Welcome All Winchesters

by almaasi

Summary

When Dean’s engagement breaks off three days before Christmas, he’s left with nobody to accompany him on a road trip to his family’s mountain log cabin. His best friend Castiel happens to be available, and is willing to help him through a tough time. But when Dean's mother and brother arrive, expecting to meet the person Dean plans to marry, they understandably assume Castiel is Dean's fiancé. After a weekend of comfortable domesticity, sharing clothes, intimate conversations, and definitely-one-time-only therapy sex, it feels almost too easy for Dean and Cas to fake a loving, romantic relationship. The hard part is going back to being friends afterwards. They can’t keep their hands off each other, and they’ve discovered some fun things to do together which they’d never tell another soul about. And, oh boy, feelings. Now being ‘just friends’ is so impossible, it seems as if fate had another plan for them all along...
As always, my thanks to my betas, Libby and Mittens, whose efforts were incomparably helpful to me, making this fic consistent and comprehensible. 12/10, would recommend. (Also Andrea! Who did some much-appreciated post-publishing edits!)

**Warnings:** Past Dean/Bela. One brief instance of unprotected oral sex, one accidental pants-wetting (and subsequent embarrassment). References to alcoholism, depression, prison, addiction to bidding at auctions, the bad kind of BDSM, and John Winchester's abusive parenting. Plus all the kinky things listed in the tag box above. None of them are particularly hardcore, but they're in here. Also, fluff so sweet it may cause cavities.

HECK YEAH, CHRISTMAS FLUFF.
prevent a soliloquy

FERRETS!!!!
FREE TO 6 GOOD HOME
CHRISTMAS PRESENT FOR YOU
HAPPY FERRETS!!!!!!

Castiel stared at the pinboard for another seven seconds, squinting at the furiously pink paper and its obnoxious text. Each letter of the font had been changed to different sizes and colours, resulting in an eye-watering, yet somehow spectacular homemade advertisement. The bottom of the page had been cut into tear-away segments.

With a decisive hand, Castiel reached to tear off the third segment.

YES, I WANT FREE FERRET!!!!

While reading over the contact number on the paper, Castiel slid his other hand into the pocket of his jeans. He pulled out his cellphone and thumbed the screen unlocked. Still no messages. With a sigh, returned his phone to his pocket along with the paper.

His eyes wandered, but nothing else on the community college’s noticeboard caught his attention. He turned, checking if there was anyone else in the concourse outside the auditorium. Empty. It was dark outside now, save for the amber glow of the streetlamps.

Castiel checked his phone again. Just in case. There was nothing new, so he sent it back to sleep.

Then he checked it again.

He looked up a second later, hearing a glass door slam shut. His stomach leapt. “Dean!” he called, hurrying forward. “You missed the whole session. I showed everyone how to make cranberry sauce from scratch— Where were you?”

“Hey, Cas.” Dean ran his hand over his mouth. He approached looking windswept and anxious, only one sleeve of his red leather coat pushed up his arm. “Just runnin’ late. Life got in the way. How was class?”

“The Christmas spirit was incredible,” Castiel said, smiling. “Everyone was so excited. We had a few sauce spills, and some shrieking, but it was all in good fun. I, um, packaged up an extra jar of sauce for you, since you were tardy. I can’t believe you missed this,” he added, smile falling. “You were so looking forward to today, Dean.”

“Hey, I can make it up,” Dean said. “You’re teaching more classes after the new year, right? No big deal.” He frowned, shrugged, then rubbed his forehead with his fingertips.

“Dean?” Castiel stepped close, touching Dean’s shoulder. “Are you okay? You never get here this late.”

“What?” Dean glanced up. “Oh. Yeah,” he said, shaking his head. He grinned briefly. “‘M peachy.”

Castiel stared. Slowly, he tilted his head.

Dean swallowed, lowering his eyes. “Listen, uh... Something happened.”
“No shit,” Castiel uttered.

“Mind if we talk someplace else? Over dinner?”

“I’d love that,” Castiel said softly, taking Dean’s wrist. Dean nodded and turned away, and his wrist slid away from Castiel’s contact. Castiel went after him, checking his phone one last time. He immediately realised that was silly; Dean was clearly here now, he wouldn’t need to text.

With that, Castiel turned his phone off properly. Dean deserved his full attention.

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“Ooh, that’s for me,” Dean beamed, holding out his hands to accept his burger and fries like a child anticipating a parent’s embrace. The waiter ignored Dean’s beckoning and instead slid the plate in front of him. Dean shuffled happily in his seat, eyes turning to Castiel.

“Thank you,” Castiel said to the waiter, whilst whipping a cloth napkin out from its folds and tucking it under the collar of his shirt, protecting his necktie.

Dean dug into his meal, then took the ketchup when Castiel was done with it. He slathered sauce over the top of his fries, hitting the bottom of the bottle to whack it out in big red globs. “That’s my vegetables for the day,” he chuckled.

Castiel looked at Dean’s plate in disgust. “How are you meant to get an even distribution of ketchup like that? You’re meant to put it at the side.”

“Get lost,” Dean retorted, cramming a mouthful of fries between his open jaws. “Outside the kitchen, you ain’t the boss. I eat how I want.”

Castiel sneered for a while longer, then began to smile. He smirked down at his plate, somehow not truly repulsed by Dean’s gobbling. It was endearing, even.

“So,” Castiel said, patting ketchup from the sides of his mouth with his napkin, “Is it safe to ask where you were this evening?”

Dean scoffed, punching burger sauce from his chin. “I w’z at home,” he mumbled, giving a rough shrug. “Can I eat first, man? Get some courage in my belly.”

Castiel blinked acceptingly.

They ate in silence. Castiel watched the other people in the restaurant around them, all the walls gleaming in gold and ruby red. This wasn’t the sort of place Dean usually came to alone, but when Castiel invited him, this was their favourite place to go. The burgers were second to none.

Dean and Castiel sat at right-angles in a circular booth, Castiel with his back to the wall, Dean closer to the edge. Dean devoted himself to the food, but Castiel couldn’t keep his eyes from returning to his friend instead of his plate, a hundred questions bouncing around his brain. They were scratchy and energetic questions. Much like ferrets, he supposed.

Once Dean got to the final stages of his meal, he mopped up sauce drips with a bread roll, then sucked salt off his fingertips. He hummed in satisfaction, then sighed, leaning back in his seat to unbutton his jeans. His eyes were half-closed, a slow smile on his face.

“Dean,” Castiel began, curiously. He popped the last scrap of lettuce into his mouth, eying Dean with some caution. “Dean, what happened tonight?”
Dean immediately became guarded. He put on a pretend smile and looked away. “Does it matter? Hey, could we get dessert? C’mon, it’s Friday night. Christmas weekend special!”

“Not until you talk to me,” Castiel pressed.

Dean seemed tempted. “Can I get pie?”

“Yes, Dean, I’ll buy you some pie if you talk. Just let me—”

“Bela and I broke up.”

Castiel’s tongue stumbled on his unfinished sentence. “What?” he breathed.

“The engagement’s over.” Dean licked salt off his lips, eyes down. “Hell, it was about time, right?”

Castiel suppressed a shiver of gratification. He ought not feel smug about the dissolution of Dean’s half-planned marriage, but he couldn’t help it. “Well... yes,” he replied.

Dean looked up, startled at Castiel’s unsympathetic response.

“Ahm— Sorry,” Castiel smiled, head down. “You met Bela at my sister’s disaster of a wedding. Given they cheated on each other, then divorced a month later, I never thought it was a good sign.”

Dean rolled his eyes out towards the restaurant, folding his arms over the table. He wore a tiny smile, however, so he wasn’t truly resentful. “Maybe it would surprise you, Cas, but it wasn’t my commitment issues that dragged us apart.”

“Then what was it?”


“Opinions about putting ketchup on your food instead of at the side?”

“No, like whether we wanted kids or not,” Dean said. He frowned and gulped after he’d spoken. Castiel stared; that was the most serious thing Dean had confessed in months.

“Bela wanted—?”

“No, me,” Dean said. He tried to look Castiel in the eyes but failed, instead settling on the knot of Castiel’s tie. “I want kids. She didn’t. And won’t ever.”

“Not even adoption?”

Dean smiled, crinkles appearing at the corners of his eyes. Somehow, he looked sad. He shook his head. “Not even adoption. Christ, she didn’t even want even a dog. She likes her place spotless.”

“I like my place spotless.”

“Well, good thing I’m not marrying you, either, then,” Dean muttered, rolling his eyes to meet Castiel’s. “Look, when it came down to it, we just— We weren’t a good fit. Mostly what we shared was sex, y’know?” Dean huffed, suddenly avoiding Castiel’s gaze. “When you’re with someone, most folks need more than a good lay if it’s gonna last. I was into her when we were together, but when she wasn’t there, I... I dunno. I didn’t really miss her.”
Dean’s eyes settled on Castiel’s cheeks for a while. Perhaps he was thinking. His gaze was soft and considerate— And then he looked up, and Castiel saw affection he hadn’t seen in Dean for a while. Dean wasn’t smiling now, but he looked happier than he had when he was. How strange.

“Um,” Dean said quickly, looking away. He licked his lips twice. “So that’s all. That’s why I missed the meeting; Bela and I were having a real fun chat while she unpacked her travel bag. Can I get pie now?”

Castiel sighed with put-on resentment. “Fine. Order me a chocolate cake, please. Extra cream.”

“What happened to your quest to go sugar-free?” Dean queried.

Castiel raised a sharp eyebrow. “Oh, get lost, Dean,” he said, bluntly. “I’ll eat what I want.”

Dean’s smile was bright and radiant this time. He wandered away from the table, and he was still smiling when he looked back over his shoulder.

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They stopped in at a coffee house on the way to the parking lot. Castiel wanted hot chocolate, and Dean figured he might as well ‘come with’ since they were still deep in conversation about the exact nature of carpal tunnel syndrome. What Dean actually meant by “I’ll come with” was that he hoped he’d score a free drink. A drink he was refused, since Castiel had already bought dinner and dessert. So Dean bought his own coffee, and on impulse added a couple of chewy almond cookies for him and Castiel to share.

The back of the coffee house was warm and steamy, filled with cushy chairs and private corners to nestle and enjoy their sweet delights. Dean shed his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his plaid shirt, smiling to himself as he stirred the cinnamon sprinkles into his latte.

“You should’ve gotten decaf,” Castiel warned, licking foam off his own lip. “That’ll keep you awake.”

“I ain’t sleepin’ anyway,” Dean shrugged.

“Well you aren’t now, are you?” Castiel argued. “You may as well have tried. Bela doesn’t need to consume your every thought.”

Dean snorted brutishly, then sipped milk foam off his teaspoon in a rather more delicate manner. “I ain’t even heading home tonight,” he uttered a moment later, warming his hands on his mug, bowing his head to stare into its steaming swirls. “Bela and I were gonna take a trip. Christmas getaway, y’know? My mom has that cute little log cabin, up in the mountains. Always snows this time of year, it’s beautiful. You wouldn’t even believe it...” Dean raised his eyebrows, snowy imaginings stealing his sight. He stared through the table instead of at it.

Snapping back to his senses, Dean shook his head, lifting his coffee to his lips. He sipped noisily, then lapped away white bubbles, settling the mug back to its saucer. “Every year, my family used to go up there, ever since we were kids. Go tobogganing, play in the snow, climb trees. But, uh.”

He stopped.

Rather than speak, Castiel reached across the wooden table and touched Dean’s hand with his fingertips. The contact made Dean look up, and they shared a comforting moment. Dean’s long eyelashes fluttered, lips parting.
“I can’t believe it’s been three years,” Dean breathed. “Sam’s been at college that long. And I haven’t seen him or Mom in that whole time. Jesus. It kills me just thinkin’ about it.”

“You really miss your family, don’t you.”

“Like deserts miss rain,” Dean snorted, before gulping down some coffee. “I know you don’t relate – you got your toxic faction, and all – but…” He sighed sadly. “It shouldn’t be so damn hard to meet for Thanksgiving – or Christmas, at least. Half a continent away, and it takes three years to organise a meetup. It’s my fault. I know it’s my fault. I got so caught up chasing the stupid American Dream – wife, house, a good, steady job—”

“You forgot you had a home already waiting for you,” Castiel finished.

Dean pushed his lips together in a shrug. “It’s not like I regret it completely. If I hadn’t moved to Vermont, I never would’ve met you, y’know? Plus, more importantly, I never would’ve learned to cook so well.”

Castiel beamed, but tried to act humble. “You’re a good student. If you’d stayed with your family you would’ve learned from someone else.”

“Maybe. Maybe not.” Dean smiled into his coffee. Slowly, his smile faded. He swallowed. “Anyway,” he said. “That was why me and Bela were headed up there this year. Mom and Sam were gonna meet her for the first time. I— I made plans. I set this weekend to make the trip.” Dean swallowed, struggling to find his words. “This Christmas was meant to be the first time. First time all of us would be together. Happy family.”

“But now Bela won’t be joining you. The thought must be unnerving.”

“As I said, I wasn’t gonna sleep tonight. Just drive. My head’s clearest when I’m driving,” Dean stated, swirling his coffee in its mug. “I was just gonna hit the gas and head up there alone. Guess I’ll… break the news to Sammy and Mom once they arrive.”

“You shouldn’t drive at night,” Castiel warned. “Or stay in an isolated cabin with nobody else there.”

“Why?” Dean scoffed. “What am I supposed to be afraid of, man? I’d be the most dangerous thing up there.”

“Exactly.” Castiel gave Dean a hard look. “You’re emotionally volatile, Dean. A two-year relationship just ended. You’re driving up there to confront a past that no longer has an obvious future. No, don’t give me that look – you don’t seem devastated, I’ll give you that, but by no means are you a stable human being.”

Dean sucked on his own tongue, glaring. He grasped his coffee mug and tipped the dregs down his throat like a vodka shot.

The sight made Castiel realise something else. “There are bottles up there, aren’t there?” His voice sounded hollow, even to himself. “I can’t imagine a single snowy log cabin in existence with a crackling fire and no fifth of whiskey on hand.”

“So what?” Dean mumbled. “It’s not like I’m gonna head straight for the liquor cabinet.”

“So there’s a whole cabinet, is there?”

“It’s not a big deal, Cas, I can control myself.”
“I’m not saying you can’t,” Castiel assured him. “But, God, can you blame me for worrying? I know what you’re like when you’re upset, Dean. Nobody in their right mind drinks whiskey by the gallon.”

Discomfort played on Dean’s lips, but he didn’t offer a word in argument.

“Fine,” Dean sighed. He pulled out his phone from the breast pocket of his discarded jacket and unlocked the screen. “Fine, you win, asshat. I’ll take someone.”

“Someone,” Castiel echoed.

“Yeah. I need *some* chick to pretend to be my fiancée, right?” He grinned, shoving his thumb along his phone, scrolling something. “Hey, you ever use MatchBook?”

“No, what is it?” Castiel asked, cautiously.

“Dating app. It has this facial recognition thing, you can filter by the kind of nose you like, if you wanted.”

Castiel squinted. “That sounds... shallow.”

“Isn’t everything? Hey, look, how ‘bout her?” Dean showed Castiel a photo on the screen. “She’s local, online to chat now. And a doctor.”

Castiel stared until Dean pulled the phone away. She looked an awful lot like Bela.

“Dean,” Castiel said, sitting forward in his armchair. “Are you sure taking a stranger is the right way to go?”

“Who cares? Like you said, I just need someone to keep me outta the liquor cabinet. The guy who cleans the chimney at the cabin could do that. Hell, a well-trained squirrel could do it. It’s not like you need qualifications.”

“No, you need more than that,” Castiel insisted, taking the phone from Dean and laying it face-down on the table. “You need someone to talk to. Someone who understands the importance of you being there, in that cabin. Someone who can look after you.”

Dean started to grin. “You angling for a road trip?”

“No, I’m angling for your mental and physical well-being. If that includes a road trip, and a few days off work, then so be it.”

Dean gazed. Castiel gazed back. Their hands were still connected over Dean’s phone, warm and steady. Neither man blinked.

Eventually, Dean’s eyes dipped to Castiel’s lips, then back up. “Whatever,” he said carelessly, removing his hand from under Castiel’s, taking the phone with him. “Cute doctor girl can wait ‘til I get back, then.”

Castiel felt a pang of unhappiness at that remark, but he said nothing.

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“I thought you said you liked your place spotless,” Dean said, lifting a stack of papers to see the books underneath. “This place looks like a ransacked library.”
“I’ve been busy,” Castiel said in self-defense, tipping random necessities into his overnight bag as he saw them. “Do you have towels up at the cabin?”

“Probably, unless some mountain hikers looted the place,” Dean shrugged. He was still pawing at Castiel’s shelves. “Dude, I didn’t know you collected comic books.”

“I don’t any more, not since I stopped going to auctions,” Castiel muttered, checking his wallet was in his bag. “I collect scented candles now.”

“Yeah?” Dean grinned, looking around until he spotted a half-used candle on the knee-height coffee table, right beside an overgrown potted plant. He picked up the jar and inhaled, purring at the minty aroma. “Mm. You wanna bring a few? Might make the cabin smell all cosy.”

“They’re in my bedroom, careful you don’t knock anything,” Castiel called, heading into the bathroom first. He got his toothbrush, toothpaste, a nailbrush, shower gel, and a loofah, then headed back towards the bedroom. He went straight for his closet, taking Dean by the waist as they side-stepped the narrow alley between the candle shelf and the bed.

“Just pick a few, don’t stand there sniffing them all,” Castiel said, pulling underwear, shirts and sweaters into his bag without looking. “You’ll be here all night.”

“My question is,” Dean said, putting the lid on a third candle, replacing it on the shelf, “if you like a tidy place, what’s with all the junk? I mean, it’s nice junk, but I haven’t seen this much clutter since I dropped in at Bobby’s place.”

“Things pile up,” Castiel shrugged, counting out five pairs of thick woolly socks as he knelt on the rug. “Not just objects, but... events. Work. I haven’t had much free time.”

“Dude, how much work can there be?” Dean laughed, nose in another candle. He sat on the foot of the bed, socked feet crossed at the ankles.

“You’d be surprised,” Castiel said, reaching deep into his closet to get his toughest black boots. “Around Christmas, particularly, everyone and their fifth-favourite aunt wants a hand-painted sign, or a personalised greetings card done in calligraphy.”

“Hm’hhh,” Dean said, sighing into a jar of candy-floss-scented soy wax. He licked his lips, turning the jar to look at its label. “You ever think maybe you swapped one addiction for another?”

“What do you mean?” Castiel asked, getting to his feet, then bending down again to measure his boots against the sole of his foot.

“I mean... You quit bidding at auctions, right? You got addicted to the adrenaline rush and the prize at the end. You barely cared if it was something you wanted; you’d find excuses to want it. But now it’s candles.”

“Collecting things is normal,” Castiel replied, affronted. “Candles have an obvious purpose, and they make me happy.”

“Hey, not saying they don’t,” Dean said, hands up. “But you have several hundred here. You’re not the only one who gets to worry, all right?”

Castiel pushed up a smile, dumping his bag beside Dean’s hip. “What else do I need...?”

“Damn. What are you packing for, a trip to space? It’s a three-hour drive, Cas.”
“And a whole weekend after that,” Castiel said. “Oh, shoot, that reminds me—”

Castiel went to his painting desk in the living room, and hurriedly collected up all his unfinished signs. He looked around, put them down again, then upended a large cardboard box of clothes designated for charity donation, instead filling the box with signs. Dean stood watching as Castiel packed up his glitter and fancy paper, brushes between his teeth as he crammed acrylic paints and assorted craft supplies into a carry case. He spat the brushes onto the top of the pile, and sealed up the box with golden washi tape.

“Thought you said you were taking the weekend off,” Dean said.

“If I do that, I’ll fall behind schedule,” Castiel replied. “At least this will give me something to do.”

“There’s books up there, Cas. Old clothbound classics, Mom used to read them to us all the time. And a decent kitchen. It’s not like the place is void of entertainment. Besides, wouldn’t you – y’know – rather talk to me?”

Castiel smiled at Dean’s hopeful tone. “Perhaps I will. Now, hold this please,” he added, bending his knees to lift the box. He dumped it into Dean’s waiting hands, then he went to the kitchen to pick up some food.

