfortable conversation.

Alfie took a long drink as he listened to Claire and Crowley discussing a movie he'd never seen, happy to find both of them amused by the topic. As he set his glass down, his eyes settled on a scowling woman at a distant table.

The woman had fixed him with a wicked glare, and it took him a moment to place her.

"Julie's mom is here." he said quietly.

Claire quashed her instinct to look around, "Are you sure?"

Alfie nodded, "She's coming over here."

"Would that be the young woman who didn't stay on at the automotive shop?"

Alfie and Claire each gave a reluctant nod as the irate woman approached their table.

"I just wanted to come over here thank you for getting my daughter fired with your little stunt a few weeks ago." she said, leaning in between Claire and Crowley with a shrewd loud whisper directed at Alfie, "I hope it was worth the laugh. You almost cost her her scholarship."

"Oh, gracious, where are my manners?" Crowley asked, getting to his feet. He unbuttoned his jacket, letting it swing back, and didn't reach to shake her hand, "I wouldn't want to be insensitive to our cultural differences, of course."

"One might say the same about your daughter."

Crowley gestured towards his belt buckle, "Isn't that how the women in your family greet people?"

Julie's mother turned a violent shade of crimson and sputtered, before declaring "You're disgusting!"

"Oh, gracious, where are my manners?" Crowley asked, getting to his feet. He unbuttoned his jacket, letting it swing back, and didn't reach to shake her hand, "I wouldn't want to be insensitive to our cultural differences, of course."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, turning to Crowley.

Crowley gestured towards his belt buckle, "Isn't that how the women in your family greet people?"

"One might say the same about your daughter."

She quickly tucked tail back to her own table as Crowley sat down again, "Claire, I must apologize, that was... well,-"

"She had it coming." Claire replied with a polite smile.

Crowley smiled, "I don't often hear about young women working as mechanics, is it something you
"Yeah, it is. I'm going to start college in a year, but if my schedule lets me, I want to keep working at the shop, too."

"What will you be studying?"

"Right now, the plan is business management, but I'm looking at all my options."

Crowley nodded in approval, "I suppose you could keep a wrench in your purse, in case of any glass ceilings."

It didn't quite register in Cas' mind when Dean's bedroom door opened, but the closing of the bathroom door woke him.

After a moment's remembrance, a celebratory evening of whiskey flavored kisses that had ended too soon came back to him, and evening resulting in a comfortable sleep, a forgotten alarm, and a forgotten lock.

He shook himself awake enough to check that he was covered, finding that he'd fallen asleep in his clothes, and Dean, the same, minus a shirt.

Dean stirred slightly, Cas' head still on his shoulder, waking slowly with the sound of Ben retreating to the kitchen.

"Um..." Dean began.

"In a year," Cas said softly, "He'll be one of the students at my middle school... This is..."

"I'll talk to him."

After Cas had slipped out to head home, Dean found Ben at the table, teaching Nick to catch pieces of cereal. He slid into the chair across from him.

"Buddy, we need to talk."

"Don't give the dog that much sugar? She only had nine pieces."

"No, Ben... Um..."

Ben looked up, waiting for Dean to speak.

"Listen, you remember what the rules were about knocking? Before we moved?"

"Yeah, but there's no girls here."

"Right, well... You see, that was, uh..."

"Is it because Cas was asleep in there?"

"It's more complicated than that." Dean answered, "Just because there's no girls here, well, that doesn't mean you need to just walk into somebody else's room, even mine. You were coming downstairs anyway, and there's a bathroom down here."

"Is it a sex thing?" Ben asked bluntly.
Dean made an involuntary sound, and took a moment to find the right words, "It's a privacy thing. Okay? There's no way Cas is suddenly going to get used to some kid running right through the room first thing in the morning. He didn't have Claire around until she was already a teenager, so this is weird for him, and probably makes him uncomfortable."

"So just use the downstairs bathroom instead?"

"Yeah."

Ben shrugged, "Okay."

A few days later, after Cas had left for California, and Charlie, staying in the Novak's home, had left for work, Alfie had arrived at Claire's request, both well aware they had two hours before they were due at work.

"I should have framed it." Alfie said softly, glancing at the poster on her door.

"Then the frame would bump every time I open the door."

Alfie kissed her neck gently as she sat on the edge of the bed in front of him, keeping her arms around his bare shoulders. He knelt between her knees, one hand on the small of her back the other working at the scar on her side, beneath the fabric of the side of her bra.

Each had an ear bud in one ear, the cord running to Alfie's phone, with Unchained Melody playing.

Claire kissed him firmly, softening as he silently reminded her that their intentions had been to go slow.

She reached between them, unclasping her bra, and moving her mouth below Alfie's jawbone, with a comfortable hum. Claire took a gentle hold of his wrist, guiding him forward slowly to reach her breast.

"Oh... Okay, yeah..." Alfie said quietly, moving to accommodate her request, cupping her delicately.

Out of nowhere, making them both jump, there was a loud knock at the bedroom door.

"Zip it up and get both your butts downstairs, now." Dean's voice came through the door, loud and clear.

"Zip it up and get both your butts downstairs, now." Dean's voice came through the door, loud and clear.

Boots went down the stairs loudly as Claire met Alfie's gaze. She was frustrated by the combination of her arousal and the sudden requirement to stop, but she kissed him deeply. "We're finishing this later, right?"

"You could at least show some respect for the fact that your father's taking time off work to go handle this whole custody thing, and not go sneaking around like this." Dean continued to ramble.

Claire looked more irritated by his existence than concerned, which gated his nerves.

"And you," he gestured to Alfie, parked on the furthest point of the couch from Claire that Dean's glare had managed to get from him, "You've got about two months before the word 'statutory' starts getting thrown around, mister."

He paced some more as Claire spoke up, "Bullshit. My dad wouldn't press charges."
Alfie stayed silent, which Dean considered the only correct action for the boy.

"You wanna bet?" Dean asked, "I only came over here because he needed your DNA test faxed to him. He tried to call your phone three times. Found it in the kitchen while you two were taking your time getting down here."

Dean passed her the phone.

"You know this is none of your business, right?" Claire asked rudely.

"The hell it's not."

"Maybe if we were at work, but we aren't. I live here, you don't."

"You're a minor, and your dad is several states away. I'm pretty sure he'd want someone checking on you."

Claire pulled up Cas' number, "I can settle this right now."

"What are you doing?" Alfie whispered.

"Calling my dad."

"Great." Dean said confident in his opinion, "I'm sure he's going to have something to say about this."

The phone rang several times on speaker before Cas answered, shuffling papers in the background, "Claire... everything okay? You weren't answering."

"Yeah, I left it in the kitchen. Dean's here, and he's freaking out."

"Why?"

"Because, um... Alfie's here, too."

"... I see... Take me off speaker and give the phone to Dean."

Claire pressed the button and offered the phone back to Dean, who quickly put it to his ear, "Yeah?"

"Dean, calm down." Cas' voice came back.

"Really?" Dean asked, still fuming, "That's it?"

"This isn't exactly unexpected, they've been dating for longer than we have."

"Cas-"

"Dean, have you ever been with someone who's been raped?"

Dean shifted uncomfortably, getting an idea why Cas didn't seem to be having a typical fatherly reaction, "No."

"I have... I know you're only upset because you care, obviously you care about both of them, and don't want to see them hurt, but you need to step back from the parental role for a moment. She was barely fourteen, then... It's not that this doesn't bother me, but she has a lot to heal from in this aspect, and honestly, her therapist would probably say this is encouraging, because unlike my ex, she's not
completely shutting down until her late twenties... And he seems like a very patient, caring person. If she's comfortable with him, that's all that matters."

"Yeah, but-"

"The birth control her mother found? She left it sitting out in plain sight. There were several pills gone. Claire knows what she's doing. Let it go."

Dean took a deep breath and rubbed his forehead, "You know,-" "Just give her back the phone, and leave. It's fine."

"Right." Dean took the phone away from his ear and hit the button, "Speaker's back."

He passed the phone to Claire and started for the door.

Cas' voice came through the speaker, "Look, I'm not angry, and-"

Dean gestured to Alfie, catching his attention as he got to the door, assuming Cas wouldn't hear him, "This isn't over."

"Yes it is, Dean." Cas replied through the phone. He waited until he heard the front door shut, and spoke again, "I'm not angry. I'm sure you're both well aware of what you should be doing to stay safe. I'll talk to Dean when I get home."

"Dad, he brought up statutory..."

"... That would be unreasonable, obviously if I had a problem with you two dating, I would have said so by now. At any rate, with an established relationship, less than a year apart in age, no one would take that seriously." Cas replied, "I have to go. Please don't take Dean's reaction too hard, he's used to parenting a much younger child."

"He's going to kick my ass." Alfie muttered.

"He won't." Cas answered, "I have to go, I'll probably be heading back tonight."

As Claire said goodbye, Alfie moved to sit next to her, putting an arm around her waist, "That wasn't as bad as I thought it would be."