“Don’t bother emptying the kitchen,” Dean called, turning sideways to see past the box. “Just bring the perishables, and some olive oil or something. I’m gonna make everything myself.”

“But I’m a chef,” Castiel complained.

“Yeah, and it’s my family,” Dean retorted. “You taught me how to cook, so let me lead for once. Don’t look so freaked out. I promise not to poison you, c’mon.”

“You’re telling me you want to use my olive oil and my eggs to feed your family—”

“I’ll buy some on the way, then!” Dean huffed. “Jeez.”

Castiel grinned. “I’m joking, Dean. Tell me what you need, I’ll pack it.”

They spent a few minutes filling an old milk crate with odds and ends – spatulas, greaseproof paper, food colouring, and a dozen other necessities. Right in the centre, Castiel placed the two jars of cranberry sauce he’d made as examples in his class tonight. Soon the crate was overflowing, and Castiel had to set it down before he could put on his winter coat, a nice double-layered trenchcoat he’d been delighted to find in a thrift store.

Castiel sloshed some water into the plant pot on the coffee table, and then declared he was ready to go, snatching up his apartment keys and tossing them in his hand.

Last of all, one finger pointed from room to room as he double-checked he had what he needed. Crate of food... check. And Dean had the craft box, check. Castiel spied a crumpled bag of candles Dean had picked out and left on the table, and he squeezed it to his side under one elbow, since now both his and Dean’s hands were full.

When Dean was already out of the door, Castiel hesitated. Should he go to the bathroom first?

Surely not. He was a full-grown adult. It was only a three-hour drive.

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“Are you kidding me? Are you actually kidding me.”

“It was a big hot chocolate!” Castiel complained. “No, I’m not kidding you.”

Dean growled. “We made it twenty minutes, man. You’re worse than Sam was when he was six.”

“Just pull over at the next gas station, Dean,” Castiel said bitterly. He tried his best to make Dean’s name sound like an insult.

Perhaps it worked too well; Dean didn’t speak for a full minute.

“I’m sorry,” Castiel said gently.

“Sorry? For what?” Dean glanced over.

Castiel raised his eyebrows. “For...”

“What, for needing to pee?” Dean laughed. “Naw, man, I was thinking about other stuff.”

“Like what?”

“Like Bela.” Dean managed a small smile. “I’m not mad at her, you know? I think whatever we had, it was over weeks before tonight. Months, even.”

Castiel hummed a note of laughter, staring at the dark road ahead, watching tail lights flicker in the distance. “I’m not surprised, really. Were you checking MatchBook while you were engaged?”

Dean’s shoulders sank. “Only, like, once a week. Out of curiosity, or whatever. Just seeing who else is out there.” Lightly, he pried, “You get that, right?”

“What I get is that you weren’t committed.”

“It’s not like Bela never checked out other guys,” Dean said, flaring his fingers off the steering wheel. “We both knew that if we were together we wanted to see other people.”

“You agreed on that.”

“Yeah.”

Castiel considered that in silence. “Is that something you’re always planning on doing, or was it just with Bela?”

Dean smirked. “Why’d you ask?”

“No reason,” Castiel lied.

Dean wet his lips with his tongue. “I figure I’ll settle. That need, that whole – ‘I wanna be with every girl at once’, that thing, it’ll stop eventually. I’ll hit forty, I’ll adopt kids, get a dog, and I’d get more comfortable existing without a girl in my life. I think that’s all it is. Discomfort. With Bela I never felt... comforted. She’s badass and she’s hot, but she ain’t exactly cuddly.”

A smile burst across Castiel’s face. “You like cuddling?”

Dean flustered. “What— No, I meant, she’s not the... the empathetic sort...” His eyes darted to Castiel’s twice, gleaming in a streetlight shine.
Castiel smiled back softly. “If I had anybody to cuddle with, I think I’d enjoy cuddling.”

“Puh,” Dean breathed, looking back at the road. “Should’ve known you were a softie. Scented candles. Giant fluffy cushion on the bed.”

“I appreciate comfort,” Castiel said. “Much like a cat.”

After a while, he looked over at Dean again. “Dean... I know you said you wanted a dog, but do you like cats?”

“Cats?” Dean turned his head away from the road for a little too long, enraptured by Castiel’s unflinching stare.

When Dean looked back at the road, he seemed breathless. “I mean... I never met a cat I liked enough to take home, but...” He licked his lips again. “But, um. I’m not opposed. To the whole idea. Of... cats. Cats can be cute. Cuddly, or... whatever. Good companions. Tough where it matters, right?” He glanced over once more, as if checking Castiel approved.

Castiel squinted. “I suppose so.”

“And— And cats are easier to look after than dogs,” Dean said. He seemed to be blushing. “Lower maintenance. Guess that’s the patriarchy talkin’, though. A cat who’s anything like you would want pampering. Not that I’d mind,” he said hastily. “Like, if there was a cat who – who wanted me back, I-I’d give him... whatever I could offer. Delicious home-cooked food. Loads of... hugs.”

Dean stared at Castiel, hands gripping the steering wheel a bit too tight.

“Uhm,” Castiel said, glancing warily at the road. Thankfully they were on a straight section. Castiel looked back at Dean. “And what about ferrets?”

Dean blinked. He turned back to the road and stared, unblinking. “Ferrets?”

“A kind of polecat. They look like stretched raccoons,” Castiel said. “Or a dry-land otter.”

“Oh,” Dean breathed. He exhaled again, grinning. “Oh, I thought you meant...”

“What?”

Dean’s lips rounded on nothing. “Um. Doesn’t matter. I thought we were doing metaphors.”

“Metaphors.”

“Yeah. Like you say one thing and you mean another—”

“I know what a metaphor is, Dean. What did you assume I was talking about?”

“Forget it,” Dean said, waving a hand between them. “Look, there’s a sign for an off-ramp. You still need to pee?”

Castiel settled Dean with a dull stare. “What do you think, Dean?”

Dean breathed out a laugh, and flipped on the indicator.

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Once over a curved bridge which took them to the other side of the road, they discovered a small
town with one main road, which most prominently featured a brightly-lit miniature mall. Inside, it was not unlike an airport. Warm fluorescent squares glowed on every second stripe of the ceiling, contrasting with the absolute blackness of night through the skylights.

Castiel headed straight for the bathrooms, and Dean decided to go too because he “might as well”. Castiel rolled his eyes. That coffee Dean had drunk was even bigger than Castiel’s hot chocolate.

They washed their hands side-by-side, and Dean dried his hands under the air-dryer, while Castiel tugged out the last paper towel. Dean followed Castiel back into the mall area, disgruntled that his hands weren’t quite dry. He was left with wet smears on his t-shirt when he gave in and wiped his hands down his front.

“You hungry?” Dean asked, when they were halfway back to the parking lot.

Castiel gave Dean a concerned look. “Your metabolism is truly something to behold.”

Dean smiled. “C’mon, let’s stock up. I don’t wanna be makin’ pit-stops every half-hour. Besides, three days in the mountains, Cas, there ain’t exactly grocery stores up there. Mom and Sammy are bringing the roast dinner, but we gotta keep ourselves going until then.” He said this while already heading into a grocery boutique, and he’d grabbed a cart before he’d finished his sentence.

Castiel put multiple cans of soup in their cart. He may have been gifted at making nearly anything taste nice with a little effort, but he still saw great value in any food that could be made edible with just a microwave.

Dean, however, chose fresh vegetables, fresh meat, fresh fish, six packets of winter seasoning, white wine, red wine, and mint sauce. Then bread and milk and eggs (yes, more eggs) and cereal and toilet paper. Then all the required ingredients to make apple pie, and gingerbread, and turkey stuffing. Last of all, Dean handed Castiel a frying pan to add to the cabin’s growing collection.

“I know you have a great affinity for home-cooked meals,” Castiel began, eyeing the second overflowing basket that Dean had hooked over his forearm, “but I didn’t realise you fancied yourself a professional chef.”

“Food distracts me,” Dean said simply. “When the going gets tough, I eat.”

Well, Castiel thought, that explained a lot.

With a checkout bill that totalled over one hundred and fifty dollars, Castiel surely thought Dean would be done trying to bankrupt himself and might focus on travelling again. But Dean handed more than half of the bags to Castiel, then dragged him by the lapel of his coat into a store right near the entrance of the roadside mall.

“This place is just full of useless tchotchkes,” Castiel frowned, following one step behind as Dean led him down aisles of Americana, garden gnomes, and tinsel.

“Yeah,” Dean said, with some enthusiasm. “Hey, look – hats.” He beckoned Castiel to a wall of costume headgear: feather-adorned pirate tricorns, detective deerstalkers, princess tiaras, and—

“Commander Castiel is on the bridge,” Dean announced, dropping a white sailor’s hat onto Castiel’s head. It flopped over his eyes, and Dean laughed as he pushed it up, fingering Castiel’s dark locks out of the way. “Cute.”

“Hmph,” Castiel said, secretly delighted.
“Pick one for me,” Dean said, looking eagerly at rows and rows of distractions. “How ‘bout this one?”

He held up a cowboy hat with a Sheriff’s star front-and-centre. Castiel looked at the hat, then looked at Dean. There was something boyish in his eyes right now, playful and excited. Damn. He really wanted to play dress-up.

Castiel sighed slowly. He put down some of the grocery bags and took the rest in one arm, then reached with a free hand to put the Sheriff’s hat onto Dean’s head. Dean slowly lifted his chin, a wide, flirtatious smile tugging at his lips. “Howdy, Cap’n. Name’s Dean Winchester. Sheriff Dean Winchester.”

“I probably outrank you in battle,” Castiel supposed, taking off his hat and looking at the fake emblem on the front.

“I’m fine with that if you are,” Dean said, grinning. He caught Castiel’s eyes and winked.

Castiel honestly didn’t know what to make of that exchange. He felt tingly.

Dean paid for both hats, and insisted Castiel wear his on the walk back to the car. Dean walked in a Wild West march that exaggerated his naturally bowed legs, his expression flipping between serious and giggly. Castiel had rarely seen him so elated. It was strange to see, but at the same time, it made Castiel worry about him a whole lot less.

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The closer they came to the mountain range, the more Castiel’s ears started popping. He was already tired – the clock on Dean’s phone said it was nearly eleven p.m. – however, he quickly discovered that his copious yawning worked to his advantage. Each time he moaned out a gaping yawn, his ears felt better.

The downside was that every time Castiel yawned, Dean would yawn mere seconds later. Each time, Castiel was immediately on full alert, making sure they wouldn’t run off the road if Dean had his eyes shut.

Now fewer cars passed by in the other direction. One every minute or less. Every pair of headlights was blinding, filling the car’s windshield with refractions that collected in the patterned swipes that the wipers had made last time it rained.

Up here, the sky was inky black. Stars were everywhere, sparkling all the way to the faded horizon.

Once they ascended in altitude, Castiel realised they were now the only ones up here. There were no lights where they were going. Beyond the area on the ice-dirt road which the headlights bathed in gold, they were driving into darkness.

Dean breathed out, and his breath formed into a cloud. He grinned.

It got quiet. Just the sound of the engine. Castiel had never heard a classic Chevy Impala’s engine so clearly. That deep roar was oddly soothing. When Dean let up on the gas or pushed his foot down on the pedal, the roar changed pitch.

The road leveled out a bit once they’d been climbing for what felt like half an hour, round and round the mountain, or zigzagging across one side. Slowly, Dean pulled the car into a gentle crawl, so gradual that Castiel could feel gravel under the tires. Dean stepped fully on the brake, then killed the engine.

“Listen,” Dean whispered. Breath fogged the inside of the windshield. He reached to his side and wound down the window, indicating that Castiel should too. Castiel did – and he gasped. Though he’d already been cold, freezing air flooded against his exposed neck, tightening his throat. His eyeballs stung, his fingers curled reflexively against his jeans.

And he listened, as Dean was doing.

Oh, dear God, that was quiet.

A faraway city gleamed in yellow, like single flecks of glitter on the horizon. Castiel could see the road they’d driven down: it was a meandering line of light, which ended abruptly. It was like wherever they were now, it was a void on Earth. This place may well have been uncharted for how it looked in the dark.

“Beautiful, ain’t it,” Dean whispered. He was pressed close, leaning forward to see the view out of Castiel’s window.

Castiel’s voice was tempered as he replied, “Yes.” Barely a breath; he saw the vapour curl against Dean’s stubbled jawline. Dean blinked once, inhaling. He swallowed, and the skin of his throat pulled tight to his jaw. He exhaled, turning his eyes to meet Castiel’s. They were inches apart.
Dean drew back, blinking rapidly. “Only a short way to go. It’ll start getting snowy soon. You warm enough?”

“I’m fine,” Castiel said truthfully. He was flushing hot from head to toe, and it was all Dean’s doing.

Dean wound up his window, leaving a crack open to keep condensation from forming on the glass inside. Castiel did the same, wanting to appreciate the smell outside. It was fresh, like nothing he’d ever known before. Crisp pine, iced rocks, and something he couldn’t quite put his finger on. It smelted... cold. He’d recognised it a few times over his lifetime, walking outside on especially frosty days, but never this strong. It hurt his nose.

Dean revved the engine to life, and it was startling in its loudness. As they began to climb again, the thunder of the engine was enough to make Castiel wonder what right humans really had to invade the planet the way they did. Here they were, powering upward on a road less travelled, burning up fuel made of dinosaurs pumped out of the sea. Sure, a car got the job done better than a horse would, but Dean’s Impala was a black devil on a rock carved by angels. Even in pitch-black oblivion, their sound shattered the serenity of this frozen world.

All thoughts of pollution quickly fell away as the road began to brighten. Dean was right: the snowline was nearby. Already there were occasional rainbow twinkles either side of the path, and within a minute, those twinkles were obviously white. Ice showed up in clumps, clinging to plants, settled between tufts of grass.

“Dean, look,” Castiel said in wonder, reaching to grab Dean’s leather-clad arm. Excitement raced in Castiel’s heart as they drove from a dull road onto a white one. The line was clear, and barely faded.

“Freezing point,” Dean said, almost to himself. He was smiling around his words.

The smell was stronger now. It chewed at Castiel’s senses like a waking dream, and he soon realised—

“That smell! It’s the smell of snow,” Castiel said in awe.

Dean chuckled as he looked over. “You never saw snow before?”

“I lived in the city all my life,” Castiel replied, still hearing awe in his tone. “Snow smells polluted and dirty, and whatever touches the ground turns into brown mush. It’s so clean and white up here. My God, Dean, look at it. How can you even see the road?”

“I can’t,” Dean admitted. “There’s no markers. Let’s just pray we don’t go over the edge.”

“This is exciting,” Castiel said, sitting forward in his seat with his hands clutched between his thighs. He was shaking slightly, from the cold, and from elation. “How much farther?”

“Don’t know,” Dean said, ducking his head, trying to see the peak of the mountain through the windshield. “Not far.”

They came to another level platform, where the snow seemed as deep as the wheel’s rims. Dean had been driving slower and slower as he became more unsure about the road, and now he pulled to a halt.

“Here,” he said, reaching over Castiel’s lap to the glove compartment. “Grab a flashlight. There’s a bend in the road somewhere around here, and I can’t be sure where the cliff edge is unless I see it.”
Castiel’s heart dropped. “See,” he said. “This is why you shouldn’t have come up here alone.”

Dean snorted. “If I’d come up here alone I’d only be dooming myself. It’s the car I’m worried about. And you, I guess.”

An alarming thought struck Castiel, as chilling as his first breath of cold air. “Does anyone even know we’re up here? What if we do run off the road?”

“Hey, Mom and Sammy’ll be here in a couple days,” Dean said, climbing out of the car.

Offended by that, Castiel got out the other side, carefully. He almost leapt out of his skin when his boots sank down in a crunch of snow, covering him all the way up to his ankles. “Dean,” he said, trembling. “Dean, I agreed to a weekend retreat to a cosy firelit cabin, not a weekend trapped in a hand-dug igloo with you.”

“You make it sound like that wouldn’t be fun,” Dean said, his voice muffled by the cold air. His flashlight beam swept the surrounding area, bright through misty, humid emptiness. He made his way over to Castiel, offering a hand. Castiel took it, and bravely followed where Dean led.

They waded ahead of the car by a few feet, making fresh tracks in virgin snowfall. Castiel watched his feet more than the road ahead, but he felt safe with Dean’s hand around his own. They were both just as cold and shivery as each other.

Castiel felt a sudden weight yank on his hand, and he dropped to his knees, clinging to Dean as both flashlights toppled five feet down, spinning, landing with a plaff!-plaff! in a snowbank. Dean was barely holding on to the cliff face, fingers latched around a rock. There was snow beneath him, but who could say how sturdy that would be?

“Ha,” Dean laughed, exhilarated. “Found the turn.”

“Dean,” Castiel panted, both hands wrapped tight around Dean’s wrist. “Oh, I’m going to kill you. I’m going to fucking kill you.”

“Whoa, whoa,” Dean said placatingly. “Chill out, dude. Just pull me up.”

Castiel felt tears of terror in his eyes. “How can you be so calm?! You’re rehanging off a cliff on a mountain and nobody knows we’re here.”

“Cas,” Dean said, all the laughter gone from him. “Cas, it’s okay. You’re strong enough, man, just pull me up.”

“I don’t have muscles like you, I only do yoga!”

Dean grinned. “If you can lift yourself on your hands, you can lift me. C’mon.”

Castiel felt a tear drip off his nose and saw it smash onto Dean’s face.

“Ow,” Dean said.

Castiel gulped. He let out a slow, measured breath, then looked deep into Dean’s eyes.

“On three,” Dean said, gazing back. “One. Two.” He licked his lips, gripped the rock even harder, and squeezed Castiel’s hand with all his might. “Three!”

Together they heaved, and Castiel – he didn’t know how, he really didn’t – pulled Dean not only off the edge of the cliff, but all the way up onto solid ground, and let him collapse on top of
Castiel’s own body.

Dean grunted, rolling off onto his back. He laughed.

“Dean, how could you— How dare you— I can’t even believe you’d—”

“Shh,” Dean grinned, rolling halfway over again, caressing Castiel’s cheek with an ice-cold hand. “Mission accomplished, Commander. All personnel present and correct.”

Castiel burst into hysterical laughter, covering his face with his hands. Dean lay down beside him and laughed too.

Eventually, they took deep breaths, and they opened their eyes to stare at the stars.

“Hm,” Dean sighed, wriggling an inch closer to Castiel for warmth. The ground was overwhelmingly cold at their backs.

“All right,” Castiel said tearfully. “All right, I suppose that was a tiny bit fun.”

“You think you’d ever go mountaineering?” Dean asked.

“Over my dead body.”

Dean snickered, and with the utmost care for where he put his feet, he stood up. He offered Castiel both hands, crossed at the wrists.

When they were both standing, Dean looked over the edge with his hands on his hips. Their flashlights were going to stay there. “Good thing cats like us have nine lives, huh.”

“Good thing,” Castiel agreed. He stood for a moment longer, staring into the sky ahead. What a good thing indeed.

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“There she is,” Dean smiled. “Home sweet log cabin.”

Solar lights glowed at the edges of the driveway, their tops buried beneath a translucent inch of snow. Dean guided the Impala into a undefined parking bay. When the car parked and stalled, the headlights reflected directly back through the windshield off the brown wood of the lodge.

Castiel looked back over his shoulder. There were pine trees all around, but none so close that they blocked the view off the mountain.

He sighed in relief, sinking down in his seat. Dean looked over at him, smiling fondly. “How’s about we unpack, yeah? I’ll light a fire, get the water tank heating. You make us some soup.”

“Fine by me,” Castiel agreed.

They opened their doors simultaneously, and again, Castiel was startled when he found himself ankle-deep in white powder. It kind of clung to him, like it didn’t want to let go. And boy, was it cold. His toes tingled in a painful sort of way.

The moon had risen as they’d reached their destination; now the snow glowed blue, and it was bright enough to see by. Castiel took careful steps around the front of the car, first following Dean to the cabin’s front door. Everything in moonlight was a shade of cobalt, but closer to the cabin, Castiel could see the redness in his own cheeks and nose. Another solar light hung from the porch
awning, this one classic-looking, made of black wrought iron, all four sides of the glass frame speckled with frozen bug caracasses.

Dean fiddled with a keyring, sorting through keys until he found the right one. He jammed it in the door, turned it until the door clicked open – then he left it there, nodding Castiel back to the car. “Let’s grab everything all at once, or we’ll end up leaving snowy puddles inside.”

Castiel blew hot air between his numb hands, trotting paces behind Dean. Dean went to the trunk of the car and opened it wide, first handing the biggest item to Castiel: the box of craft supplies. He then plopped Castiel’s captain hat on his head.

Castiel dutifully carried the box to the cabin, shouldering open the door as he reached it. The door was stuck, but it juddered open as he forced it again. The inside was dark like the night sky, but it smelled like ancient pine, old furniture, and stale bedsheets in an attic. It was noticeably less icy than outside.

Castiel placed his box only a foot inside the door, then went back to get what Dean handed him. First, the crate of kitchen stuff. Then groceries, groceries, more groceries, and a ten-pack of toilet paper.

Dean went back to the car, moving in jumps to keep himself warm.

When Castiel returned, Dean was holding a duffel bag, wearing his cowboy hat, still staring into the trunk. “Uhhh, Cas?”

“What?”

“You did put your bag in the car, right? Your clothes and stuff?”

Castiel stared.

Dean lifted a bag of candles, waggling it. “Apart from my stuff, this is all that’s in here.”

Castiel gaped, then quickly checked the backseat – but Dean shook his head. “I didn’t put anything back there,” he said.

“Dammit,” Castiel said, dragging the back of a hand under his damp nose. “I left it on my bed. I thought you got it.”

“I was carrying your box!” Dean exclaimed. “You took the candles, the crate, and your keys—”

“So it’s still on my bed.” Castiel sighed, bumping his necktie with his chin.

Dean slammed the trunk with a huff. “Sorry, man. There’s enough t-shirts and socks in my bag for the two of us, though. And there’s blankets inside.”

“Great,” Castiel said, without intonation. “That’s perfect, isn’t it.”

He turned and stalked back to the cabin. He was halfway there when— Paff! A burst of white struck the back of his shoulder.

Narrow-eyed, Castiel turned around. Dean giggled. He ducked behind the car, eyes visible over the top. After a moment of disbelief, Castiel found himself hit with another projectile.

“Dean!”
“Where’s your sense of humour?” Dean complained, taking cover behind the car again. “How have you gone your whole life without seeing snow and not be curious about playing with it?”

Castiel set his jaw. “I’m an adult.”

“Suck-ass.” Dean leapt up and launched a third snowball at Castiel. It shattered on his chest, leaving a burning-cold splotch. Castiel looked down, watching fragments of ice topple away, catching on his shirt buttons. The rest melted into the white cotton.

Castiel exhaled, shoulders slumping. He stared, and saw Dean’s hat and forehead slowly emerging from behind the car, peering inquisitively across the roof.

A sly smile spread over Castiel’s face. If Dean wanted a snowball fight, he was going to get one.

Castiel bent to scoop up a giant handful of snow. It wasn’t as easy as it was in cartoons – snow was resistant to squishing, and it shuddered in spikes, and it was painfully cold. But Castiel put together a shape that looked like the inside of his fist, and he hurled it at Dean. It skidded over the roof of the car and showered Dean, making him shriek. “Cold! Cold! Went down my neck!”

Castiel laughed, head back. And he was hit in the throat by another smash of snow. It wasn’t even a snowball, it was just fluff.

Dean went, “Hee, hee, hee.”

“Oh, you’re gonna get it,” Castiel muttered darkly, lowering his chin and locking his eyes on his target. He squatted down and scooped together as much snow as he could, scraping it into a little mountain. He crushed it, blocked it up, and lifted it. It fell apart. He crouched down and tried again.

“Havin’ trouble, partner?” Dean asked in a western drawl, leaning casually against the side of the car’s hood, on Castiel’s side. The moment Castiel looked up, Dean dumped snow in his face.

“Ga-AAAH!” Castiel shouted, grabbing his tie and trying to shake the snow away from his nipples.

Dean bent over backwards, laughing his ass off. His eyes were squinted thin, his hands open and knees weak. He stumbled a few steps, and his breathless moment gave Castiel a chance to kick snow into his crotch. Dean leapt, suddenly serious. He kicked back – but not fast enough. Castiel finally managed to form a snowball, and it shot at Dean like a rock.

“Yow!” Dean shouted, grabbing his arm in pain. “Dude!”

“Sorry,” Castiel laughed.

“Ffff,” Dean snarled. Quickly, he responded with a properly-made snowball.

Castiel took note of its lighter consistency: not snowflakes, but not so tightly-formed that it hurt on contact. He was grateful Dean allowed him some time to make one right. But when he got the chance to throw it, Dean had prepared three.

One hit Castiel in the ear. One skimmed his captain’s hat. And the third hit Castiel’s only snowball in mid-air, exploding them both. Specks slid down the Impala’s windows, leaving fast-icing streaks.

Castiel exhaled in a puff of vapour, shaking out his hands to get the blood flowing. Dean attempted to make one more snowball, but for once, Castiel beat him to it. Dean’s cowboy hat was knocked
clean off, and he was left startled and shivering.

They threw snow haphazardly, bodies aching and quickly becoming stiff, but they were both so cold that their shots missed their mark most of the time. Castiel’s crowning moment was when he hit Dean in the ass and made him yelp. They both laughed, but their laughter was no longer raucous, only breathy and trembling. Castiel’s teeth were chattering.

“I th-thi-think it’s-s time to go inss-s-side,” Dean managed, wiping his red nose with a clawed hand. He put his hat on again. “G-Gotta get that fire goin’. Could you get my bag? It’s on the trunk.”

“Mmuh,” Castiel replied. He hobbled around the car to collect Dean’s duffel bag and the candles, then hobbled back to follow Dean into the cabin.

Dean went deep into the house, calling back that he was going to switch the electric box on. Once that was done, he hit the wall a few times to find the light switches, and when he did, the first room was filled with a pleasant gold wash from the side sconces.

Castiel grinned. He was standing in a wooden living room, horizontal logs making up every wall, a fireplace on his left. A painting of a moose was nailed on the opposite wall. In front of that, an antique lion’s foot couch was placed several feet forward, as the centrepiece of the room. Another floral couch sat at a right-angle, piled up with plaid blankets.

“I present to you: the Winchester-family log cabin,” Dean said. “Welcome home, Cas.”

Castiel just smiled.

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Castiel sat cross-legged, a foot away from where his coat was draped over the fire grate, steaming. White swirls rose in visible droplets, twirling and dancing towards the dark ceiling rafters. The electric lights were off again: the fire served to brighten the room perfectly in sparkling orange. Castiel’s right cheek burned hot in such a satisfying way.

“Yo,” Dean said, making his way in from the hallway. He’d been in and out of the two bedrooms for the last half-hour, putting clean sheets on the beds. “You taking the couch or the bed, Cas?”

“Aren’t there three beds?” Castiel asked, voice thick and slow, aching from fatigue. He turned his head to warm the other cheek, and to look at Dean.

“The two single beds are for Mom and Sammy,” Dean said. “The double was for me and Bela.”

Castiel turned his gaze down and stared at his wriggling toes. “Are you comfortable sleeping alone in a bed meant for two?”

“I’ll play you for it,” Dean said, holding out a hand flat, his other fist curled atop it. “Rock-paper-scissors, on three.”

“I want the couch,” Castiel said, just as Dean played paper. Dean’s hands relaxed.

“But the fire is so delightful, eh?” Dean grinned.

“Let it snow, let it snow, let it snow,” Castiel sang. His deep voice vibrated in the back of his throat. Dean bit his bottom lip, still beaming. “Fine by me. See ya in the mornin’, Cas.”
“See you.”

Dean hesitated instead of leaving. “Listen... Um. Not to pressure you or anything, but wouldn’t you rather wear some clean underwear? I can smell the mountain slush on you from here. And your shirt’s soaked through on the back.”

Castiel rolled a shoulder, saying nothing.

Dean sighed. He went to the floral couch, where he’d left his duffel bag. “You a boxer or briefs guy?”

“Boxers,” Castiel said.

“Well, I got boxer-briefs, close enough,” Dean offered, tossing a clean pair onto Castiel’s damp knee. “I want those back, so you better not stretch them out.”

Castiel smiled widely, turning his chin down so Dean didn’t see. “I’m flattered you think I might.”

“Wow,” Dean scoffed under his breath, “have you looked between your legs recently?”

Castiel glanced back over his shoulder, wondering if he was even meant to have heard that.

Dean lifted a cotton t-shirt out of his bag, shaking it free of wrinkles. “Here.” He returned to Castiel’s side, bumping him in the thigh with a bare foot. “Shirt.” He dropped the shirt on Castiel’s lap. “Sweet dreams, Asstiel.”

“How dare you. I saved your life tonight.”

Dean made a smiley noise. “Sweet dreams, angel?”

“That’s more like it.”

Dean laughed breathily, nudging Castiel’s thigh again, toeing his leg hair the wrong way.

“Night.”

With that, Dean left the room with his duffel bag in one hand, his other hand spread back through his rumpled brown hair. Castiel let his eyes lower at the last second – Dean’s bowed legs were bare below his mid-thighs, and surprisingly unhairy.

Castiel smiled when Dean was gone.

Castiel then took Dean’s t-shirt in both hands. He moved slowly, considering and reconsidering how appropriate he was being – but eventually he raised it to his face. He shut his eyes, crumpled the soft fabric around his muzzle, and breathed in.

Mostly, Dean’s shirt smelled like the damp insides of a wintery duffel bag. But it also smelled like fabric softener, and engine oil, and Dean’s intimate scent. Brutish and stubborn and delicate, all at once. Like black river rocks with little daisies growing between the cracks, caressed by spring sunlight.

Castiel exhaled, rubbing his lips back and forth on the ribbed collar of the shirt. Letting it drape over his knee again, he moved his hands to undo his button-down so he could change.

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an artist requires tea and music

Brrrp... Flblbblblblkkkkk.

Castiel’s eyelids fluttered, a frown appearing between his brows.

kKKKKHHHH. best thing for an uneventful AAAAALLLL!

Castiel sat up straight, on full alert. His eyes refused to open. “Wah?” He frowned again. “Dean?”

The rattling, spitting, fuzzy noise fell away to almost nothing. “Shit. Sorry, man.” Dean’s voice came from the same place the other noise had some from. “Didn’t mean to wake you. Couldn’t find the volume knob.”

Castiel rubbed his fists against crusty eyes, all his limbs feeling displaced and heavy. “What time’s it?”

“Uh.” Dean fidgeted nearby. “Almost three. Couldn’t sleep.”

Castiel finally got his eyes focused, and he blinked hard. Ahead, there was a wide sliding door that led through to the kitchen. The light was on, and Dean’s silhouette moved to lean against the door jamb with rugged casualness.

“We got a bit of radio signal here,” Dean explained, lifting the boxy silver-and-black radio he’d been adjusting. Its antenna was fully extended. “No cellphone signal, though, and no wi-fi. Landline still works, but the connection’s patchy. I called Sam, he says they’ll be here by tomorrow. They haven’t left Illinois yet, still a timezone behind. Oh – and the water’s hot now, so you can take a shower if you want.”

“Why are you still up, Dean,” Castiel uttered, struggling to make his voice audible.

Dean shrugged. “Coffee with a double shot. Endless cycle of negative thoughts. Unfamiliar bed. The sound of the wind, cold draft, bright moonlight through a thin curtain. I like to think of it as an insomniac’s smorgasboard. Take your pick.”

Castiel felt a pang of sympathy. Not for Dean’s conscious decision to over-caffeinate himself, but for the endless cycle of negative thoughts, first and foremost. “I’m sorry,” Castiel said.

Dean shook his head. “Figured I’d just work off some energy poking around this place. There’s no TV, so.” He waggled the radio. “Next best thing. If I can find a decent station, that is.”

“Well, don’t let me trying to *sleep* stop you,” Castiel said, verging on testy.

Dean chuckled. “I said I’m sorry. What d’you want, hot tea and a bedtime story?”

Castiel couldn’t really respond with venom to that; the idea sounded pleasant. “Is there tea?”

“Really, man?” Dean grinned, reaching back to dump the radio on the nearest kitchen surface. “Yeah, there’s tea. It’s all weird fruity stuff my mom likes. Been here for years.”

“I’ll take whatever isn’t stale.”

Dean rolled his eyes, then his shoulders, then his whole body as he clumped deeper between the kitchen’s double-galley workstations, opening high cupboards as he went.
While Dean worked on locating the tea, Castiel made a trip to the bathroom. Beside the sink, he discovered a pair of toothbrushes that hadn’t been there before, one with all the bristles bent (that had to be Dean’s), and one brand new, which Castiel could only assume was for him. It was bright orange and absolutely tiny – a child’s size – but it was certainly better than nothing. It had probably been stored in a cupboard for decades.

Castiel returned, reaching for a woollen blanket to wrap around his shoulders. He walked barefoot into the kitchen, leaning on the door jamb Dean had leant on before. There he was: Dean Winchester, trying really, really hard to pour an equal amount of hot water into a pair of glazed brown mugs.

“Leave the teabag in,” Castiel said, before Dean dared reach for a teaspoon. “I like my tea strong.”

“Same way you like your men?” Dean teased, one eyebrow up.

Castiel laughed around a gape of surprise. He didn’t have a good comeback, so he pretended to be enticed by the tea instead. He followed Dean back into the living room, inhaling the steam of a red berry and liquorice brew.

“Ahh,” Dean sighed, sinking down onto Castiel’s sofa cushions. “One for me. Aaand one for you.”

“Thank you, Dean,” Castiel said, sitting beside him and taking the mug he was offered. “So. About that bedtime story...”

“What? Cas, I was kidding...”

Dean stared at Castiel for a moment. Castiel stared back. He noticed Dean had deep shadows in his eye sockets, and the rims of his eyes were red. Either he was especially tired, or he’d been crying. Perhaps both.

Dean swallowed, facing his tea, blowing steam away from its fluttering red surface. “Well, if you insist—” Dean pushed his lips together, a sort of shrug. “There’s one story that comes to mind. Been thinkin’ about it a lot recently, if ’m honest.”

Castiel sipped enough tea to taste it, not enough to burn his tongue. He watched Dean carefully.

Dean sighed. His gaze slipped away from his tea, moving to focus vaguely on the fire, seven feet before them. “Hope you’re not looking for a happy story, Cas.”

“If you tell it, I’ll appreciate it,” Castiel promised. “I’m listening, Dean.”

Dean forced a small smile. “First time me and my family came up here, to this place. You remember?”

“Yes, you told me while lying drunk on my couch on New Year’s Eve,” Castiel nodded. “I wouldn’t mind hearing it again.” If it was weighing on Dean’s mind, it was worth reviewing.

Dean cleared his throat. “Well. My dad. He...” Dean immediately began to frown. “Look – you know it, I know it, no point repeating the whole damn thing.” He waited a beat, then forged ahead anyway. “Short version: happy nuclear family goes up in a mushroom cloud when husband comes home drunk one too many times. Kids scared and crying, wife scared and crying, wife gets in car and drives. Doesn’t come back.”

Dean took a gulp of tea, apparently too preoccupied to notice it was scalding hot. He swallowed without a flinch. “Mom drove us from town to town... I kind of remember, there was a few days – I
was six or seven years old. I remember being glad I wasn’t at school. It was like a spontaneous vacation. You know how a kid doesn’t always see things how adults see it. Right then, I loved my mom for making me miss History Week with boring old Mr. Wiper. I mean, I understood that Dad was violent, but it felt temporary. I dreaded going back home, because it seemed obvious we were going back. But once I missed History Week, History Week was over forever, and I was never going to have to sit through that.”

Dean again sipped his tea, smacking his lips a few times. “Is that liquorice?” he mumbled. He raised his eyebrows and slurped another mouthful.

“So like I said. We went from town to town, looking for places to stay. I guess someone told Mom there was an empty cabin up here, because she paid the rent on the spot. We mortgaged it years later. But the first night, we bought groceries, new towels – maxed out Mom’s card. We had nearly nothing from then on. But it was all good for a few days. We came up here just as dawn hit, and it started to rain. And there was thunder rolling. I— I remember—”

Dean stared blankly for a few seconds. Then he began to grin, stars in his eyes. “She opened up the front windows. Made it freezing in here, but we wanted to watch the rain. Sat on the couch – this couch, it used to face the windows – and me and Sammy drank tea and huddled around her. The sun came up over the mountains ahead, and God... it was so beautiful, Cas. There was frost on the tree branches, dripping gold when the sun hit them.”

Dean smiled widely. “That was when Mom said, we’re staying. We’re spending Christmas here, and she promised us, if she could find work locally then maybe we’d never have to leave.”

Dean swallowed, sinking down in his sofa crease. “She started to sing. Honestly, I don’t know if this is a real memory – it could’ve been cut and pasted from any other day we spent here. But I remember it from the first day. It was one of her favourite songs, slowed down...”

Dean drew in a deep breath, shutting his eyes. “Ca-rry on, my way-ward so-ons... There’ll be peace, when you... are... done...”

It sounded like a lullaby, or something from a music box. It was patient and soothing, nothing like the rock-and-roll anthem its lyrics once belonged to.

Dean opened his eyes, blinking sleepily. “Lay... your weary head, to rest...”

Dean yawned, deeply, and for a long time. When he caught his breath, his chin was pressed to his sternum, and his eyes were closed.

Castiel smiled, reaching to take Dean’s half-finished tea from his hands before it could fall. “Oh, don’t you cry, no more,” he finished, gentle enough that he wouldn’t wake Dean.

Castiel drank most of what was left of Dean’s tea, then his own, and he set both mugs aside on the floorboards. He took Dean around the waist and lay him down lengthways, Castiel’s own pillow tucked under his neck.

“Hmmh,” Dean said.

“Shh, it’s all right,” Castiel said. “I’m still here. Just sleep.”

Dean’s eyelids fluttered, and his hands relaxed, one curled around Castiel’s.

Castiel bent to kiss his forehead, because it seemed like the thing to do. Slowly, he moved off the couch, and without letting his hand slip away from Dean’s, he reached to get the cushions and
blankets from the other couch. He revealed a long-forgotten collection of toy army men in the couchbase as he did.

He set his new bed on the floor parallel to Dean. Quietly, he settled down to rest, eyes on his friend.

For a number of minutes, he stroked his thumb along Dean’s hand, enjoying the silky sensation of his skin against his own.

Dean looked childlike in his sleep. Pouty lips, soft tongue that lapped out occasionally. The sight made Castiel feel... adoration. He’d never felt it so strongly before.

Like Dean had, Castiel fell asleep before he expected to. Warmth surrounded him and cocooned him, comforting, beckoning him into an all-consuming darkness. Like the choice Dean’s mother had made many years ago, it was the right time to go, and, once safe, it was all too easy to stay.

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Castiel woke up to the sound of music. He was of the opinion that music ought to be pleasing to the ears, or at the very least, invoke some sort of emotional response. His sole response, upon waking and hearing music that morning of December 23rd, was to cover his ears with a pillow.

“Somethiiing somethiiing! Old long signs, my dear, la... la. Take a cup of kindness yet, for days of... mhmhm... Ba ba ba. Run slopes and daisies, yet, pick’d em? What? We’ve wandered many weeeeary foot—Siince ooold looong signs.”

The recently-purchased frying pan hit the bottom of the kitchen sink with a clatter.

“Nnn,” Castiel complained, rolling onto his front and wrapping both arms over his pillow.

“Mornin’ Cas,” Dean chirped, entering the room altogether too loudly. “It’s seven-thirty, rise and shine! Since you’re awake, you want some breakfast?”

“Nn,” Castiel said, lifting his arm enough to glare at Dean’s bare feet, which stepped and spun cheerfully on the floorboards. Between Dean’s ankles, Castiel saw the fire had burned low, and was now simmering with red embers in a humongous bed of grey ash.

“Was that a yes?” Dean sat down on Castiel’s makeshift bed with a grunt, shoving Castiel over a few inches. Dean’s fingers walked up Castiel’s spine, making him squirm. Dean just laughed. “C’mon, get your ass outta bed. There’s Cinnamon Toast Crunch, or I can do you a hot plate. There’s sausages already goin’.’” He patted Castiel’s ass twice, getting to his feet again. “Come pick so we can eat together.”