Ivan clocked in and made a shaky approach to the garage.

Dean looked up as came in, startled by a large, puffy bruise forming on his face, "What happened?"

Ivan shook his head, "Um... I'm not getting my stuff back, looks like."

"Take your last pay stub and the lease you set up with Alfie to the sheriff's department, tell them what happened, they'll go with you to get your stuff."

Ivan shook his head, "I'm not messing with cops."

Dean leaned on the tool bench, "You have a warrant out for you?"

"No."

"Unpaid tickets?"
"No."

"They're supposed to protect and serve, let them do their job and help you out."

"I can't... I'm just going to call it over and done with."

Dean pulled his phone from his pocket and dialed, "Fine. How much stuff do you have?"

"Clothes, a laptop, and a guitar and amp." Ivan said quietly.

"They'll all fit in your truck?" Dean asked.

Ivan nodded as the phone picked up.

"Got an emergency, calling you in. I'll leave the bay doors open... No, it's not Ben, but actually, he needs to stay here... No, I just have to leave... No, I'm not checking to see if you have your- look, just get down here." Dean hung up abruptly, "Okay, c'mon..."

Ivan pulled his pickup to the curb outside his uncle's house.

Dean hated it the moment he saw it. Everything was too clean. The very look of the place seemed to scream of the smell of disinfectant and echo hushed whispers. "Gimme a second to talk to 'em, I'll wave you up if it looks like they're going for it."

Ivan nodded as Dean got out of the car, heading up the driveway and across to the front door.

A young man in his mid twenties answered. He looked to be about Dean's height, and several pounds heavier, but far less toned, and he adopted a glare the moment he noticed Ivan's truck.

"Hi, is George around? I'm Dean Winchester, he did some work on my shop, I wanted to talk to him."

"He's working. What did you want?" the young man asked.

Dean didn't like his tone, "Well, my employee here, he's moving out of here, right?"

"Yeah, sure." he scoffed, "He'll be back."

Dean nodded sarcastically, "Well, he wants to get the rest of his stuff. Now, I told him, after he showed up with that bruise on his face, to just take his pay stub, y'know, with the date, and this address as proof of residency, and his lease with the date and new address over to the sheriff, and get a deputy to help him out, but for some reason he wanted to spare you the embarrassment of all the neighbors seeing a cop car in front of your house."

"He doesn't have any stuff here."

"Look..." Dean said, taking on the most intimidating stance he had, "I'm a business owner in this community, too. I've had a good working relationship with your old man so far, but if we have to do this the hard way, word is gonna get out... Now, you're not going to get any use out of his clothes, so let the kid get his shit, and I won't have to come back over here later and give your old man the same talk."

"Fine." he growled.

Dean beckoned to Ivan, who quickly crossed the lawn to join him at the door.
As Ivan led the way past his obnoxious relative, Dean gave him a nod, "I appreciate your cooperation."

Dean followed Ivan through the house to a small, simply kept room, no bigger than a walk-in closet. Instead of a bed, there was an old cot, likely picked up at an Army Surplus, still neatly made with a thin, threadbare blanket. There was a large plastic tote, but no dresser, and Ivan pulled the lid off, checking to find his laptop, charger, and cables for his guitar were all safe inside between the stacks of clothing.

Ivan slung his guitar across his back and picked up his amplifier as Dean grabbed the tote.

Returning to the front door through the living room, Ivan stopped by the end of the couch where his relative was sitting, watching football on the television. He pulled a key from his pocket, and passed it to him.

"What about the back rent?" he sneered.

"You'll get it."

Dean was at his wits end with this guy, "Back rent?... How about assault charges? Ivan, even if you signed something with this shit-for-brains, a judge will let you out of it with a few pictures of your face. Don't give him another dime."

He turned in his seat to look at Dean over the back of the couch, "If this pussy doesn't pay up, bad things are gonna happen out at your shop, got it?"

"Threats, yeah. That's why my phone's set to record, genius. But unlike Ivan, I got no problem pressing charges, just like I did the last time somebody decided to punch me in the face. So, how about you sit on it and spin."

Dean followed Ivan out to the truck, reaching the curb before he spoke again, "I mean it, don't give him another dime."

Ivan didn't look at him as he set the amplifier in the bed of the truck. Dean added the tote and motioned to accept the guitar from him.

Dean got into the cab, setting the bottom of guitar on his boots, and buckled in as Ivan went around to the driver's side and pulled away.

"So... your whole life, or just after jail?"

"Whole life... My mom's the baby, right? She was supposed to go to college, last chance for Grandma and Grandpa to get a kid in college, because none of the boys wanted to go... Wasn't going to carry on the family name, they already had a bunch of grandsons by then- wasn't supposed to, anyway... She was like, ten years younger than the rest of them, too... Got knocked up, dropped out of high school, and the thing that pissed 'em off the most, she wouldn't marry the guy... I'm really not sure how that makes me the family fuck-up, but, that's how it is. I still get shit about having no right to have the family name."

"Any contact with your dad's family? I know you said he got you a car."

"I lied... I don't even know his name, she didn't put it on my birth certificate... The one time I asked her, she just started crying, then her brother smacked me and told me I should know better."

Dean shook his head, "Some of the best people I know have had some of the worst starts in life."
You're a hard worker, you've got a job, and you got a place to live. That's a brand new fresh start if you want it to be."

Ivan nodded, "Yeah, I think from here on out, I'll be okay."

"Listen, man... in about a month, maybe two... You're probably gonna start feeling like maybe they'll treat you better now that you're out. You're gonna want to call them, you're gonna wonder if they miss you at all, and you're gonna feel homesick... It's just something that happens, I've talked to plenty of people who had that happen when they got out of a fucked up family... Call me instead, so I can talk you out of it, okay?" Dean said, looking out the window, "Don't let them pull you back in. Make a clean break."

Ivan nodded, "Fat chance, but, sure."

Outside of Alfie's house, Dean picked up the amplifier and followed Ivan inside.

He looked around as they moved through the house, "I forgot how empty this place is... So, are you any good?"

"At guitar? I dunno, I'm the only who hears it."

"Well, I know you don't like the guy, but Kevin knows a few musicians, get something useful out of him sometime when he won't stop talking."

They stopped at Ivan's door as he set the tote down and unlocked it, opening the room that Dean had never seen before.

It was larger than the living room at the house they'd just left, with an obvious attached bathroom and a king sized bed.

"Damn... Build yourself a little mini kitchen, and you're set, huh?" Dean said, setting the amplifier down and putting the guitar down carefully to lean into the corner of the wall and the dresser, "You ask him to put the lock on there?"

"No, he just did it."

Dean nodded, "Well, at least you got some decent digs."

Ivan laughed, "Yeah. And I didn't know until I started looking for a place, but most of the rooms get rented around here for a couple hundred, jerk was charging me double."

"You tell George that?"

"Yeah, he didn't want to get involved. Said it was between me and Tony. But anyway, now I can save up for my own place, so, yeah. Big improvement."

Alfie smirked, turning the chair slightly as Claire shook her head.

She sat on the edge of the desk as she had many times before, less often, now that he had been back in the garage for some time.

"Somebody's gonna walk in on it."

Alfie shrugged, "Probably not."
"Cameras everywhere, remember?"

"So what?"

"Company time, we're supposed to behave ourselves, remember?"

"We're behaving." Alfie said with a quiet laugh, "C'mon, I can't pull that transmission until Dean gets back, and there's nothing else to do... And you did say you wanted to finish this later."

"I didn't mean the song."

Alfie's expression sobered for a moment, "Was it helping?"

Knowing exactly what he was referring to, Claire nodded, "It helped a lot."

Alfie smiled softly, getting up from the chair, "Okay, so, positive reinforcement. Endorphins and stuff."

He took her hands and pulled her down the hallway to the empty first bay in the garage, settling one of his ear buds into her ear as he pressed a command on the screen of his phone and slipped it back into his shirt pocket.

Alfie wrapped one arm around her waist and took her other hand, leading her into a slow dance.

"This is weird." Claire said quietly.

"Why?"

"You're not leaning on me like at the prom."

"You never did say if we were making fun of it or not."

Claire smiled, looking away briefly, "No... It's not dumb... And we never tried to see who could do more push-ups."

"We can do that next."

She laughed hard in his arms, dropping her forehead against his shoulder as they continued to sway and turn.

"Why's that so funny?"

"Um.. just thinking how confused Dean would be to see that on the cameras later. Slow dancing, push-up contest... We need one more thing to make it work."

"Well..." Alfie looked off into the distance for a moment, "Where can we get a tub of live eels on short notice?"

When Claire's giggling had calmed, and the song had ended, Alfie gave her a squeeze, and let go.

"What do you think the emergency was?" Claire asked.

Alfie shrugged, "Ivan said he was going to get the rest of his stuff before work, so, probably that. Otherwise, why would they take his piece-of-crap truck?"