Once Dean was gone, Castiel let out a sigh of relief.

Yet, as annoying as he was, Castiel kind of wanted Dean back again.

Castiel took another few minutes to reacquaint himself with his body, stretching his feet in turn, then moving into the Cat Pose, hands and knees on the cushions, curving his back upward. He held that pose for ten... twenty... thirty seconds, then pushed himself into Downward Dog to ease out the tightness in his back. He swept his hips down, straight into the Cobra pose, groaning at the pull in his throat as he tipped his shoulders back. His hips ached, not to mention his shoulders. He didn’t know what he’d pulled last night, hauling Dean off the side of the mountain, but he truly felt the repercussions.
Exhausted already, Castiel flopped face-forward into his pillow, then rolled onto his back, crossing a thigh over himself, letting his hips relax.

“You need help untangling yourself, there, buddy?” Dean asked, wandering in with a plate in either hand.

“Nn,” Castiel said, rolling to stretch the other thigh. He scowled, withholding a far ruder response.

“Not a morning person, huh.” Dean grinned, pulling a fold-out table down off the wall and wheeling it over to the second couch. One wheel squeaked.

“I need at least seven hours of sleep, Dean,” Castiel exhaled, sitting up at last, squinting. “I don’t know how you can function on four.”

“Habit,” Dean shrugged. “If you had anywhere near as much sex as I have, you’d get used to it.”

Castiel glared. He stood up, not caring that his morning wood was showing through his borrowed too-tight boxer-briefs. Neither did he care that Dean was staring. “I’m going in the shower,” Castiel said, slinking off. He didn’t look back. But he felt Dean’s gaze following him.

Twenty minutes later, Castiel returned to the living room, expecting to find empty breakfast plates and Dean washing up in the kitchen. But Castiel lowered the towel from his damp hair, and found Dean in the same place he’d left him: sitting on the floral couch, now hunched over a book. Beside him, both plates had gone untouched.

“Food’s cold,” Dean said, not looking up.

Castiel leaned close, reaching to pick up a sausage. Dean’s eyes swung to watch it move to Castiel’s mouth, half of it devoured in one bite.

“Still tastes good,” Castiel shrugged, chewing. He met Dean’s eyes, and Dean failed to withhold a smirk.

“You really aren’t into mornings,” Dean said.

“No,” Castiel agreed. He held Dean’s eyes for a bit longer, then lowered his gaze to his lips. Then back up. “Now would be a very good time to offer me coffee.”

Dean continued to smirk. “What kind?”

“The hot kind.” Castiel reached down again and took another sausage, this time from Dean’s plate. Dean made a loud noise of complaint, thinking his food was being purloined, before he realised Castiel was lifting it to his mouth. Dean’s mouth closed around the sausage he was offered, and all complaints were thereby stifled.

“You know, I like you better like that,” Castiel uttered, raising an eyebrow.

“Hmh?” Dean bit the sausage, taking the other half between his fingers. “Thick wad of meat in my mouth?”

“No; quiet,” Castiel corrected. He couldn’t help but grin, seeing Dean’s disgruntled expression. “I’m joking, Dean. You can talk and sing all you like – if you can call it singing. Just, please – if you’re going to yodel along to the radio, know the lyrics first. It’s called Auld Lang Syne, an old Scottish song, meaning ‘times gone by’. It’s about remembering old friends.”
Dean ate the rest of his sausage without reluctance.

Castiel watched him eat, almost forgetting for a while that he had to eat too. It was only when Dean stood up and guided Castiel’s sausage-holding hand back to his mouth that Castiel realised he’d been staring.

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Dean was restless. He’d cleaned the whole kitchen, then the bathroom, and now he was pacing, fidgeting, sighing and huffing and fretting.

“If you sigh one more time, I’m painting a goddamn butterfly on your face,” Castiel threatened, looking up from his work.

Dean smirked back. “Dunno about you, but that sounds like fun.”

Castiel’s eyes flicked upward. “Either sit down, or go and stand outside. I can’t concentrate with you so... chirpy.”

Dean sat on Castiel’s left, both on the lion-footed couch, Dean silent as he watched Castiel do his work. According to his notebook, crammed with his clients’ exact specifications, Castiel had a lot of calligraphy to get through. Distractions were the last thing he needed. So for a long time he was grateful, therefore, that Dean only breathed. His leg jiggled occasionally, but Castiel set it out of his mind.

But then Dean watched Castiel paint in a ribbon below the letter ‘Z’, swooping and swirling until the paint ran out.

“Damn,” Dean whispered. He huffed out a smile. “All in one go, too.”

“It takes practice,” Castiel replied, hoping that would answer any questions Dean might be compelled to ask.

“How do you keep your hand so steady?” Dean asked.

Castiel’s eyes flicked over to his friend. “Practice,” he said again.

“Yeah, but,” Dean shuffled forward in his seat, and his scent rushed through Castiel’s breathing air, making him blink twice. “But how’d you know where to put all the swirlies? How’d you make it fit so perfectly in the space you have? Dude, you didn’t even draw it out first. How do you not miss a letter?”

“Dean,” Castiel smiled unevenly, lifting his brush from the sign, lest he accidentally write the word ‘practice’ instead. “I’ve done this for many years. It’s not as if I haven’t mentioned it.”

“I never saw you in action before,” Dean said. “When you said ‘signwriting’ I kind of pictured wonky serifs and all the letters crammed together at the end. You teach washed-up pensioners to put a good lattice on their pies for a living, for God’s sake. I thought the arts-n’-crafts were a... a hobby. Somethin’ you just happened to start selling ‘cause people thought it was dorky, or whatever.”

“Oh, so you didn’t think I was any good, is that it,” Castiel intoned.

“No,” Dean said, in a way that meant the opposite. He gave an awkward, apologetic grin that tightened one side of his face. “I just never pictured you writing like the Queen of England. You’re
all... muscly and square. Y’know? I figured you’d write in all caps. And use math paper for your shopping lists. Like a tax accountant or some shit.”

“I lived too long fuelled by ‘muscly squareness,’” Castiel said, making finger quotes, then shaking his head. He washed out his paintbrush, in case Dean would keep him talking until the paint dried. “I’ve had enough of stoicism. I find calligraphy very soothing. I feel like I come alive when I paint, or bake.”


Within a matter of seconds, Dean’s leg began jiggling again.


“Sorry,” Dean said. “Nervous energy. If I was at home right now I’d go find some good anime porn and whack off in bed.”

“Then why don’t you?” Castiel said bluntly.

Dean hesitated. “What?”

“Do something, Dean. Do anything. I have hours of work to do, and you’re just making things harder—”

Dean shoved Castiel in the face, pushing him down onto the couch.

Castiel eased himself back up in confusion. He turned and saw Dean staring back, blinking in a slight panic, colour rising on his cheeks. Admittedly, it was warm in here from the fire, but it definitely looked as though Dean was blushing.

“Dean, what—?”

Dean shoved Castiel again, laughing this time, all breathy. When Castiel came back up, Dean lapped at his lips, eyes intent, his shoulders squared for attack. Feeling annoyance flooding his system, Castiel took the bait – he gave Dean’s chest a small shove with his fingertips.

Dean snorted. “That all you got, big guy? Huh?”

With that, he stood up, taking hold of the wheely table and pushing it out of the way. Now the centre of the living room was empty, and Dean apparently saw the space as an arena.

“Come at me,” Dean said from the far corner of the room, socked feet taking up a sturdy stance, shoulders down, head forward, fingers beckoning.

“What did I ever do to you?” Castiel asked, scowling, holding the edges of the couch he sat on.

“Fight me, Cas. C’mon,” Dean urged. “Get this fireball out of my system. I’ll leave you alone after.” He stepped in place, adjusting his hips. He clapped his hands once, rubbing them, then slapped them to his knees. “Winchester in the left corner, he’s on the prowl for victory. His opponent—”

“Won’t back down from a fight,” Castiel finished, getting to his feet with only mild reluctance. He stretched back his shoulders, shaking away the last hour of static. He jumped in place a few times, getting the blood flowing. Already he felt the buzz of excitement in his veins, everything he usually felt when Dean looked at him that eagerly.
He almost heard the roar of a crowd, the thump of feet on the bleachers, flashing lights and waving signs. He’d watched a wrestling match once; he knew how this was meant to go.

“Are you ready?” Dean asked, without the showman’s drawl often heard in the ring. He was really asking, and he wanted a truthful answer.

Castiel nodded. He sized Dean up, not for the first time. He reestablished his knowledge of Dean’s weak points, both physical and mental.

“I’ll go easy on ya, buddy,” Dean promised.

“As will I,” Castiel taunted, one eyebrow up.

With one last breath of preparation, Dean grinned, then leapt into attack. He charged Castiel like a bull, arms to his waist, aiming to knock Castiel into the couch.

They both went down, and Castiel laughed, feeling the couch tip on its back legs, balance upright for a surprising length of time, then crash back to where it started. Castiel sprawled spread-eagled in messed-up cushions, Dean kneeling with his chin in Castiel’s lap. Dean laughed and pushed to his feet, still pink in the cheeks. He bit his lip and turned away.

Castiel went after him, taking him around his ankle with one foot. Dean tripped but didn’t fall, yelping as he regained his balance. One hand grabbed Castiel’s hair, and though it hurt, Castiel bore through the pain and used Dean’s reaching arm to his advantage; he twisted his body around, forcing Dean to bend his arm backward and let go.

The moment Dean’s hand went free, Castiel pulled on his arm, continuing to twist until Dean gasped and fell to his knees, folded forward, completely at the mercy of Castiel’s grip on his wrist.

“Hey— Hey-hey-heyheyheyhey!” Dean jabbered, getting more surprised with every second as he was further disabled.

Dean had made a rookie mistake, but Castiel didn’t blame him. With one foot placed in the tender nook of Dean’s bent knee, Castiel rendered Dean completely immobile.

Dean huffed, still shocked. “Wh— How?!”

They’d never fought before. Dean didn’t know who he was up against. He’d thought he understood what he was getting into, but wasn’t savvy to the wealth of knowledge and practice Castiel had amassed over his lifetime. Dean was undoubtedly stronger and better at traditional wrestling, but in this first instance, Castiel’s knowledge had given him the upper hand.

“Round two?” Castiel offered, releasing Dean. Dean didn’t reply – he swung one leg around and floored Castiel in half a second.

Castiel groaned, frowning. It took several moments to acknowledge that he was lying on his back, winded by his fall. His limbs were pinned by Dean’s weight, knees on his thighs – god that hurt – hands over each other. Both their palms were clammy.

“You a’right?” Dean asked, grinning smugly.

Castiel snorted, gazing at the rafters on the ceiling. “Please.” In one great show of strength, he overpowered Dean, again pulling a shout of surprise from his throat.

Castiel grinned down at Dean, inches from his lips. “I’m fine, how about you?” he replied.
Dean just grunted. He tried to struggle but couldn’t, and his shock showed in his eyes. His gaze darkened, his hips squirmed, but there was no escaping Castiel’s body lock. This time Dean’s hands were pinned far over his head, and the stretch made it harder for him to get any power into his push. His legs were apart, Castiel’s knees on his, feet on his ankles.

Castiel chuckled, tilting his head dangerously. “Seven... eight... nine... ten,” he said. “You’re out.”

Dean breathed heavily, gaze lifting to Castiel’s forehead, down to his chin, then to his lips... lingering... lingering. To his eyes. Dean’s breath caught, and Castiel watched his tongue dart out to wet his lips.

“You gonna let me go?” Dean asked. His voice was guttural and breathy at once. Castiel had never heard him speak like that.

“I’m thinking about it,” Castiel said, watching Dean’s lips quiver. There was no anger or fight in Dean’s expression; he seemed content to lie there, which was what gave Castiel pause. What was Dean playing at now?

Dean squirmed one more time, harder than before. Castiel knew this had to be a ruse, a distraction, but he couldn’t help but let it work. He relaxed over Dean, body sinking down over him. And in doing that, he felt—

Castiel lifted himself again and looked down between their bodies. Dean’s erection was incredibly prominent; his jeans appeared swollen on one side. Castiel immediately began to flush with heat, looking back to Dean’s face.

Dean couldn’t even meet his eyes. He turned his head, biting into his lip until white marks showed.

“Uh... y-you,” Castiel managed, before realising he hadn’t prepared a coherent sentence.

Dean exhaled, clearly embarrassed.

Supposing Dean wanted to be freed, Castiel raised himself up. Dean sat up completely, pushing Castiel away. Castiel let himself be pushed; he sat aside, and he watched Dean hunch forward, one knee bent to hide his erection. For a moment, Dean shut his eyes, resting his forehead on his bent knee.

Castiel hadn’t seen him that vulnerable in a long time.

“I didn’t mean to—” Dean started. He panted. “This wasn’t meant to happen...”

Slowly, Dean’s shoulders began to slump. “I... I’mma— I’m gonna go take a shower,” he said, pushing himself to his feet, running a hand over his mouth.

Dean’s gaze skittered towards Castiel’s, but their eyes didn’t meet. Dean seemed ready to impart something else, yet he resisted at the last moment. He shook his head, waved a dismissive hand, and he left. He walked unevenly; perhaps he was injured, perhaps his erection was affecting him. Castiel tried not to think about it, alarmed by the idea that either injury or arousal might have been caused by him.

... * * ...
the gingerbread hobbit-hole

Castiel blinked slowly. On his wheely table, a fig-scented candle flickered, lighting his work area and his hand around his brush. He thought about painting some more, but instead he listened for Dean, who was finally out of the bathroom after nearly a full hour. The shower had been running for most of that time.

Dean entered the living room wearing fresh clothes: a dark red henley with a buttonless neckline, and only boxer-briefs on his lower half. His thick grey socks folded under his toes as he slumped past.

Castiel watched Dean travel as if in a daze, his expression caught between one of despair and one of listlessness. Dean’s hand slid along the wooden wall as he walked, feeling for the lightswitch just to check it was still there.

He didn’t even look up at Castiel, only carried on towards the kitchen. The light was already on, and Dean’s shape made a handsome silhouette in the doorway before he was swallowed up by luminessence. After a moment of silence, Castiel heard the radio crackle to life.

A young lady’s voice warbled from the kitchen, singing White Christmas, slowly and bright as a bell, accompanied by a lightly-strummed guitar. Castiel let the song wash over him, and his world narrowed to a dark warmth, the presence of a friend, and a safe place.

He took a deep breath, smiling.

Dean appeared to be caught in the same sense of stillness. His long, bare legs kept him upright as he leaned back against a kitchen counter. Both hands were cupped over his face, and all he seemed able to do was breathe.

Castiel didn’t think Dean was as emotionally balanced as he claimed to be; his separation from Bela had clearly taken a toll on him. He’d just lost half his team. He and Bela had been one unit. Now they weren’t. Dean had to feel lonelier than Castiel ever had in his life.

Eventually the song ended. It was quiet for a heartbeat, but the heartbeat seemed to last forever, as Castiel could see Dean’s sorrow, and his heart broke for him.

Then a new track began to play on the radio, and Dean found the energy to move. He let his shoulders relax, and he stepped along to pull a baking tray off the drying rack. He put it flat on the worktop.

He stared at it for a while.

Then he picked it up and slammed it against the wall, breaking something made of glass.

Castiel was already on his feet, moving closer without thinking. He approached the kitchen, pausing in the doorway. Dean faced a kitchen counter, hands grasping its edge as he folded over his arms, face down against his biceps.

“Dean,” Castiel whispered, as gently as he could.

Dean just sighed, curling forward so he could grasp his own hair, hunched into his own arms.

“Dean,” Castiel said again. “Come here.”
Dean tilted his head enough to give Castiel a hard look. There was fire in his eyes, tightness in his jaw.

Castiel offered a hand.

Dean swallowed furiously, but he gave in; he straightened, going to Castiel without taking his hand. He just walked straight into his embrace without fanfare, not meeting his eyes. Castiel took him firmly, both arms around Dean’s back, no hesitation.

Under Castiel’s chin, he could feel that Dean was burning up. Was he sick? Had his shower been too hot? Or was he losing control of himself in ways he hadn’t done in years?

Dean breathed out on Castiel’s neck, warm and humid, then rubbed his face against Castiel’s shoulder.

Castiel frowned. “Did you just wipe snot on me?”


“Then why did you rub your face on me?”

Dean shifted in Castiel’s arms. “Shut up.”

Castiel smiled, pressing his cheek to Dean’s head, one hand rubbing his back. “You’re okay. You’ll be fine.” Castiel drew in a deep breath, and found that Dean mirrored it. Castiel took the opportunity to let out a slow sigh, helping Dean ease up. “What were you planning to do with that tray?” he asked.

“I was gonna make gingerbread or somethin’,” Dean mumbled. “Calm me down.” He ducked back, licking his top lip anxiously. “I mean, when I’m not breaking shit.” His eyes darted back to the mess he’d made: a glass jar of spices had shattered, spread across the worktop. Dean sagged on his feet. “God. I dunno what’s wrong with me.” He eased away from Castiel uncomfortably.

“You’ve suffered loss,” Castiel said patiently. “Maybe this is how you deal with things.”

“I don’t wanna be this guy, Cas,” Dean said, rubbing fingers over his forehead. “My dad was violent. I can’t become him.”

“I’ll help you clear up,” Castiel offered.

“Thanks,” Dean said quietly.

He bent down to find a dustpan and brush in a low cupboard, and Castiel held the dustpan off the side of the worktop while Dean used a kitchen towel to sweep up the mess. Castiel couldn’t help but notice Dean’s frown and his silence throughout their activity.

While Dean tipped the broken glass into the trash can, Castiel decided he may as well ask: “Is there anything you want to talk about?”

Dean looked up, meeting Castiel’s eyes. His frown cleared away. “Nah,” he said, looking down. Then he paused, clicking the pan and brush together. He stared at them. “I mean, there’s some personal stuff, but...”

“I’m here to listen,” Castiel promised. He reached to touch Dean’s arm, giving him a reassuring squeeze. “Whatever you want to share.”
Dean huffed, almost smiling. “I, uh.” He cleared his throat. “Spent, like, half an hour trying to get myself off in the shower.” Pursed lips; a stiff jaw. “Ain’t happenin’.” His eyes darted up to meet Castiel’s, no doubt sensing his surprise. “And before you say it, Cas – no, it’s got nothing to do with Bela, or the breakup. This was something I was – guess you could say ‘struggling with’ – for months—” Dean cut himself off, eyes cast down, eyebrows up, as if surprised as his own confession. “God.”

He shook his head, putting away the dustpan and brush, then going to wash his hands. “Point is, if I’m comin’ on strong, it’s ‘cause I haven’t gotten any action in, what, four... five months? Long time.”

“You lied earlier,” Castiel surmised, washing his hands after Dean.

“When? When I talked about having sex all the time? Yeah.” Dean offered a bland smile, then a dry towel. “I’m pent-up and insecure about it, Cas. What more can I say?”

“So if you and Bela weren’t sleeping together—”

“What did we even do together?” Dean finished, somewhat bitterly. “Yeah, she was asking the same question.”

Dean and Castiel moved to stand shoulder-to-shoulder, leaning back against the kitchen cupboards. Though Dean leaned a little aggressively, Castiel said nothing about it.

Dean took a long drawn-out breath, finally releasing it in a rush. A hand lifted to cover his mouth, but he soon let it fall away. “Cas...” Lips licked, Dean turned his eyes to meet Castiel’s. “Another big part... Th-there’s one huge reason why...”

He trailed off, breath catching.

“What?” Castiel urged. “There’s a reason for what?”

Dean’s eyelashes fluttered as he second-guessed whatever he’d been about to say. “No... Not important. Forget about it.” He turned away, picking up the baking tray he’d dented.

“Dean,” Castiel said softly, placing a hand on Dean’s wrist, trying to soothe him. “There’s no reason to keep things from me. You can trust me, you know you can.”

Dean snorted. But after a pause, the stoicism in his eyes faded to a softer look, and he met Castiel’s gaze, knowing what he said was true. Dean swallowed. “Look, it ain’t that kinda secret, Cas. Yeah, there’s demons hounding me from top to bottom, but none of it is life-threatening. It’s just... crap.”

“It’s your crap,” Castiel said firmly, “and that makes it important to me.”