"How's that going, anyway? Him living with you?"
"He actually came out of his room and got in the pool the other day." Alfie answered, "You know, after all the crap he said about you, I almost said no."

"What changed your mind?"

"Well, I figured if he was being such a huge dickbag to you, and you were still giving him a chance, then, why not?" he tucked away a stray strand of hair behind her ear.
Chapter 50

Chapter Notes

(A/N: Here it is... The final chapter of Dirt Road Rejects... to be followed within the hour by the first chapter of Dirt Road Rejects: Two-Bit Losers.

This has been a wild ride. It's gone in directions I never expected, and I couldn't even finish the first chapter of Two-Bit Losers without a surprise smacking me in the face.

Thank you all for sticking with me, it's been so encouraging. Love you guys!

FythyrWisp

[P.s., Destiel gettin' kinky. You were warned!]

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Ben had gotten bored wandering around with Nick, tossing rocks through the open window of the occasional high-stacked junker in the yard, and poking things with sticks as little boys, and even little boys old enough to insist they aren't little, are prone to do.

He climbed up on a wrecked vehicle, much to the frustration of his canine companion, and jumped off the roof. He repeated this several times, going for distance, before his boredom at being a superhero led him back to reality to seek a more human connection. He made his way back to the shop, approaching the side of the building, and due to the bright summer sunlight and the deep shadow within the building, he didn't notice until he was too close for comfort that Alfie and Claire were in a close embrace, and mouths were involved.

After an exaggerated gagging sound to interrupt them, he shook his head, "Nasty! I'm gonna tell my dad you were making out instead of working."

"That's too bad, I was gonna take you for ice cream later, but if you're gonna be like that about it..." Claire replied.

"What kind of ice cream?" Ben asked quickly.

"Frozen custard, basically ice cream times three."

Ben shrugged, "Maybe I don't have to tell him. But he'll see it on the cameras anyway."

Alfie leaned in next to her ear, "He never checks the footage unless something goes wrong."

"Okay, great, I'll come find you when I'm ready to leave later."

Alfie waited as Ben wandered off, "You shouldn't teach him to keep secrets, that usually gets kids in trouble."

Claire scoffed, "There's keeping secrets, and then there's having the manners to mind your own business. Besides, you're the bad influence."
"I thought you were the bad influence."

"Oh, crap... If we forgot who the bad influence is supposed to be, then we might both be the bad influence."

"That's a tough expectation to live up to." Alfie said quietly.

Claire pressed her lips together, "I think we'll make it work."

"So... Frozen custard later... Just you and Ben, then? Or can I tag along?"

"You don't expect me to corrupt him all by myself, do you?" Claire asked.

Cas gathered his few personal belongings into one box, and dug through his files looking for anything that might need to be removed. Everything looked to be entirely work related.

He looked around the room, noticing that aside from the few picture frames gone, it didn't seem different at all. He'd never brought much into the small office, just a few photos of his daughter, despite the years he'd spent working at the same desk every day.

He recalled his first day, his excitement, and also the lingering disappointment that his own child would not be attending. Unlike several of his colleagues, his little girl would never make her way in to his office to do her homework or color a picture on the floor as he finished for the day, chatting quietly about her classmates or what she'd had for lunch. She was so far away, as often as he'd seen her, it might as well have been the moon. He'd spent years pretending, telling himself it didn't hurt. That she was better off without him.

"Hey, Cassie. Did they make it official, or did you get canned?" Gabe asked from the doorway.

"It's official." Cas replied, "Starting in August, 'Principal Novak,' of James Polk Middle School."

"I still can't believe that's the name they went with. That's gonna make it way too easy for the kids."

Cas shrugged, "What would you have chosen?"

"Taft... Not a lot of ways to mess with it, 'daft,' 'craft,' they'd have to get creative."

"You seem to have overlooked 'shaft.'"

Gabe snapped his fingers with a smile, " See? That's why you're the brains around here."

"Not as of five thirty."

"Yeah, well, the work you did while you were here - it shows... And your big plan, I think it's great. You'll do well, and I just wanted to come over here and say 'best of luck...' But, uh, pro-tip?" Gabe said, looking around the empty office, "Actually decorate your office this time. It'll make you seem more approachable, off-set that pesky cyborg tone you get sometimes."

"I'll take that into consideration." Cas said with a nod.

"Well, I also wanted to say, I tried. Sorry we couldn't bury the old hatchet."

Cas nodded, "You did try. And... I appreciate the effort."

Gabe nodded and tapped the doorframe with the heel of his hand, "See you around, Cas."
After Dean and Ivan had returned to the shop, Dean had immediately been called out on a tow.

Claire was updating a file at the front desk when a middle-aged man came in.

"How can I help you?" Claire asked politely.

"I brought my car in about a rattling noise, and when I picked it up a week ago, it was fine for a while. Now it's making the same sound again." he replied gruffly.

"Okay, what name will I find you under?"

"Lewis Moore."

Claire pulled up the file on the screen with a nod, reviewing the last repair.

"I want to talk to the asshole who worked on it, and didn't do their job the first time."

"That asshole would be me." she replied with a firm confidence, looking him in the eye with a sharp gaze, "Looks like you had a piece of plastic snap off a cheap air freshener, and it fell into the vent. If it's the exact same sound because you used another one and snapped it off again, I can pop your dash apart and pull that little piece of plastic and put the dash back together. It'll take maybe ten minutes, and I won't charge you for it, but you'll want to change brands so it doesn't happen again."

"You listen up, girly," Mr Moore said angrily, which caught Ivan's ear as he was passing the hallway, prompting him to change direction, "You're not touching my car again. I want somebody who knows what they're doing to handle it, since obviously you couldn't do it right the first time!"

Ivan stepped next to the desk as Claire answered him, "I offered to handle it for free, if you want someone else to pull the busted air freshener piece out of the dash for you, there's going to be a labor charge."

Mr Moore was beginning to turn red, and turned to Ivan, "Finally... listen, this girl screwed up my car, I want it fixed, and I'm not going to be charged for it."

"What happened?" Ivan asked.

"He had a piece of plastic break off an air freshener, and it's rattling in his vents, again." Claire replied.

"Woah." Ivan said, "You better switch to the little tree kind, those clip-on ones don't like you very much."

"This isn't some joke, got it?" Mr Moore growled.

Ivan nodded, "Okay, sir, calm down, have a seat, and let me talk to my manager, and I'll see what I can do for you, okay?"

Mr Moore looked a bit more relaxed, but it didn't help when Ivan turned to Claire.

"So, what do you think, can I just take it apart and fish out the trash to get him out of your hair?"

Claire looked at Mr Moore for a moment, just to savor his irritation before giving Ivan a quick nod, "Yeah, I wasn't going to ask anyone else to skip the fee, but if you're volunteering, that's fine."

"You gotta be fucking kidding me!" Mr Moore snapped.
"Look, you want to get this done for free, or you want to be stuck going somewhere else? Because somewhere else is twenty miles away. So I suggest you take a seat, and stop giving her shit." Ivan replied sternly, pointing to the couch.

"Did I leave my helmet at your house the other day?" Claire asked as the car pulled away from the frozen custard stand.

"Yeah, you did. But to be fair, it was a pretty rough day." Alfie replied.

Claire nodded as she came to a stop sign, "We should stop and pick it up."

"Why'd you get a helmet?" Ben piped up from the back seat.

"So I can go on Alfie's bike." Claire replied.

"Oh... You can try out my dirt bike if you want."

Alfie hid a chuckle at the boy's offer.

"Let me get used to being a passenger first, and I'll think about it. And then maybe you can show me how to take off a car mirror with my head instead of introducing myself to my neighbors like a normal person."

"So, are you feeling brave today?" Alfie asked softly.

Claire shrugged, "I might be. We'll see when we get back."

Ivan looked up as Dean entered the garage.

"I just got a call from Lewis Moore... Said you were unprofessional, and used the word 'shit' while speaking to him... Not exactly good for business."

"Pretty much how it happened... You want me to call him back and apologize?" Ivan asked.

Dean shook his head, "No, after he went off about Claire, I could tell what his problem was. Told him if he wants respect from my employees, he better be willing to show some. But next time, watch the language, grin and bear it, and add a convenience fee of four dollars and twenty three cents to his bill."

"Why? We weren't charging him to start with."

Dean chuckled, "Bobby's trade secret for dealing with people who suck, four-two-three, it stands for 'kiss my ass.' Helps you keep it together on the face of things, and goes straight into the pocket of whoever had to deal with the jerk customer."

Ivan nodded with a smirk, "I'll remember that the next time he comes in."

"If he comes in with another clip-on air freshener busting off, charge him, and keep his car an extra day. After the second time it's just stupidity."

It was fairly late at night when Cas, clad only in pajama pants, padded his way barefoot through the dark, empty house to the kitchen for a bottle of water from the fridge.
On his return to his bedroom, however, he stopped in his tracks, noticing two entangled bodies on the living room couch.