Dean managed a tiny, tiny smile. “Maybe later, okay?”

Castiel nodded, letting Dean’s wrist go as gently as he’d grasped it. “Later, then.”

“You mind if I bake alone for a while?” Dean asked. “No offence. I just—”

“Need some time to yourself. That’s fine, Dean. I’ll be painting if you need me.” Castiel rested a hand on Dean’s shoulder as he left. He was sure Dean pushed into his touch, which Castiel found heartening.

“Cas—?”
Castiel paused in the doorway, looking back.

Dean licked his lips yet again. “Thanks.”

It didn’t really matter what his thanks was for. Castiel smiled, and nodded once. “Anytime.”

Dean seemed encouraged by that statement, and he nodded. “All right,” he muttered to the kitchen. “Let’s make some goddamn gingerbread.”

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Castiel checked on Dean a handful of times over the next few hours, each time finding him hard at work, whistling or humming along to the radio, hands wrapped in dishtowels in place of oven gloves, body sweeping from side to side of the galley kitchen as he migrated baking trays to and from the steaming oven.

Each time, Castiel left him be and returned to his work. Soon enough he ran out of signs to paint, long before he expected. Hearing Dean getting on with things steadily in the background had apparently encouraged Castiel to keep his stamina up.

Now Castiel leaned in the kitchen doorway, hands in the back pockets of his jeans, idly watching as Dean flung a dishtowel to rest over his shoulder, bouncing on his heels to Jingle Bell Rock. He seemed sprightly now, smiling at what he’d made.

He’s baked lots and lots of gingerbread panels, as far as Castiel could tell. All different sizes and shapes, but all a uniform thickness and colour. The spiced smell was strong and pure enough to make Castiel’s mouth water. Damn. Even without tasting the result, Castiel could tell Dean had improved at making gingerbread since Castiel first taught him how.

“Almost done?” Castiel inquired, making Dean yelp.

“Jeez!” Dean clutched his heart dramatically. “Warn a guy before sneaking up on him, Cas! How long’ve you been lurking there?”

“Long enough to see you’re feeling better,” Castiel remarked, one eyebrow up.

“Yeah,” Dean said, but it was careless, not fully genuine. He looked around at what he’d made. “Man. Nothin’ better to take your mind off life than some good, old-fashioned math. You realise I had to make diagrams before I started this? Look.” Dean held up a wad of writing paper with a hollyleaf letterhead, covered in pencil-grey architectural scribblings and numerical calculations. “I just wanted to build a freaking gingerbread house, didn’t bank on it being a college-level mindwarp.”

“You look like you had fun, though.”

“Oh, hell yeah,” Dean grinned. “Ain’t had this much fun since...” His eyes focused lazily on the living room behind Castiel, then back to Castiel. “Since whenever.”

Castiel’s eyebrows jumped in noncommittal acknowledgement. He heard what Dean wasn’t saying, and he took a secret pride in knowing he, Castiel, had been Dean’s most recent source of pleasure.

“Anyway,” Dean breathed, tossing his now-grimy dishtowel onto the nearest surface. “Just a little washing-up to do, and I’ll be done. Leaving this stuff to cool before I smother it in icing.” He gestured at the racks of crisp brown planks, which Castiel now recognised as walls for a miniature
house. Dean sighed, pushing both hands into the small of his back. “Nnn. God, I need a break before I wash up. How long have I been in here? Feel like I got old real quick.”

“Three hours, give or take,” Castiel replied. He smiled, watching Dean’s show of surprise. “Don’t worry, I don’t see grey hairs yet.”

“You’re not looking close enough,” Dean uttered, half-joking. He scratched his head, then dismissed the unwashed dishes with a wave. He headed towards Castiel – but stopped, an inch before his nose. “Dude, you’re meant to move.”

“Most people would say ‘excuse me’.”

“Well, I ain’t most people, clearly,” Dean argued, still right up in Castiel’s space.

Their breath mingled, and Dean sucked his own lower lip, eyes drifting down to admire Castiel’s mouth. Castiel first assumed he was just playing up his attraction to psych Castiel out, but as the moment went on, and Castiel proved to be utterly unperturbed by the invasion of personal space, Dean began to blush. He swallowed, and his eyes lifted a part of an inch, attention lingering on Castiel’s cheeks. Dean’s eyelashes fluttered as he looked up, meeting Castiel’s gaze.

Dean smiled a tiny bit, somewhat demurely. Oh, he was shy. Castiel flushed hot in pleasure.

“Aehh,” Dean croaked out. “Eh— Excuse me.”

Castiel smirked, and finally stepped back to let Dean past. Dean gripped the door frame, hesitating before passing through.

“I don’t know what you were planning to do now,” Castiel said, following Dean, “but the lodge’s book collection has been calling to me since the morning. I was going to read for a while.”

“I was gonna get more firewood,” Dean said, leading Castiel to the centre of the living room, beside the crackling fireplace. “Looks like icy hell out there, though.” He nodded to the nearest window, through which Castiel could see the fierce flurries of snow that danced up against the glass. “Another hour, it’ll be dark.”

“We have enough firewood to last the night,” Castiel said, knowing he was being too optimistic. There was only one log left in the wicker basket at the foot of the bookshelf.

“It’ll be fine,” Dean scoffed. “C’mon, it’s been so toasty in here that I haven’t worn pants all day. Worst case, I’ll have to get dressed tomorrow.”

“Perhaps, on second thoughts, I’ll get more firewood now,” Castiel said.

Dean raised an eyebrow. “Sudden change of heart, huh. Any correlation to me threatening to wear pants?”

“None whatsoever,” Castiel lied. “Give me the basket.”

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Castiel returned to the lodge covered in speckles of white, all of which melted in seconds once he stepped inside. He was shaking like a leaf, red-nosed, stiff-fingered. He was grateful that Dean approached him with a towel, immediately rubbing his hair into a tangled poof.

“How you doin’, Rudolph?” Dean asked, helping Castiel take off his borrowed jacket, then his
own coat. “How cold is it?”

“Fucking c-cold,” Castiel answered, in no mood to ruminate on exact figures. “S-sub-fucking-zero.”

“No kidding.” Dean patted Castiel’s cheeks, making them sting. “I made us some cocoa. And we can eat some of the broken gingerbread bits, how’s that sound?”

“Mh,” Castiel replied, hoping he’d expressed exactly how grateful he was. He shed his soaked jeans and hung them over the fire grate next to the outerwear Dean put there. Now he and Dean were both wearing only t-shirts and underwear – nearly nude – but their matching level of undress felt comfortable.

While Castiel busied himself removing his sopping-wet socks from unhelpful feet, then placing them over the toes of his sodden boots, Dean put some more wood in the fire, arranging it so it would burn throughout the night. The pre-cut logs were partly damp, but they immediately began to steam, then singe.


“Well, let’s see.” Dean wandered to the bookshelf, right of the fireplace. “We got Moby Dick, Adventures of Tom Sawyer, The Hobbit— Ooh—”

Their hands met on the spine of The Hobbit, Dean’s palm cupping Castiel’s knuckles.

“Play you for it,” Dean said, preparing for a round of rock-paper-scissors.

“I can read aloud,” Castiel offered. “I’ve been told I have a good reading voice.”

Dean scoffed, but it was affectionate. Smiling, he led Castiel to the couch and sat down. Castiel’s paints and signs had been cleared from the wheely table, replaced with two steaming mugs of cocoa, and a plate piled with uneven shards of gingerbread. Castiel felt his heart warming with childish excitement, seeing Dean’s care as a luxury. He didn’t recall ever being mothered like this. He liked it.

Castiel sat comfortably, soon joined by Dean. Dean held his dog-eared copy of The Hobbit. He grasped it with both hands, thumbs stroking its water-stained cloth cover. For an endless heartbeat, they were still. The radio still played a Christmas song.

Castiel held out a hand for the book. Dean gave it to him. Though he acted at ease, Dean sat forward, wearing an air of stiffness, afraid to relax in a compromising position. He remained a full six inches away from Castiel, knees spread, heels together, reaching for some cocoa and a gingerbread piece.

Castiel settled down to read, legs stretched out in front of him. He opened the book at the first page, appreciating the crisp sound of well-turned paper. He turned to the second page, and read the title. “The Hobbit, by J. R. R. Tolkien.”

Apparently that was all Dean needed to hear. Without warning, he bumped up close, practically pressing himself to Castiel’s side. He dunked his cookie, sucked the cocoa out of it, then ate the damp part, humming a pleased note.
Dean watched Castiel turn the page again. After one deep breath, Dean relaxed entirely, curling into the cushy backrest.

Castiel wondered if Dean’s mother had ever sat like Castiel did, right here, with Dean beside her in the same place he was now. Castiel could only suspect yes.

“In a hole in the ground,” Castiel began, “there lived a hobbit. Not a nasty, dirty, wet hole, filled with the ends of worms and an oozy smell – nor yet a dry, bare, sandy hole with nothing in it to sit down on or to eat...”

Castiel looked up, admiring the room all around, the delicious treats in front of him, and the steam that rose in swirls from the fire. He then peered at Dean, and he smiled.

“It was a hobbit-hole,” Castiel said, fondly, against Dean’s hair. “And that means comfort.”

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Castiel had been reading for twenty minutes when Dean rested his cheek on Castiel’s shoulder.

While one of Dean’s hands was unaccounted for, his right hand moved to lay atop Castiel’s stomach, lightly scrunching his t-shirt.

Castiel wondered if Dean put it there to feel him breathe. Just that idea made breathing a struggle, and each expansion of his chest felt more exciting than it ought to. Castiel became hyper-aware of his own heartbeat. He admired the way Dean’s cuticles hugged his fingernails, and how his knuckles wrinkled – but regardless of what Castiel tried to distract himself with, he couldn’t ignore how close their bodies were now.

As if a hand so near to Castiel’s heart wasn’t trying enough, Dean’s crotch was now shamelessly pressed to Castiel’s hip, and it took a monumental effort on Castiel’s part not to let his thrill show in his voice. He kept his words tender, his voice purling from his tongue as easily as it had before. He felt the reverberations in his throat as he spoke, but he could not ignore the feeling of deepness, huskiness, whatever it was that tightened his chest and made every word feel one accidental touch away from a groan.

He licked his lips a little too often, he knew it. He had to resist turning his head to watch Dean, to see if he’d noticed the slight plumpness that was gradually filling out Castiel’s borrowed underwear. Castiel was not embarrassed for his own sake, but he was concerned that even a semi-erection might be taken as an advance.

Castiel did want to get hard. He wanted to squirm in place, lift the book an inch, and have Dean notice that his presence and warmth had aroused him. He wanted Dean to give in to whatever chaos had dominated his mind for only God knew how long, and reach out to satisfy his curiosity. Castiel wanted to kiss and lavish Dean with all manner of affections and aberrations. He wanted to take the man apart, mind and body and spirit at once. Castiel wanted to make Dean lose every inhibition he ever had, and just accept and enjoy the feeling of attraction to another male, without shame, without fear, without anyone around to hear them shout out in pleasure.

But Castiel could not let that happen. He really couldn’t. Bela and Dean broke up fewer than twenty-four hours ago; Dean was in no state to be seduced – not now, and not by Castiel.

At least, that was what Castiel assumed.

He was quickly proven wrong.

Just as Castiel finished reading chapter one, and cleared his throat to begin chapter two, he felt Dean adjust himself at his side. Dean’s hips shifted, and something unexpectedly solid pushed up against Castiel’s hip.

Castiel paused, wondering if his phone had fallen out of his pocket. He looked down between their bodies, only to realise, one, he wasn’t wearing pants, therefore had no pockets, and two, Dean had an erection. “Oh,” Castiel breathed, looking away immediately.

Dean exhaled, relaxing closer. He hid his face against Castiel’s neck, giving a breathy chuckle. “Sorry,” he murmured. “Didn’t mean to... uh.” He cleared his throat. “You weren’t kidding when you said you had a good reading voice.”

Castiel gave a shy laugh, putting a palm over the page he meant to read. He felt a flush creeping up
his neck, originating where Dean breathed on him.

“Seriously,” Dean added, more lightly. “You should do audiobooks or somethin’.”

“I dread to think what the timbre of my recorded voice might allow you to do, if I weren’t right next to you.” Castiel raised an eyebrow, trying to act as though his body wasn’t throbbing with adrenaline and arousal.

Dean chortled a single note, angling his head to meet Castiel’s gaze. Castiel could see how Dean’s pupils were dilated behind hooded lids; it was dim in this room, but there was no ignoring the lust in Dean’s eyes.

“Believe me,” Dean said lowly, “if you weren’t here right now, buddy, I’d be having a real different kinda Christmas. Not a good one.”

Castiel had to concede that was true. He swallowed, helpless to stop his eyes dipping to watch Dean wet his lips with a lap of his thick tongue.

“Cas,” Dean said, nosing an inch closer to Castiel’s lips. “Cas, I— I wanna...”

Castiel could feel himself trembling. He could feel Dean’s hips resisting the urge to press harder against him, and he could feel the shake in Dean’s breath, gusting over Castiel’s lips as it flew his way.

Dean gulped, hard. “Listen,” he said, his voice riding an exhale. “I gotta be straight with you: I’m fuckin’ horny. I know there’s this thing about Bela. I get it, I gotta deal with that. A big part of my life just went up in flames, and—” a frown flickered across Dean’s face, darkening his expression, “and it hurts, Cas. It does. But I don’t get why it has to hurt. Why can people only heal through feeling pain? Why can’t I just do whatever I can to feel better?”

Castiel wasn’t dense; he didn’t think Dean simply wanted to drown his sorrows in alcohol, but he couldn’t allow himself to believe anything else...

Dean moved on the couch again, facing Castiel a little more, pressing his erection harder into Castiel’s thigh. One more lick of his lips...

“What if...” Dean said slowly, turning his head, letting his eyes roam down Castiel’s face. “What if you could make me feel good? We make each other feel good. Just... just once. Doesn’t—” He huffed. “Doesn’t have to be a r-romantic thing, or whatever. Just, like. Just sex. Friends with benefits. Whatever the kids are callin’ it these days.”

“You want to sleep with me?”

Dean blushed, and it made his eyes shine. His lower lip slid under his upper lip, and he nodded, clearly trying to restrain exactly how eager he was. “I wanna— I never did it— Like, with dudes —” He broke eye contact, folding forward with his pinkened face covered by his hands. “Shit. Look.” Dean patted his knees in beats as he spoke: “You’re here. I’m here. We’re alone— I want some goddamn dick, okay. I can’t get myself off, it’s driving me nuts – and as far as I see things, there’s one obvious option staring me right in the face.”

Castiel, full of thrills and a pounding heart, leaned down over his thighs, setting the book aside. He gazed at Dean beside him, who gazed back with equal intensity.

“You really think having sex with me would make you feel better?” Castiel asked, eyebrows raising.
Dean examined Castiel’s lips, then met his eyes again. He nodded, smiling.

“You don’t know how I am in bed,” Castiel warned. “It might be the case that I... I’ve never had sex with anyone before.”

Dean looked startled. But rather than ask questions, he shrugged and said, “We’d chart new territory together, then. You ‘n me. If you want.”

Their gaze locked, and they stared for a while, long enough that their breathing patterns aligned. Castiel could see one strand of Dean’s hair moving violently, and confirmed that their hearts were thumping just as hard and fast as each other’s.

Castiel couldn’t bear the thought that any intimacy between them would be a one-off. But Dean might never ask again; this might be Castiel’s one and only chance to have him. He’d be mad to turn this offer down.

So Castiel nodded, once. “Okay.”

Dean smiled, and it lit up his eyes. “Awesome.”

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Dean closed the bedroom door behind them. At first Castiel wasn’t sure why, given they were the only people for miles around. Dean held himself timorously, though – shoulders down, smiles flustered, gaze cast low. Perhaps he was symbolically making sure nobody else would find out what they were about to do. In that one gesture, Castiel understood: this was their secret. How shameful it must be for Dean to take a separation so badly, and within twenty-four hours fall into bed with his best friend.

“Dean, are you sure about this?” Castiel asked, reaching to touch Dean’s hand. Dean let him take it, and they held on for a while, gazing into each other’s eyes.

Dean swallowed, then nodded. “Yeah.” He smirked. “I’m just... nervous. Well, not nervous...”

“Excited,” Castiel said.

Castiel spoke only for himself. So he didn’t expect Dean to smile, bite his lip, and again whisper, “Yeah.”

Dean inched forward, craving a kiss. But he stepped away before satisfying himself, leaving Castiel still in expectation. When Castiel turned his eyes to follow Dean, Dean bent to lift his duffel bag onto the half-made bed.

“Got condoms in here someplace,” Dean explained, still pink-cheeked. “Never leave home without ‘em.” He found a few in a side pocket, and handed them straight to Castiel. Then Dean hesitated, and took them back to examine their packets. “Um. Not sure if they’re still usable...”

“How long have they been there?” Castiel asked, playfully mocking.

“A reasonable amount of time,” Dean retorted. “Yeah, they’re still good for a couple months.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows, taking the condoms again, now wondering how long Dean had truly gone without sex. Months? Or years?

Fading grey daylight eased through the thin curtain on the left. To the side of the double bed, an
antique lamp brightened the room in amber. The room was cozy, but Castiel couldn’t help but feel it was missing something.

“Back in a moment,” Castiel said.

He left the room, and returned with a candle, already lit; he made sure to close the door again. He passed Dean on his way to the nightstand, smiling at him. Dean smiled back, eyes dazed and sparkling. He looked so enthralled by every movement Castiel made; his gaze tracked Castiel’s hands and the candle, then his smile, then his eyes, as he stepped closer.

Again, Dean nosed closer to kiss Castiel, but turned away before doing so. “I guess, uh. Clothes off. Clothes on?”

Castiel rolled a shoulder. “Whatever you’re most comfortable with.”

Dean yanked his t-shirt over his head without hesitation. He breathed a laugh, then sauntered into Castiel’s space, dropping his shirt on their feet. Now Dean’s hands moved to Castiel’s waist, taking it firmly. Dean’s head bowed, watching himself lift the hem of Castiel’s borrowed t-shirt.

Castiel breathed in as Dean disrobed him, lifting his arms so the t-shirt could be removed. As Castiel relaxed, he watched Dean’s hypnotism take hold. Dean couldn’t look away. He drank in the sight of Castiel’s bare skin like he was some impossible artwork, something far greater than just another human. When Dean touched Castiel’s ribs, fingers splayed, he touched as though Castiel was made of gold or light or rainbows. Dean appeared perfectly in awe that he was allowed to look, let alone touch.

Slowly, Dean’s curious hand lowered, feeling the shape of Castiel’s abdomen, moving the hair below his navel. Dean’s fingertips met the band of Castiel’s boxer-briefs, and stopped there.

“Take them off if you want,” Castiel offered.

Dean’s eyes lifted, then turned away. He instead took off his own underwear, eyes on Castiel’s, making sure he was watching. Dean’s erection bobbed up, and it seemed to take heart from being observed: it grew in the seconds that followed, stiffening completely without a single touch.

Dean stood with his underwear around his feet, toes curled inward, both hands latched behind his neck.

Sensing Dean’s expectation, Castiel removed his own underwear as Dean had done, leaving himself just as bare, but only half as hard. His erection was simply too weighty to allow it to reach full mast while standing. Dean observed this, and looked up with eyes darker than Castiel had ever seen anyone’s. His lips were shiny and plump without having licked them.

Dean again left a space between them as he approached, breathing over Castiel’s mouth but not making contact. Castiel eased in, thinking Dean wanted him to accept, but Dean fled, moving for his duffel bag again. Head down, he rummaged in a side pocket until he found a bottle of Astroglide-branded lubricant. He tossed it at Castiel, who caught it.

With the bag back on the floor, Dean turned his attention to the bed. He pulled the pillows atop the comforter, placing one by the headboard, the other halfway down the bed.

Castiel couldn’t imagine what position Dean expected him to take here. For a number of seconds, a dozen thoughts flew through his mind. He felt like they hadn’t talked about this enough, hadn’t agreed who was dominating – or whether one of them would dominate. How were they going to be sure they were both equally satisfied? What did Dean want from this besides physical release? How
did he want his release? Did he want to be held softly? Or did he want to be plowed into the mattress and shown no mercy? Castiel knew so little about Dean’s cravings and preferences. All he could see was that Dean wanted a kiss but denied them both, out of some mistaken assumption. And what about what Castiel wanted? Was it fair to let Dean enter this agreement under the pretence that it was unromantic? Castiel wanted to make love, Dean just wanted to screw around.