Both were fully clothed, Alfie was leaning back on the arm of the couch, his motorcycle jacket open, one knee raised against the back of the couch, the other foot resting on the floor. Claire was laying on her stomach, asleep, with her head on his chest.

"Mr Novak," Alfie said softly in a loud whisper, "I'm really sorry, I know it's late and I shouldn't be here, but, um... She's got her arm under my back, I'm kinda stuck."

Cas took a moment to gather his thoughts, then nodded, "It's fine... She hasn't been sleeping very well... Of course, I want my daughter to be comfortable, and happy. However... Si je deviens grand-père dans les quatre prochaines années, l'homme responsable sera forcé de manger ses propres testicules... I'm sure you understand."

Alfie nodded, "Yes, sir."

Cas turned and headed up the stairs, back to his bedroom doorway.

He slipped through the door quickly, turning to make sure it closed and locked. Turning back around, he found Dean exactly as he had left him, sitting on the spread towel on the floor, his wrists bound in fuzzy handcuffs to the decorative metal bar that ran the length of the footboard of the bed. He wore only a thin sheen of sweat, and his hair was a mess. A large open trunk, normally kept locked and tucked away beneath the bed sat wide open in easy reach.

He knelt next to him, opening the water bottle and helping him with it as he drank deeply. "Claire and Alfie are downstairs on the couch."

"Should we stop? ...Or you wanna talk about it?" Dean asked, still a bit breathless.

"That would hardly be fair to you, at this point. I'll put the radio on."

"That's not gonna be enough," Dean said, nodding toward the trunk, "You got anything else in there that might help keep me quiet?"

Cas rummaged in the trunk, brought out a ball-gag, and held it out for Dean to bite down on. With one bound hand, he gave Cas an 'okay' signal.

Cas shook his head, "You won't be able to say anything if something's wrong."

Dean spit out the ball-gag, forcing Cas to catch it, "Nah, don't worry about it, see?"

"Yes, unless you bite down."

He rummaged in the trunk once more, and pulled out a clicker, placing it in Dean's hand. "Try it."

Dean clicked a few times, testing it out, "This could be fun, y'know, concentration games?"

"Not tonight." Cas held the ball-gag up for him again, and let him take it. "I won't fasten it, any trouble breathing, spit it out."

Dean nodded, and Cas got up, crossing the room to start his small stereo cycling through the three CDs it held. He stripped off his pajama pants as he returned to his position in front of Dean.

Cas watched Dean shiver and give a muffled gasp and then a quiet moan as he ran a hand up the inside of his thigh. He took a gentle hold of the large black ring at his tip, removing the sounding
plug he'd carefully inserted before going downstairs.

Dean shook slightly as it came out.

"Click it twice." Cas said quietly.

Dean clicked the small device twice in a row.

"I've gotten you pretty close, haven't I? How many times?"

Dean clicked it four times.

Cas took hold of Dean’s thighs and lifted him high enough to get his own legs below him. He reached underneath, and traced the edge of the plug he'd painstakingly worked inside, slipping one finger below the rim, leaning forward to trace Dean's adam's apple with his tongue, making him shudder.

Dean breathed harder, giving a small hum as Cas backed up again.

"You know... I could take all night." Cas said quietly.

Dean made a quiet sound of displeasure as he tried to wrap his legs around Cas, grasping the bar with his empty hand.

Cas took a firm hold of the plug and carefully began to work it out of his body. As it came free, it's slippery surface coated in lube, he ran his hand over it, and coated himself with the already warm liquid.

He aligned himself, giving Dean a brief moment before pressing inside, almost roughly as Dean bit down and gasped through his nose.

"Dean?" Cas asked quietly, waiting as Dean calmed.

Dean flexed his thighs against Cas' waist, nodding and trying to pull him deeper by pressing his calves against the other man's ass.

Cas gripped his hips firmly and began to move, sliding in and out of his already slick and loosened body, taking great care not to go fast enough to make him feel more than a comfortable high.

Dean rocked against him, unable to do much more, trying to make him speed up, trying to find a better angle for his hips, desperate to make it happen for real this time.

Cas had been thorough over the course of the last hour and a half, leaving no part of his body untouched. Dean had cycled through pleading and demanding, begging, and even getting Cas to stop just in time to continue.

Dean's arms tensed as he tried to use the bar to hold his weight well enough to move, which worked for a moment before Cas grabbed his hips harder, pinning him down on his length, not letting him do more than squirm and moan deeply.