Perhaps Castiel was not alone in wondering these things: no sooner than he’d begun thinking, Dean crawled onto the bed. Now he lay on his back, head on the topmost pillow, ass on the other so his hips were raised. He sat up on his elbows, looking at Castiel with pleading in his expression. “Fuck me,” he said. His words shattered around a breath, actually emotional as he added, “Go slow. Please.”

Castiel flooded with heat. He loved Dean so dearly, his sweet words and that helpless, needy look in his eyes. Castiel forgot why he’d second-guessed giving Dean this. Without resistance, Castiel got onto the bed and crawled over Dean. Dean lay down, his gaze never breaking from Castiel’s. Already they were both sweltering, searing from within. Castiel felt waves of heat rolling off Dean.

“Condom,” Dean reminded Castiel.

“Oh.” Castiel looked around, finding where he’d dropped the packets on the bedcovers. He took one packet, pretending this was natural for him, as if he’d done it before in the company of someone else. He concentrated hard, slipping a condom on, rolling it down, stroking himself afterwards. It was tight: clearly it was purchased in Dean’s size. It was not comfortable, but it was necessary.

Dean wriggled himself into position, hands on Castiel’s shoulders, watching Castiel slather himself in lubricant. At this point, Castiel would have loved to kiss Dean. He wanted to smooch and nuzzle and give him butterfly kisses that would make him giggle, but Dean seemed so reluctant to kiss. Castiel could understand why. If they kissed, how could they say this was a friendly, platonic act? Castiel was satisfying a need, that was all. If that was what Dean needed to believe to allow this to happen, Castiel would let him believe it. This might be his only chance to have Dean. The moment they got home, some ‘cute doctor girl’ was waiting. If he could claim Dean now, mark him, he would. This was his chance to make Dean realise that Castiel was the one he needed.

“Don’t bother,” Dean uttered, before Castiel could slip a finger inside him. Dean grinned sheepishly. “What do you think I was doin’ in the shower? I’m all stretched. Just drench me in lube and I’m ready when you are.”

“Oh, so, that’s why you need me,” Castiel teased, pouring lubricant straight from the bottle and onto Dean’s hole. “ Couldn’t find your G-spot on your own.”

“Shuddup,” Dean huffed, a smile tugging at his lips. “I know where it is. Maybe it just feels better when someone else does it, ever think of that?”

“Mm,” Castiel acknowledged, somewhat sarcastically. He was still tugging himself, thoughtlessly masturbating to the sight of Dean puffy-lipped and blushing.

“C’mon,” Dean whispered, urging. “Get inside me already.”

Castiel exhaled, angling and aligning his body, getting ready to sink in. Dean began to pant, hands sweating on Castiel’s shoulders. His hooded eyes fluttered shut, as if he was about to pass out. A small whine broke from Dean’s lips: complete and utter longing expressed in a cry.

Easy, gently, slowly – Castiel held Dean’s hip and used his own weight to guide himself in. Dean
was tight – nothing like a curled fist. The vacuum of his hole seemed to draw Castiel in as Dean relaxed. Castiel laughed in shock, feeling lights brighten him from the inside out.

Dean’s eyes were still shut, eyebrows up, mouth open. He sighed – in relief.

Dean then relaxed completely, sighing again. His thighs spread outwards, his head rolled to the side, his hands slid down Castiel’s biceps smoothly, all the way to his elbows.

“You okay?” Castiel asked quietly, now having sunk all the way in. “Is this all right?”

“Uh-huh,” Dean smiled. His eyes fluttered open, then shut. “S perfect.” He wasn’t about to pass out: he was simply overcome with relief. Castiel couldn’t imagine needing sex so badly.

“Can I move?” Castiel asked.

Dean nodded. “Slow.”

Castiel breathed, tipping his hips an inch, starting to move. Dean cried out immediately. “Cas,” he gasped.

Castiel froze. “Did I do it wrong?”

“What?” Dean’s gaze drifted to meet Castiel’s through half-open eyes. “No, I... I just said your name.”

“Do you want me to do something different?”

Dean became more alert. “No?” First he seemed confused, then he chuckled. “It feels good, Cas. Feels awesome.” Dean shivered, batting his lashes. “Mmmh. That’s it, just right.” Castiel had started moving again, as gently as before. Dean purred, squirming so Castiel went deeper. “Cas...”

Perhaps Dean liked saying Castiel’s name, that was all. He said it twice more, moaning more each time.

“It’s so warm,” Castiel breathed, whispering against Dean’s cheek as they settled into a rhythm, slowly fucking into the pillow. “You’re so warm, Dean.”


“Can I push harder?” Castiel asked, feeling sweat break on his lower back. “I— Uah. I really like —” He grinned, hearing Dean’s breath shudder around Castiel’s name. “I like the thrusting.”

“Don’t we all,” Dean murmured. “Oh, go on,” he agreed. “Lift my legs. Yeah, take them under the thighs, get my knees up next to my shoulders.”

Castiel did as he was told, immediately gratified by the change in position. He groaned, eyes sliding shut as he pushed his weight over Dean’s ass. Dean grunted, moving his feet to cross over Castiel’s back, hugging Castiel’s head with his knees.

Sweat formed on Castiel’s forehead now, prickling on his scalp. His eyes locked on Dean’s, and they held fast for nearly a full minute, each of them gasping, rocking, moving in time with each other.

Dean soon began to tremble, eyes closing. His mouth slid open, whispers of “Cas... Cas... auh, Cas,
yes,” tumbling from his tongue. Castiel shifted a hand and a shoulder, removing his grip from Dean’s left thigh so that thigh went free; Dean yelped in pleasure unexpectedly, head back, mouth open to haul in a breath, fingers scrunching the sheets. Castiel, wide-eyed in fascination, pushed deeper, now thumping into Dean’s ass with abandon, hearing his own cries escape his throat every so often.

“Cas— Cas! Cas!” Dean sobbed, one hand lifting blindly to curl into Castiel’s sweaty hair, every finger weak.

“Tell me it’s good,” Castiel said, breathing in jolts. “Promise me I’m not hurting you.”

Dean shook his head. “Just right. Just right. Cas, please... Please—”

“What?” Castiel asked, shaking his head. “Don’t know what you want, Dean. Tell me. Talk to me. Talk to me, Dean.”

“Kiss me,” Dean pleaded. “Please. Want you to kiss me. Kiss me, kiss me.”

Castiel wasted no time before obeying. He stopped moving his hips, instead lurching to take Dean’s face in both hands, letting Dean’s body collapse around him. He pressed his mouth against Dean’s, frowning, wanting so badly to have this moment become every part of his life, over and over, because Dean kissed back. He kissed back with such intensity and passion that Castiel realised Dean had needed this more than he’d ever needed sex. A kiss, that was all. He’d been so starved of physical affection, so focused on living up to his virile nature that he’d forgotten there were simpler, sweeter ways to be loved.

Castiel felt Dean’s hands grip him surely, pulling him in for a deeper kiss, mouths open. Dean moaned, letting his tongue breach Castiel’s lips. Castiel licked Dean in return, sighing into Dean’s mouth. Dean gave Castiel the kisses Castiel had fantasised about: smooches, side-to-side nuzzles against his chin stubble, nose bent against his cheek. Then butterfly kisses, kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss-kiss against Castiel’s lips, never opening up completely. Castiel chuckled, returning the affection in slow, steady French kisses. Dean groaned from deep within his chest, enjoying it the way he ought to.

Castiel began to move again, hands lowering to hold Dean’s knees apart, legs open, so Castiel could press himself between them, sliding into the slick, lubricated mess around Dean’s hole.

“Slower... go slower,” Dean breathed.

Castiel moaned, breaking the kiss for a moment to just appreciate how he felt, sweeping into Dean as slowly as he possibly could. Every inch of Castiel’s skin sang Dean’s name, lungs full of his scent – a scent which included the raw smell of their genitals and warm lube.

There was something pure in their connected energy now, the way they were wrapped around each other. Intimacy bloomed, and the feeling was far more impressive than anything Castiel ever expected to experience in his lifetime. Being together like this made it easy to transcend the sticky feeling, the sweat, the knowledge that this wasn’t the most sanitary thing to be doing. Dean breathed with his mouth open, making the same tender noises over and over, hands sliding up past his head in physical tension, release, tension, release.

Castiel felt on top of the world. He had the power to make Dean squirm and shudder and look at him like he was some sort of divinity, like this feeling was so unbelievable it could only be caused by magic. Granted, Castiel was just pushing his penis into Dean’s anus in an endlessly repetitive
motion, but dear lord, it felt like so much more. It was so much more. Castiel felt like he might cry from how good this felt. But the best part was not simply the roller-coaster drop in his stomach, nor the rush of pleasure that chased his heartbeat, nor the feeling of Dean reaching to take both his hands, wanting to hold them both. Yes, holding hands while deep inside Dean was certainly one of the greatest things Castiel had experienced so far. But it was all so incomparable to the swell of emotion in Castiel’s heart, every beat echoing Dean’s murmur of “Cas, Cas, Cas,” with an internal reply of Dean, Dean, Dean.

Castiel was overwhelmed with love for this man beneath him, legs wrapped around his waist. Castiel nearly wept upon seeing Dean smile like this: gratified, genuinely happy – so it was a privilege to see him smile like that without stopping. Castiel dared not blink. He just watched Dean gasp and purr and whisper his name like a prayer. Closer and closer, kissing, nuzzling, hands holding tight.

Dean let go of one last cry, “Cas! Cas! Yes! Yes—” and all at once, it was over for him: he came in a hard full-body surrender, spilling a thick white line across his belly, where it immediately transferred to Castiel’s skin, sweeping over it. He felt its heat, and its gelatinous texture. Dean was still coming, though he came dry: he shook violently, body curled up to embrace Castiel, hiding his face against Castiel’s neck.

“Ah, auh, ah—” Dean panted, still weak, still tense. He whimpered, froze up... trembled, then sank onto the bed with a sigh, as limp as he’d been when Castiel first pushed inside him. His eyes slipped closed, and he smiled again.

Although he was already going slowly, Castiel eased to a stop. “Shall I pull out?” he asked, words shaking.

Dean shook his head, opening his eyes to meet Castiel’s gaze. “Keep goin’, Cas. Keep goin’ till you’re done.” Dean stroked a hand through Castiel’s hair, a little grin rising on his lips.

Castiel grinned too, leaning down to kiss Dean. He was sweaty and hot, and his kisses were tired things, but he still responded with as much energy as he could muster.

Castiel let go of Dean’s other hand, needing both hands to reach down and take Dean by the hips, hauling him closer, ass up on Castiel’s folded thighs. Now Castiel could lean forward, pushing into Dean at the angle he liked best, nearly vertical. Dean made sounds of surprise at the speeding thrust, but he didn’t complain – his eyebrows rose, a grin flashing across his face every few moments whenever their eyes met. Castiel grunted, no longer caring if he sounded ridiculous, or if Dean was later forced to release the air Castiel was currently pushing into him.

“You’re close, huh,” Dean said, stroking Castiel’s hair again. His voice strained as he begged, “Come inside me, Cas. Fuck me. Fuck me, c’mon.” He lifted his head and kissed Castiel, mouthing furiously. “C’mon! Go harder. I know you’re thinking about it, Cas. Fuck me. Like you want to, like you didn’t this whole time.”

Castiel searched Dean’s gaze, unsure if he meant that. Dean was frowning, eyes watering. Oh, he was about to fall apart.

“Don’t look at me like that,” Dean snapped. He helped out, lifting his lips, offering his body openly. “I ain’t letting you pull out until you get what you want, all right? Do it.”

So Castiel lowered his chin and did it. He grabbed Dean’s waist, then his thighs – then just one thigh. He turned Dean over – and he accidentally slipped out as he rolled his body over, but he never hesitated before sliding back in, making Dean yell. Castiel spat over Dean’s hole, wetting the
lubricant anew before pushing forward.

Castiel began to pound into Dean’s ass, bodies clapping together in the most obscene way. Dean had to brace himself against the headboard, grunting, thighs shaking with the effort of keeping himself steady as Castiel pummelled him, snarling on each thrust. Castiel knelt up straight, hips forward into Dean, head tipped back. He breathed in, biting down on his lip as he growled. His hands left grip marks on Dean’s waist.

“Cas,” Dean managed to choke out. “Oh, sh-hi-it...”

Castiel grinned a wicked grin. It lasted one fleeting moment before it was overtaken by an expression of pleasure, eyes shut, mouth gaping. Castiel was convinced he had very little time left, so he was making use of it. Their lubricant was tacky now, Dean’s hole was visibly sore, Dean was shaking with exhaustion, but most importantly, Castiel knew Dean was about to cry. He wasn’t in pain – at least not the kind Dean seemed to care about – but throughout this session, he’d slowly become consumed by emotion, every bad and good feeling that plagued him finally culminating in his shout to make Castiel take what he wanted. Dean had become reckless, and always had been the most reckless when his heart was fragile. Castiel had to reach his peak before Dean broke down, or this moment could end very differently than either of them would like.

Thankfully, he was only moments away from his climax. Dean was right: Castiel preferred to fuck with force, hands grabby and hips violent. He’d never known, never suspected. Dean must’ve sensed it in Castiel’s push, in the way he’d groaned more when he went faster, thrusted deeper. Now Castiel let nothing held him back; Dean took what he was given, still making sounds of enjoyment despite each one sounding strangled, torn apart by whatever feelings he was stubbornly suppressing.

Castiel breathed out, bending to kiss the back of Dean’s neck. He frowned, pressing his forehead to Dean’s hot skin. At last, he came, feeling himself jerk inside Dean, unable to to more than twitch within his infernal confines. He kept fucking until he was spent, and only then did he slow, and slow, and slow, and then stop. Castiel was shattered, sighing softly over Dean’s back.

“M’hh,” Dean managed to say.

“Roll over,” Castiel whispered, pulling out of Dean. While Dean struggled to do so with such heavy limbs, Castiel looked around for some tissues, and spotted a box on a second nightstand. He reached for one, then took two. He used one to take off his condom, cleaning up whatever muck he could see. He tossed the wad onto the floor, then used the other tissue to wipe up the ejaculate on Dean’s stomach, half-dry, stuck to fine hairs. Dean’s belly swelled as he breathed, each breath laboured.

Castiel took a third and fourth tissue, wiping himself, then lifting Dean’s hips to clean his anus, and all around it. Dean flinched; even a soft texture probably stung. “Sorry,” Castiel uttered.

Dean shut his eyes, swallowing.

As Castiel tossed the final tissue, he lay down on top of Dean, sliding his arms around him, under his shoulders. With his cheek gently resting on Dean’s sweaty, freckly collarbone, Castiel let himself relax.

Dean gave Castiel a squeeze.

“I’m not going anywhere,” Castiel promised.
Dean hesitated, then wrapped his arms completely around Castiel, the crooks of his elbow hooked behind his neck. Dean’s breath was warm and humid against Castiel’s forehead – then Castiel felt the change as Dean held back a sob. Shuddering, afraid.

“It’s all right,” Castiel assured him, kissing his heart. “Everything’s okay, Dean.”

“I— I know, that’s—” Dean stammered, fingers gripping a clump of Castiel’s hair. “I know. I just can’t believe it.”

“Believe what?” Castiel lifted his head, trying to see Dean’s face. He was startled to discover tears streaming down Dean’s cheeks, though there was a smile on his lips, and a shine in his eyes.

“What can’t you believe, Dean?”

Dean pursed his lips and shrugged, then shut his eyes, releasing another flood of tears. He pressed his forehead to Castiel’s, exhaling over his lips, then kissing him once. “I feel incredible, Cas.” He shook his head, shaking Castiel’s in the process. “I never felt this good after.”

“After sex?”

Dean nodded. “Not with anyone.”

Castiel, too, found that hard to believe. “How can that be possible?” he asked sweetly, inquisitively, pushing himself up an inch so he could turn Dean, hold him in his arms. Dean wriggled so he lay with his back to Castiel, head turned to see his face.

Dean shrugged one shoulder, giving Castiel a kindhearted smile. “Maybe you’re special.”

“Am I?”

Dean snorted, hastily wiping away tears with a thumb, then his wrist. “Obviously. You’re my best friend. We’d trust each other with our lives, that’s gotta count for somethin’.”

“Didn’t you trust Bela?”

Dean seemed stumped by that. His mouth rounded, eyes lowering. “I... trusted her to tie me up. Spank me. Y’know, whatever.” Castiel acted as though those words didn’t make him pulse hot with arousal and jealousy at once. “Trusted her with the financials, and planning the wedding. But, uh.” Dean snuggled against Castiel, nosing under his chin. “Don’t trust her like I trust you.”

“What’s different about me?”

“You’re askin’ me?” Dean chuckled. “God knows. I’m just... happier, when I’m around you. Comfortable.”

They lay quietly for a while. Castiel listened to Dean’s breathing, waiting as it slowed. Dean’s fingers traced little lovehearts on Castiel’s forearm, and Castiel smiled, though he said nothing.

“Cas?” Dean said, just as Castiel thought he’d been about to fall asleep. “Was that fun for you? Sex?”

Castiel smiled, nodding. He kissed Dean’s forehead. “Yes.”

“Okay. Good.” Dean nuzzled Castiel’s throat.

Castiel hoped there might be another exchange, one that involved them saying ‘I love you’, but Castiel dared not be the first to say it. Dean had to commit first. Castiel needed to know Dean
wanted to be together, and wasn’t just agreeing because Castiel suggested they could be. That was the mistake Bela made. Though Dean prided himself on a wandering heart, he actually craved commitment. Why else would he stay with Bela, agree to marry, and stave off ending the relationship despite never feeling fulfilled? He just wanted someone to love him. And Castiel did, with all his heart.

But Dean had to say it first, or Castiel could never believe him.

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Castiel woke in darkness. The scented candle had drowned its wick in its own wax, but the fragrance still hung in the air in a comforting haze. The bedside lamp was off, only a line of gold highlighted the edge of the closed door, and it took Castiel a number of blurry moments to realise he was alone in the bed. A rattling of pots and pans came from the kitchen: Castiel supposed that was what woke him up.

Blinking hard, Castiel rolled over the sheets, finding the edge of the bed. Despite sleeping above the covers in the nude, Castiel was only mildly chilly: the room was thick with heat, since the built-in wardrobe backed the living room’s fireplace.

Trudging to the door to open it, Castiel emerged squinting, blinded by gold light, affronted by the overwhelming smell of sugar. Ignoring it all for the time being, Castiel shuffled to the bathroom. He relieved himself in the running shower, letting tepid water sluice over his back as he stood motionless, every muscle burning. Langid yoga poses had not prepared him for the roughness of lovemaking; even slow sex required muscles Castiel hardly ever used. He’d never moved his hips that way before.

Wrapping his waist in a damp towel – Dean’s towel; the shower had been wet when Castiel got in – Castiel left the bathroom and made his way to the kitchen. He found Dean sucking icing off his hand, dancing in his underwear to an upbeat version of *Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas*. Dean started when he saw Castiel. Then he grinned.

“Hey, you,” Dean chirped. “How’d you sleep?”

“Like a yule log. What time is it?”

“Uh, midnight. Why?”

Castiel grumbled, rubbing his eyes. “No wonder I’m hungry.”

Dean clicked his fingers and pointed at Castiel. “One midnight snack coming right up. It’s Christmas Eve. Can you believe how fast this year went?”

“I’ll ponder the concept of passing time once I’ve had some coffee.”

“Coffee’s off the menu,” Dean said sternly, busy collecting some food onto a pair of plates. “You’re gonna eat, then get back to bed. Mom and Sammy are gonna be here in, like, ten hours. There’s gonna be an almighty unpacking of emotional baggage, and I need you awake and well-rested. Gotta help me get through it in one piece.”

Castiel looked at the plate of food Dean handed him: crumbed fish, roasted potato, parsnips, and some fancy-looking sauce in a tiny dish. “Thank you,” Castiel said in surprise. “When did you make this?”