Cas ran his hands up Dean's torso softly before taking a firm hold of his thighs, "Change position."

Dean nodded quickly, desperate to be able to move.

Cas lifted his weight off his lap and slid out of him gently, setting his legs on the floor and backing up.
Dean quickly turned around, crossing his wrists at the bar and grasping it again with his empty hand.

"Click twice." Cas said quietly next to his ear.

Dean rolled his eyes, but gave two clicks before Cas guided his hips back, making him inch further away from the bed on his knees.

Satisfied with Dean's position, he dragged his fingertips up the back of Dean's thighs, enjoying the softened sounds he made. He pressed his tip against him, listening to the change in his breathing before pulling away again and giving a firm slap to one side of his ass, receiving a startled yelp in return, ending in a soft moan.

Cas pressed in again, just a bit, letting Dean whimper and press back against him, slowly impaling himself on Cas' body.

Dean tilted his hips, trying to hit that one place, but Cas adjusted, not allowing him to stimulate it just yet. Dean gave a frustrated growl, jerking his hips forward an inch or two before attempting to slam himself backward onto Cas.

Cas grabbed Dean roughly, holding him in place and leaned forward over his back, running a slow, teasing lick up his spine.

Dean whimpered slightly, and Cas suddenly backed away completely, exiting him, and moving to his side. He reached underneath Dean, taking the gag, "Did you want me to jerk you while we do this? I forgot to ask."

Dean was panting, shaking, and had obvious sweat beading on his forehead as he turned his head between his outstretched, bound arms to look Cas in the eye, part desperation, part anger, "Cas, I swear to god, you fucking bastard, you don't get me off soon, my balls are gonna explode, okay? Just get back in there and fuck me!"

Cas smirked with amusement and put the gag back into his mouth a bit harsher than before, and went back to his previous position.

He entered Dean roughly this time, striking his target, and earning a muffled moan of delight as Dean quickly began to rock his whole body shoving back from the metal bar, taking over the movement as Cas held still and let him.

Cas ran his fingernails down Dean's back as Dean kept moving, thrusting himself onto Cas, relieved sounds of pleasure muffled by the gag.

Once Dean's hot flesh, still dripping with injected lubricant, had brought him closer, he caught Dean's hips and began to thrust in earnest, pounding into him, attacking his sensitive nerves, making him moan deeply with nearly every thrust.

"Dean... Still okay?" Cas panted.

Dean fumbled with the clicker in his crossed hands, attempting to make it click, but only wound up dropping it out of Cas' immediate reach.

"I can stop... pick that up for you..."

Dean gave a hand signal he recognized immediately, one with an extended middle finger, and chuckled, "Keep going, then?"
Receiving a thumbs-up, he didn't slow down, taking care to continue a slow build as Dean was becoming more and more wound up.

He could feel and hear him approaching the edge again, and this time, instead of slowing to a stop, he sped up.

Dean's entire body shook hard, his muffled voice high and frantic, thrusting himself back, carelessly, almost violently, as he grabbed the bar with both hands.

In his own state of heightened arousal, Cas managed to steer his hips just enough to stay inside as he continued, staying inside him, just barely, nearly his entire length coming out each time.

Cas was brought even closer by the sounds Dean made, and released on a final, hard thrust, deep inside Dean's still trembling body.

Cas leaned down, pressing a quick kiss to Dean's back, admiring the shape of his muscles and crossed wrists as he slipped out of him slowly, taking extra care to cause him no discomfort.

Dean spit out the ball-gag, letting it land on the now messy towel below him, still breathing hard as Cas released his hands from the cuffs. He tried to right himself, but only wound up wrapping around Cas, ending in a fairly slow tackle, holding him close as they went to the floor.

"Goddamn you were good." Dean said with a rough voice, "I knew you were fun."

Cas kissed him softly, rubbing gently at his shoulders to help him relax after being cuffed for so long, "Do you think you can walk?"

"Probably not... Not for a few minutes, anyway."

"Good."

"That was the plan, huh?"

"Yes... I just needed to find a way to get you completely helpless on my floor, so I could then, well, make you completely helpless on my floor... Now here we are, and everything's perfect."

Dean adjusted only slightly to look him in the eyes, "This is your idea of perfect?"

His whisper was filled with hope and Cas' heart skipped a beat.

"In a perfect world," Cas said softly, meeting his eyes, "You'd be in my arms every night."

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Chapter End Notes

(A/N2: 'omg, what did he say?' Google it. LOL!

Stay tuned for Two-Bit Losers.)

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