“Just now,” Dean said. “Dude, you slept for eight hours. I took a shower, put the books in alphabetical order, swept the whole house – apart from the bedroom... made dinner...” He shrugged. “There’s a lot you can get done when your best bud is out for the count.”

“‘Best bud’?” Castiel repeated, smiling, as he made his way to the couch.

Castiel’s stomach tightened, anxious. “Nothing’s wrong with that,” he said unsurely, taking his place on the couch. “I take it having sex hasn’t changed anything between us?”

Dean turned his face away and sat down on the couch, holding two sets of cutlery in a closed fist. “Nope. It was just sex.”

“You stand by that statement.”

“Yeah?” Dean looked at Castiel accusingly. “Like I said last night, Cas: one time only. It was just a... a thing. That we did. To get my mind off Bela.”

“I thought it was to relieve your immense physical burden,” Castiel said, holding out a hand for cutlery.

Dean passed him a knife and fork. “Yeah. That too.”

“So we’re not together,” Castiel stated.

“What, like— Like, boyfriends?” Dean blew out a puff of air, expression becoming obnoxiously facetious. He shook his head, grinning. “No way. Don’t sweat it, Cas,” he said kindly. “You’re my best friend, that’s all.” Then he cleared his throat. “So are we gonna eat, or what?”

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Castiel breathed in deeply, smiling when he inhaled the smell of Dean’s hair, the warmth of his scalp pressed right against Castiel’s cheek. With a groan of delight, Castiel wrapped an arm around Dean’s waist.

Then he frowned. He was sure he’d gone to bed alone. Opening his eyes, he found Dean sound asleep beside him, snuggled close like he’d been there for hours.

“Dean?” Castiel croaked. He wet his lips, struggling to make his voice work. “Dean.”

Dean just uttered an incoherent sentence and squirmed even closer, one thigh slipping between Castiel’s. Castiel promptly gave up trying to wake him; it seemed cruel to disturb a peaceful slumber.

The minutes wore on, and the silence of the bedroom and the heat of Dean’s body nearly lulled Castiel back to sleep. He didn’t know what time it was, but the sun was up high, which meant it was after ten. Castiel was alarmed he’d been in bed for so long. At least his body didn’t ache so much any more. The extra rest had been healing.

Though the remarkable silence of this mountain lodge had long been the most noticeable thing to listen to, Castiel soon realised that daytime made a big difference to its ambience. A bird was chirping somewhere outside, the roof clunked and ticked as the sun warmed it, and wind whistled through a crack in the bathroom window, two doors away. Dean’s stomach gurgled, and he farted gently. Castiel smiled, chuckling to himself.

Eventually, Dean stirred.

Half a minute later, he squinted open one eye, looking at Castiel dazedly. “Hmmm. Mornin’, sunshine.”
Castiel smiled, feeling fondness steal through him for the thousandth time. “Hello, Dean. Did you sneak in here last night after I’d gone to bed?”

Dean grunted, sitting up in uncomfortable increments. He was completely naked, hair ruffled, waist wrapped with a bedsheet. “S it a crime to wanna sleep in a real bed?” he slurred. “We didn’t even get to play rock-paper-scissors, you just crashed in here after you brushed your teeth.”

“So cuddles had nothing to do with it, I suppose,” Castiel said, sitting up too.

“Believe what you like, buddy. I came here for the bed. That’s my story and I’m stickin’ to it.”

Castiel admired Dean’s silhouette, all roughed-up against the bright curtain. Through the lit fabric, Castiel could see another mountain, white and glowing with snow, set against a backdrop of pure blue. After yesterday’s storm, this marked the first time Castiel had seen the view in daylight.

The distant sound of an engine burst through a wave of snow-muffled nothingness, and Castiel felt a chill of apprehension run down his spine. “Dean, I can hear a car.”

Dean straightened, head turned towards the window like a dog with its ears pricked. “Shit. I hear it too.” Without pause, he tossed back the covers and got out of bed, bending to pick up his discarded boxers, putting them on. “Get dressed. Quick. I ain’t doing this by myself.”

Dean clawed a hand back through his hair, looking frantically for clean clothes in his bag. He found a heather-grey t-shirt, pulled it on, then dived back in for something else.

“You’re nervous,” Castiel said, watching Dean flurry about, tossing shirts and underwear over the bed.

“No shit, Sherlock,” Dean said, finally finding the plaid shirt he’d been looking for, a nice reddish-purple one. He donned it roughly, then grabbed his jeans, jumping to pull them on. “Why’d you think I crawled in here last night, huh? You’re like—”

Now dressed, except for the missing belt of his jeans, Dean held his face in his hands. He lifted his hands to look despairingly at Castiel. “You’re like the one good thing in my life right now, man. The only thing I think about in my future that doesn’t fill me with dread. Mom and Sammy, they’re on their way up this stupid death rock— Cas, I—”

He covered his mouth and sat down at the foot of the bed, tears brimming in his eyes. “I haven’t seen either of them in three years. Three years. What if they’ve changed? What if getting his doctorate turned Sam into some unrecognisable douchebag? What if Mom’s hair went full grey, what if she needed me this whole time and I was off trying to run a failing mechanic business five states over? Worse— What if I’ve changed? What if they hate who I am now? What if I’m acting weird because of the breakup, and they think that’s me?”

Castiel crawled on his hands and knees to sit beside Dean, touching his shoulder. “I don’t know,” he said truthfully. “But whatever you need me to do, I’ll be at your side.”

Dean swallowed, wiping away unspilled tears. “I gotta cowboy up. Can’t have an emotional breakdown while they’re here; I swore to Sam I had my shit together.”

“I’m right behind you,” Castiel promised, giving Dean an encouraging push. “Go on. I’ll join you in a minute. I need to put some clothes on.”

Once Dean left the room, Castiel got dressed at lightning speed, making a fast trip to the bathroom before joining Dean in the living room. Dean was pacing, one hand over his mouth. The car was
right outside; the engine was making the windows vibrate.

“Dean,” Castiel said, standing before Dean, taking both his hands. “Look at me,” Dean met his eyes, and Castiel smiled at him. “Remember Anna’s wedding? That fiasco? My family drama has you beat. I’ll always have you beat. Nothing that happens now can top that. All right?”

Dean nodded, grinning a bit.

“We’re taking this one step at a time, and one crisis at a time. Once your family comes in, you just have to say hello. All the rest comes later. It’s going to be okay.” Castiel touched Dean’s cheek with his hand. “Everything’s going to be fine.”

“Gonna be fine,” Dean repeated, weakly. He breathed out through narrowed lips, eyes turned towards the front door. The car had pulled up, and Castiel heard the doors slamming. “Cas,” Dean said, squeezing Castiel’s hand. “Could you— Could you give us a minute alone? I wanna talk to them first.”

Castiel nodded. “You can do this, Dean. You’re not the same person they said goodbye to. Maybe you have changed, but you’re stronger now. Proving that to them will come in time – not all at once. Okay?”

Dean nodded. “‘Kay.”

Castiel let his hand linger in Dean’s as he walked away. Finally they parted; Dean went to the front door, Castiel went to the kitchen.

Castiel heard a knock at the door, but rather than looking over his shoulder, he retreated. He’d noticed a change made in the kitchen: Dean had wrapped his belt around the handles of the liquor cabinet, and it was buckled shut. The lock wasn’t flawless, but by God, Castiel was thrilled to see Dean taking active measures to keep himself away from temptation.

Hearing new voices, and the front door closing, Castiel returned to the opening of the kitchen and peered into the living room. Sam and Mary Winchester stood by the door, arms hung with bags, bodies thick with coats and scarves.

Dean was wrapped up in the arms of a taller, long-haired man, who wore orange plaid under a greatcoat, and a big smile. They rocked to and fro, Dean letting free tiny laughs of disbelief. He looked onward at a beautiful older woman with shoulder-length hair.

“Mom,” Dean sighed, moving from Sam to Mary. He reached for her, and she went to him with open arms.

Castiel smiled, feeling warmth grow in his heart. All that worrying for nothing. Clearly, after three years, none of their love had faded.

Dean breathed silently on his mother’s shoulder, fingers twisted in her greying hair. She soothed him, holding the back of his neck.

When Mary’s eyes opened, they immediately lighted on Castiel. “Oh, hello,” she said brightly. “Who’s this?”

Sam Winchester turned around, spotting Castiel too. “Oh. Hi.”

“Hello,” Castiel said to them both. Dean pulled away from Mary, sniffing back tears. All three of them faced Castiel now.
“Mom, Sammy – this is Castiel.” Dean crossed the room to Castiel’s side. He bumped Castiel’s side with his entire arm. “Cas, say hi.”

“Um. Good— Lovely to meet you both,” Castiel said, offering a hand. Sam crossed the room, and they met halfway, by the fire. They shook boldly, both using two hands. “Sam. Dean’s told me very impressive things about you.”

“Dean’s been wrong about a lot of things,” Sam said with a cheerful smile. “No reason he should be right when talking about me, either.”

“Sam!” Mary tutted. She eased Sam out of the way, ignoring Castiel’s proffered handshake, taking him for a hug instead. Castiel accepted it with grace, giving her a friendly squeeze. “It’s so nice to meet you,” Mary told Castiel. “Your name, it’s very unusual. Beautiful, too.” She pulled back, squinting. “It’s pronounced Kass-ti-el, is it?”

“Yes. Dean told you about me?” Castiel asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Ahhm, not as such,” Mary said. She looked over at Sam, who was unwinding a fat scarf from his neck. “He was excited for us to meet someone, but he never gave us a name.”

“Honestly, I was expecting to meet a girl,” Sam said. Mary seemed ready to scold Sam again, but then gave Castiel a look that confirmed, yes, she’d expected a girl too.

Dean pushed against Castiel’s side for comfort. “Well, sometimes stuff doesn’t go the way you expect it to, all right?”

“It’s not a problem,” Sam said hurriedly, eyes darting to Castiel. “Honestly. It’s just a surprise.”

“Yeah, surprises for everyone, all ‘round,” Dean muttered, looking away. “Jeez, it’s not like I saw this coming.”

“Um,” Castiel said, hastening to save Dean’s dignity. “May I take your coats? Get you some food? A drink?”

“Ah,” Mary said happily, taking off her coat, thanking Castiel as she handed it over. “A real gentleman.”

“Would you like to wash up?” Castiel asked. “There’s a bathroom down the hallway. Oh—” he flustered, “You know that, of course you do. This is your house…”

Mary laughed, patting Castiel on the hand.

Sam squeezed Castiel’s bicep as he handed over his coat too. “We appreciate your train of thought, Castiel. Colour us impressed, too. Dean’s idea of hospitality mostly consists of nagging people to wipe their feet, then throwing them a takeout menu.”

“Really?” Castiel looked at Dean incredulously. “You have changed.”

“Shuddup,” Dean mumbled, folding his arms.

“What do you mean?” Sam asked Castiel.

“Tell them, Dean,” Castiel said. “I’ll put the coats away.”

He went to the second bedroom, draping each coat on a hanger and hooking them over the back of the door. Castiel admired the two single beds: Dean had left folded towels and a small plate of
homemade candy on each pillow, tied up with ribbon. The sight made Castiel smile, and he continued to smile as he returned just in time to hear Dean stuttering, “I— I learned how to cook. And bake. And iron clothes, and wash laundry properly. And it’s really fun.” He mumbled the last part.

Mary’s response was to wrap Dean in another big hug. Dean leaned into her, smirking.

“Dean is a very skilled baker,” Castiel told Sam. “There are several gingerbread houses in the kitchen which Dean was going to put together later.”

“Gingerbread houses! That sounds like a riot,” Mary said, finally letting go of her eldest son. She touched his chin with a thumb, gazing at him with love gleaming in her eyes. “If there’s enough house parts to go around, I’d love to make one too.”

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Since the wheely table was far too small for gingerbread endeavours, Dean dug out a clean bedsheet and spread it on the floor like a picnic blanket. They each took a cushion or two, and sat in formation around a construction zone of edible houses, each set up atop a baking tray.

Dean chewed his tongue in concentration while he piped windows onto his cottage. He shared his tray with Castiel, while Sam and Mary built a second one between them. While decorating with icing, they talked about their drive up here, how they found the turn in the road without a problem in daylight. Since Dean was so engrossed in his art, Castiel picked up the gauntlet and began sharing their own story.

“Dean almost fell off the cliff as we drove up,” Castiel said, toning down the shake in his voice so he wouldn’t worry Dean’s mother. “Luckily I was with him. I pulled him to safety without breaking anything. We lost the flashlights in the snow, though.”

“Oh my God,” Mary shouted at Dean.

“It’s fine,” Castiel said placatingly. “It really wasn’t a big deal.”

“Dude,” Dean scoffed, eyes on a gingerbread chimney as he lowered it onto a thatched roof, “You saved my freakin’ life, you deserve a little credit.”

“Please, no,” Castiel waved down Mary’s surge of appreciative noises. “I’d rather not think about the incident. It was very scary.” He looked down, fiddling with a gingerbread door, getting icing on his fingers. He quietly added a doorknob, then handed the door to Dean to stick on their shared house.

“So how did you two meet?” Sam asked, meeting Castiel’s eyes. Castiel noticed there was white icing on his cheek, transferred from his half-planted picket fence.

Castiel looked at Dean. Dean looked at Castiel.

“You wanna tell this story?” Dean asked.

“It’s more your story than mine,” Castiel said. “Your family wants to hear your side.”

“Yeah, but you were the whole reason we’re even friends.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Mary muttered, good-naturedly, “we don’t care who tells the story, but for the love of this tiny gingerbread chimney, someone tell it already.”
“Ahhh,” Dean exhaled. “Fine. So. It was a few weeks after I moved to Vermont. I enrolled in some night classes at the local community college.” Dean’s eyes flicked to Sam, then back down. “I figured I’d be a more capable adult if I knew the basics, like how to cook. Obviously Mom got all her dinners out of packets, and I skipped most of my home ec. classes in high school, so I never learned that stuff. So, uh. Went along. Dropped out of nearly all my classes after a month, since the teachers were crap. But Cas taught cooking class. Cakes, pasta, soup, pizza, cookies and candy – stuff like that. Nutrition. Oven safety. Germ elimination. How to control water consumption while washing dishes by hand. Proper usage of rubber gloves.”

“Apparently Dean found it fascinating,” Castiel said dryly, “since he not only completed every course I was teaching, but then re-enrolled in the same courses again. Twice. In one year.”

“Now I know everything Cas knows,” Dean said proudly. “I could teach that class myself, if I wanted.”

Castiel rolled his eyes, but he did admit to himself it was probably true. After all the practice he’d put in, Dean was every bit the culinary egghead as Castiel was, at least when it came to basic and intermediary skills. With a weary, yet fond sigh, Castiel told Sam, “Dean had the option to go on to do further learning, but for some unknown reason, he elected to remain in my class for three years in a row.”

Dean flustered slightly. “Yeah. Well, we were kind of friends by then,” he said. “We’d meet up at the weekends, get coffee or a couple beers, plan Cas’ classes together.”

“Really?” Sam said brightly.

Dean shrugged. “Wasn’t a big deal. It was like extra credit. We’re about the same age – and it’s not like I’m paying for the class now, anyway. They let me sit in for free the third time ‘round.”

Castiel coughed into his fist. “I may have pushed the board into that.”

Dean grinned. “Yeah. You can’t pay for a class you’re co-teaching.” He and Castiel exchanged glances, sharing affectionate smiles and good memories. Dean bit his lip, looking back at his gingerbread house. “Things got serious a couple years ago, though. Cas, uh—”

“My sister was getting married,” Castiel said, looking up at Mary, who peered back, providing him her full attention. “I was invited to their garden party wedding – and I... well...”

“Cas was too chicken to go alone,” Dean smirked. “He made me put on a freakin’ bow tie and march around this garden like his goddamn bodyguard. And he needed a bodyguard, too.”

“There was no small amount of violence,” Castiel said, speaking lightly, though the memories felt murky. “I believe there was at least one hospitalisation, and Anna, the bride—”

“Her bridesmaids almost drowned her in the pool,” Dean grinned. “That whole event, man, that was somethin’ else. The day’s schedule read like a Greek tragedy playbook.”

“Was Anna all right?” Mary asked, bewildered.

“Oh, yeah,” Castiel said seriously. “Everyone was fine. Unfortunately.”

Dean and Castiel shared another smile, this one bordering amused and hysterical. Dean blinked away first, thoughtlessly mentioning, “Actually, that wedding was where I met Bel—”

Dean stopped suddenly, hands frozen as he squeezed an icing flower from a tube. “Um.”
“Met... me,” Castiel said, panicking on Dean’s behalf. “I-In a new light.”

Dean’s worried eyes met Castiel’s, and Castiel gave him an encouraging nod.

“Oh. Um. Yeah.” Dean swallowed, still gazing at Castiel. “Yeah, we. We became a lot closer. After that.” Finally getting his bearings again, Dean breathed out, smiling at Mary, then Sam, then at his gingerbread house. “Cas would drive me home after a night out drinking, or we’d go chow down on burgers, or get takeout and watch a movie, whatever. He borrowed my Survivor vinyl once. Still hasn’t given it back.”

“I told you, it’s still in the player!” Castiel uttered. “Every time! Every time you bring that up, it’s still there!”

“Point is,” Dean said, “Cas ain’t my teacher any more. We’ve gone so far beyond that, it’s like a weird footnote in our history. He’s kind of the best friend I ever had, y’know? We’re best buds,” He gave Castiel a plain, unfettered smile now. Castiel returned it in equal force. “If I’m honest,” Dean added, turning back to his gingerbread, “him yanking me off a cliffside wasn’t even the most dramatic way he’s saved my life. I couldn’t count how many times he stayed up through the night with me. Keepin’ watch. Talking me down from metaphorical ledges. Even after he realised I’m the world’s biggest fuckup, he stuck around. And Cas... Heh. He makes getting through the day a helluva lot easier.”

Castiel felt a glowing ember emerge inside him, hearing what Dean said, and how he said it without shame or compromise. A smile made its way to Castiel’s face, and he gazed at Dean until Dean gazed back. They shared steady heartbeats, each pulse heavy with solidarity and affection.

“Well then,” Mary said, smiling curiously, eyes flicking between Dean and Castiel. “Castiel. It seems you’re my son’s guiding light. A guardian angel. So, spill. Come on. I want to know all about you! What do you like doing when you’re not teaching class?”

“Oh. I, um, make painted signs and greetings cards. Calligraphy.”

“He’s an artist,” Dean added importantly. “A good one, too. He sells his crap on some overpriced internet craft store, mails it worldwide. He spent this whole weekend making signs for New Year’s, and stuff for January birthdays.”

Castiel nodded along. “I find it very fulfilling. The process is far, far removed from my previous walk of life.”

“You mean cooking?” Mary asked.

Castiel took an uneasy breath, shrugging a shoulder. “No, um... Before then...”

“I figure Cas was, like, a drug dealer or something,” Dean said, glancing his way. “He won’t talk about it. Never said a thing about his job in class, but he made it clear—”

“My occupation came about as a result of a turbulent childhood,” Castiel confirmed, looking at Mary and Sam in turn. “I chased thrills and sought out danger, and I crafted my livelihood around getting as much of it as possible.” He swallowed, watching his hands shake, misplacing a balcony ledge. Dean noticed, taking Castiel’s hand, then taking back the balcony to reposition it. Castiel licked his lips. “Nowadays I actively seek out calm activities, and avoid excessive excitement.”

“He’s a sucker for weird yoga poses,” Dean smirked. “Never had a bendier friend.”

Castiel blushed, avoiding his onlookers’ eyes. “I’m really not that flexible.”
“Sure, pal,” Dean uttered to himself, rolling his eyes. “I’ve played with rainbow slinkies less willowy than you.” He grabbed some more icing tubes and piped out some bluebirds nesting on the gutter of the ivy-draped cottage. Once done, Dean looked up, peering at Sam and Mary’s cottage. “How are you guys getting on?”

“Oh... ho-hum,” Mary said. “It’s been years since I put together one of these.” She shook her head at her handiwork. “What a mess. Heck, at least you made it easy to put together. It’s like a 3D jigsaw puzzle.”

Dean looked smug, and he deserved to, after all the work he’d put in.

“Were you really a drug dealer?” Sam asked, leaning towards Castiel.

Castiel breathed a laugh, a grin rising across his face. “No. But Dean’s guess isn’t so far off.”

“Sniper?” Dean asked, even though he’d guessed the same thing months before and been told no. “Undercover mob operative. Stripper by day, hitman by night. Bungee cord operator!”

“Dean, stop,” Castiel chided, placing a hand on Dean’s knee.

Dean smiled, tipping his head. “I’m curious. I’ve wanted to know for years.”

“I know.” Castiel patted Dean’s knee, then retrieved his hand. “Are we going to add any gingerbread people to these scenes, or are they unmanned desserts?”

“I didn’t make any gingerbread people,” Dean said, sounding disappointed in himself. “Sorry, man. I was all caught up in the idea of tiny houses. They look real cute, huh?”

Both cottages looked like more extravagant versions of a child’s playhouse, with a central front door, windows with flower-filled window boxes, a balcony, a chimney, and slanted roofs textured with piped icing. Dean’s bluebirds took baths in the gutter, and a squirrel frolicked across the sugar-snow front lawn.

“Yes,” Castiel said. “They are very... cute.”

“Always wanted to live in a house like this,” Dean said, quietly – speaking to Castiel rather than Mary and Sam, who had begun a separate discussion about the placement of fencing. Dean smiled, showing Castiel the back of their gingerbread cottage, where Dean had piped more green vines up the wall, brightened with the occasional flower. “Maybe I’d live with a dog. Or a ferret. And two-point-four kids. Preferably whole kids, though; I ain’t into the idea of point-four of a kid running around. I like my graphics well-rendered.”

Castiel laughed, throwing his head back against the couch behind him. He folded forward again, beaming at Dean. “That’s not what that means, Dean.”

“Hey, I know,” Dean grinned. “Just like makin’ you laugh.”

Castiel shook his head, still beaming.

“And we’d go out for walks in the park,” Dean said, letting his fingers walk the perimeter of the baking tray their house was perched on. “Go see movies at the weekend. See a game – or sixteen; get season tickets. Maybe check out a stage show when there’s something good on. A musical maybe. Rock concerts. Go bowling. Then come home and do some gardening. Ride a bike around the flowerbeds. Feed the squirrels, rake the leaves. Teach the little tykes how to scorch the daylights out of anything on a campfire. Shit like that.”
“You really want children, don’t you,” Castiel nodded, adjusting an iced bluebird after it fell over. He left a fingerprint, but it looked like a wing.

“I’d love to do something like this with them,” Dean said, answering Castiel’s question. “Just sitting around the day before Christmas, chilling out, making something fun. I never had that as a kid.”

“You did!” Mary butted in, her voice tinged with alarm. “Don’t you remember? Every year we’d make chocolate yule logs. And string up the lights, decorate the tree—”

“I meant with my dad,” Dean said. “Hey, Mom, don’t worry, all right? Whatever you did with me and Sammy, that’s what— That’s what’s making me want all this. The house…” Dean nodded at the ceiling. “The feeling of… of this. Just being with my family, smiling.” He gulped, looking down quickly. “It’s chick flick stuff. I just love how this feels. I’ve missed this more than anything while we weren’t together.”

He breathed out, and Castiel heard the air shudder. Castiel reached to touch Dean’s back, rubbing gently. Dean leaned into the touch, pressing their shoulders together.

Dean blinked a few times, then looked hopefully at Castiel. “What about you? You want kids?”

Castiel was sure the room fell silent, everyone waiting with bated breath for his answer. This was why Dean and Bela broke up; Dean yearned to have children. One piece was absent from the jigsaw puzzle of his ideal home, and that piece represented the people: the one part of Dean’s fantasy not yet set in stone. Who would live with him? Who would love him? Castiel saw the fear in Dean’s eyes every time they talked about the future. Who could ever love him, a community college dropout with a mountain of pending business debt and little more than six hundred bucks to his name?

Without hesitation, Castiel offered a warm smile, holding Dean’s gaze. “Dean, I grew up viewing my family home as an active war zone. I grew up craving everything you described. Longing like that – it never leaves you. Why wouldn’t I want to spend my Christmas surrounded by people I love, people I count as family?” His smile faltered, weakened by a rush of emotion that made his eyes fill with tears. He blinked them away, finally confessing to Dean, “Why do you think I was so eager to come here with you? You are family to me. If you wanted to bring more family into your life, what right do I have to refuse that? And why would I want to?”

When Dean’s eyes still shone with his question, Castiel grinned, and shoved his side fondly. “Yes, Dean, I want children.”

Dean bit his lip, looking down and away. He was smiling, Castiel saw it in the shape of his cheeks. But Castiel flushed with colour, knowing his words could easily be interpreted a certain way.

No, he didn’t want just any children. He wanted Dean’s children.

Castiel avoided Mary’s eyes, afraid of what he might see.

… ※ …
Sam and Dean wrestled with a bushy, freshly-cut fir tree as they angled it through the front door. They argued about how they ought to get things done, but they weren’t actually fighting. Castiel observed from a distance, enthralled by all the shoving and the bickering as the brothers got the tree upright, secured, and then began to decorate it.

“Shouldn’t you let the snow dry first?” Castiel asked, approaching with a box in his arms. Mary had given him a collection of ornaments and ribbons from the trunk of her car, and Dean seemed utterly gleeful as he recognised the box and reached for it excitedly.

“The dampness will evaporate eventually,” Sam said, since Dean was too busy muttering about how much he’d missed hanging ornaments. “It’s warm and dry in here. And we shook off the bugs outside – don’t look so concerned, Cas.”

Castiel smiled, liking that Sam used Dean’s nickname for him.

“Cas, look at this one,” Dean said, showing Castiel a miniature metallic red bauble with Dean’s name scrawled on the side. “Made this when I was eight.” He held up another. “This when I was twelve.” A third: “And twenty-five.”

“We decorate tiny ornaments every year,” Sam explained. He dug in the box and pulled out a new store-bought box of four hollow, golden balls, and a white paint pen. “Christmas Eve is decorating time!”

Dean looked up from where he knelt. “Hey, what did you and Mom do these past few years, when I wasn’t around? You, uh... make ones for just you two?”

Sam watched his own hands, unboxing the ornaments. “We did, yeah. But...” he shrugged, “it didn’t really feel right without you.”

Dean looked glad for all of one second, then he looked... terribly, terribly sad. Castiel worried dark thoughts would quickly consume him, so he stood closer, giving Dean a pat on the shoulder. He meant it as a reassuring gesture; he didn’t expect Dean to reach up and hold his hand. Dean’s thumb rubbed back and forth, back and forth.

Castiel watched him, caring too much to let go, but too anxious that Sam was watching to let it continue. With a single squeeze, Castiel slipped his hand away. “I have some more paints,” he said casually. “You could decorate your ornaments with all the colours of the rainbow, if you wanted.”

Castiel went to get the paints, painfully aware that Dean was watching him leave his side.

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They laughed as they reached up together, struggling to hold the tree still. “Left! Left,” Dean chuckled, as Castiel made the tip of the tree flail, its topmost spire assaulting the ceiling. “Dammit, Cas, I can’t reach it if it’s moving!”

“I’m taller than both of you,” Sam complained from the couch. “I could do it in ten seconds!”

“Me and Cas are on it already, Sammy. We got this! C’mon, Cas, lean it left!”

Mary brought Dean a folding stepladder she’d found under a bed, handing it over with a sigh. “If
one of you break your neck, don’t say I didn’t warn you. Be careful.”

Dean volunteered Castiel to climb the ladder, on the grounds that he himself was stockier and therefore best at weighing down the base, but Castiel knew Dean was just afraid of heights. So Castiel climbed up three steps until his ruffled hair brushed the rafters, one hand holding the gold star for the top of the tree, the other around a dusty wooden beam.

He felt Dean’s hands on his waist, easing around slowly, fingers under his lifted shirt to touch his hipbones. Castiel felt his heartbeat soar, but he concentrated only on the star, placing it gently where it ought to be. The treetop drooped under its weight, but the sight made the others laugh, so Castiel didn’t try to fix it. But, as a precaution, he wavered a hand around the star, making sure it wasn’t about to fall.

Dean gave his hips a squeeze, and Castiel looked down at him. Dean gazed up, eyes shining with unmistakable affection. Without breaking eye contact, Dean leaned in and gave Castiel’s exposed hip a small kiss. Castiel barely restrained a gasp, shocked and confused and thrilled by such an open show of sentiment. Surely Mary and Sam could see—?

Castiel set his jaw and lowered his shoulders, pulling down his borrowed shirt, hiding his skin from view. With one hand he brushed away Dean’s grip, and with the other took Dean’s shoulder, using it to guide himself down. Dean held Castiel’s eye in silent questioning: wasn’t his kiss welcome?

Castiel couldn’t meet his eyes any more. He folded up the ladder, handed it back to Mary with a word of thanks.

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“All right, all right, more hugs,” Dean said, sweeping his arms from Sam to Mary, wrapping himself all the way around his mother, beaming as he rocked her from foot to foot. “Hmmm.”

“Dean,” Mary complained, laughing, pushing him off. “I need to check the roast. Hug your brother.”

Dean shuffled closer to Sam, arms up, expecting another hug.

Sam looked up from watching Castiel decorate his bauble in swirly writing. “What? Again? How many bedtime hugs do you need?”

“Dude, I haven’t seen you in years, don’t deny me this,” Dean said grumpily, shoving his hands under Sam’s arms and yanking him in for another squeeze. “I missed you, little brother. So shut your pie hole and hug me.”

Sam eventually sighed, relaxing around Dean, patting him on the shoulder. “I missed you too.”

Castiel grinned, painting one last flourish that curled around the string of his miniature ornament. When he lifted his head, Dean finally slid out of Sam’s space with a satisfied sigh.

Mary came back from the kitchen, and Dean smiled back over his shoulder. “You ready for bed, Mom?”

“I might stay up and read,” Mary said, pulling her maroon velvet robe tighter around her shoulders. “Gotta keep checking the oven for a few hours.” Before Dean could say anything, Mary held up a hand and said, “Uh-uh! You’ve spent enough time in the kitchen, there’s enough food to feed eight of us. We’ll have an early start tomorrow, open our presents over breakfast. In the meantime, there’s plenty of books and the radio to keep me company. You and Castiel get to bed. Right now.
Dean pressed his lips together, eyes sliding to meet Castiel’s. Castiel blinked back. Neither had prepared a good excuse to stick around and sleep on the couch; it seemed they would be sleeping together again.

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Castiel slumped into the bathroom feeling both dozy and elated from the eggnog. He was immediately startled by Sam, who stood at the sink. Letting out a breath after his gasp, Castiel muttered, “I didn’t realise you were in here.”

“The light was on,” Sam smiled, squeezing toothpaste onto his toothbrush, watching Castiel in the mirror. “Didn’t that give it away?”

“Dean leaves the light on all night,” Castiel said, wrapping his arms around his middle, self-conscious about his unshaven chest hair. “If the bathroom’s occupied we keep the door shut.”

“Yes,” Sam chuckled, eyebrows jumping towards his floppy mane of hair. “I forgot about that little quirk. He’ll never admit he’s afraid of the dark, but he is.”

“It’s not the dark he’s afraid of,” Castiel corrected, “he’s afraid that he’s—”

“Not alone in the dark,” Sam finished, in time with Castiel.

They made eye contact in the mirror again, then laughed and looked away.

“I’ll leave you to brush your teeth,” Castiel said. “I’ll come back later.”

“No, stay,” Sam offered, stepping to his left, closer to the toilet’s sliding door. “Obviously we’re both big guys, but there’s enough room if we keep our elbows to ourselves. I take it that tiny orange brush is yours. I haven’t seen one like that since I was a kid.”

“Yes,” Castiel said, stepping forward to claim the brush, accepting the toothpaste tube when Sam offered it. “I forgot my bag at home, I’ve been using Dean’s things all weekend.”

“Ah, I thought I ruc’gnised your t-shirt earlier,” Sam grinned, speaking through a mouthful of quickly-foaming toothpaste. “I gave it to Dean after I grew out’f it.”

Castiel smiled in contentment, watching fresh toothpaste swell into a neat stripy ball on his brush. He felt warm inside – from the booze, yes – but he was honoured Dean had dressed him in what was essentially a Winchester family heirloom.

Before Castiel could lift his brush to his mouth, he saw movement in the mirror: Dean entered the bathroom, bedraggled, sleepy, and totally naked.

“Dean!” Castiel scolded, turning around to glare at him. “Put some clothes on, we have company!”

From both Dean and Sam’s mouths tumbled the same careless laugh. “Cas, everyone in this lodge has seen me naked at one time or another,” Dean drawled, sauntering up to the sink, squeezing between Castiel and Sam to reach his own toothbrush, then snatching the toothpaste from the side of the sink. “And it’s not like I’m an eyesore, anyway,” he added, smirking. He pulled back, slathering paste on his brush without any thought to how much he ought to use. He tossed Sam the tube, and Sam caught it like he’d expected it to be lobbed his way.
Castiel, despairing, could only huff in Dean’s direction. His own toothbrush went forgotten, held halfway to his mouth.

Dean began brushing his teeth without water, eyes closed, making tuneless noises as he angled his brush and repeatedly jabbed it into his mouth.

Reluctantly, Castiel did the same, but with far more elegance. He let his gaze rest on Dean, then on Sam, then on the sink. For a couple of minutes, the bathroom echoed with three examples of the familiar, yet surreal sound of bristles inside open mouths.

Sam finished first, and he bent past Castiel’s waist to spit in the sink. He ran the water fast, washing out his mouth. Tiny droplets splashed against Castiel’s abdomen, which Castiel surreptitiously wiped away with a palm, pretending not to feel an angry twinge from his full bladder.

Sam stood straight again, breathing out a minty puff of air. He reached for a towel, taking it off the rail to run it down his face.

When the towel lowered, Sam’s gaze landed on Dean’s back. “Nice handprints,” he smiled.

Dean opened his eyes. “Uh?” He turned his chin over one shoulder. “Oh. Yeah,” he uttered, darting to the sink to spit out foam, tossing his unrinsed brush on the side, then wiping his mouth with a wet hand. “Yeah, that’s some decent handwork there, huh?” Dean grinned at his brother’s reflection, shooting finger guns. “Eyyy.” In the mirror, Castiel saw Sam roll his eyes.

“What are you talking about?” Castiel asked, while bending to rinse his mouth out. He spat out fresh water, turned the faucet off, then prompted, “What handprints?”

“You didn’t notice?” Dean turned around, showing off his backside. Castiel’s first instinct was to look away, but he quickly looked back, alarmed by what he’d seen. A pair of bruises framed Dean’s hips, obviously in the shape of hands: four fingertips and a thumb had dug into his skin on each side, gripping hard enough to leave a blue-green mark against freckled flesh.

Castiel’s blood ran cold. “Oh, no,” he whispered.

Dean stroked the mark on his right side. He flinched, biting his lip. “Hmh. Still hurts.”

“Dean,” Castiel said, hearing his voice crack around near-silence. He couldn’t breathe, he couldn’t blink, he couldn’t look away from Dean. Those were his handprints, he’d done this to his best friend without realising. “Dean... I’m so sorry...”

Dean looked up, surprised. “For what?”

Castiel could only see blurs through his rising tears. “I never meant to hurt you. I would never do that. I didn’t mean to be so rough— Oh, Dean, I’m so sorry, I-I’m a monster, I’m sorry—”

“Whoa, whoa, whoa, heyheyhey,” Dean gushed, warm hands taking Castiel’s face, then slipping down to his collarbones. “Cas, don’t cry. Sh-sh. It’s okay. It’s fine. They’re just marks, there’s no real damage? It’s just bruises.”

“But I hurt you— You wanted me to be gentle and I tried to— I’d never done that before, Dean, I knew I’d do it wrong, I knew I would—”

“Cas, no—” Dean breathed heavily, hands taking Castiel’s shoulders more firmly, shaking him once. “Shit, man, don’t do this to yourself. I’m fine. Look at me. Cas. Look at me.”
Castiel blinked hard, struggling to control his breathing. He swallowed down the worst of his guilt, finally meeting Dean’s fierce green gaze.

“I am absolutely okay with what you did,” Dean said plainly. “Don’t beat yourself up.” A silly grin rose on one side of his lips, but he quickly schooled it away. “We both agreed to do what we did. All right? Sometimes the consequences include a random bruise.”

Castiel tried to nod, feeling his ears burning, all too aware that Sam was standing right behind him, observing.

“Listen,” Dean went on, speaking gently, keeping his voice down, “I know this ain’t the time or the place to have this discussion – but by God, Cas, you gotta know that sometimes pain is pleasure. For me at least. I consented to these fucking bruises. You hear me? And I happily would again, in a heartbeat.”

Though Castiel fought to comprehend most of what Dean said, the last part was both the easiest and the most difficult part to believe. “You— You’d have sex again?” Castiel choked out. And, in a whisper: “With me?”

Dean’s hands slid down Castiel’s chest, then slipped away to curl into fists at his side. “Like I said,” Dean breathed, eyes darting to Sam. “This ain’t the time or the place.”

Sam cleared his throat. “I can go.”

“No, it’s fine, you brush your moose mane or clip your antlers, whatever you were gonna do,” Dean said. “I’m gonna go.”

“Me too,” Castiel muttered, rushing into the separate toilet room, sliding the door shut behind him and locking it. He leaned his forehead against the door, hands over his face. He was shaking, overwhelmed, upset, dizzy. Guilt churned in his stomach. He’d hurt Dean, and therefore he was the scum of the Earth. It was simple math.

From beyond the door, Castiel heard muffled voices. “Dean, wait,” Sam said. “Maybe stick around until he comes out. He looked pretty upset...”

“Yeah,” Dean said. He sounded confused.

“S-so, um,” Sam said, around a tentative smile that Castiel heard in his words. “He seems sweet.”

Dean waited before responding. “He is. God, Sam, he really, really is. He’s a fucking angel, you wouldn’t even believe how good a person he is.”

Castiel shut his eyes tight, holding back a sob. How could Dean think that, even now?

“At least I don’t have to give him the ‘don’t you dare hurt my brother’ speech.”

Dean laughed quietly. “Yeah.”

Castiel, although distraught, pushed away from the door, moving to do what he locked himself in in order to do: he lifted the toilet seat and pulled down his borrowed underwear, finally getting the chance to let go of all the eggnog Dean had served him. He aimed his stream against the side of the bowl so it flowed silently, as Castiel was still eager to eavesdrop on the brothers.

“I know this is gonna sound textbook,” Sam said, “but, listen.” He cleared his throat. “I hope things work out for you two, in the long run. I hope you’re happy together.”
“Ummm. Thanks.” Dean sounded uncomfortable now. “For the record, it was a secret that me and Cas were doin’ it. I kinda forgot about these bruises for a second; brain malfunction. Long day. Half-bowl of eggnog.”

Sam scoffed a laugh. “Good eggnog though.” After a few beats of silence, he said, “I, uh, didn’t actually realise you were into guys. You were always the archetypal ladies’ man, all through high school, then beyond. Ahhh... I know you probably don’t need to hear it but – I dunno. Meeting Cas really threw me for a while. Your whole ‘thing’ with him got easier to comprehend once you got talking about how you met, though. Coffee dates with your baking teacher? Hah. That was cute, Dean. Food always was the quickest way into your heart. And your pants.”

Castiel curled his toes on the linoleum, feeling chills twirl down his spine for a myriad of reasons.

“Well, Cas taught me a lot more than cooking, it wasn’t just about the food,” Dean said gently. “For example...” First came silence. Then Dean took a breath. “He’s actually, uh... agender. As in, genderless. Not a man, just has a dick. And the whole idea of gender is bullshit anyway. I mean, since we’re on the subject.” Dean cleared his throat roughly.

“Wow,” Sam said, cheerfully. “Literally in all my days on Earth, I never expected you to say anything remotely like that sentence.”

“Oh, bite me, Sasquatch. Maybe I appreciate him for who he is and how he treats people, rather than just what he’s fed me or how he is in bed. Ever think of that?”

“Aww, true love. That’s adorable,” Sam crooned. He chuckled, then asked, “Have you set a date for the wedding?”

Castiel froze up, full-body tension cutting off his otherwise steady stream. Silence pounded in his eardrums between his heartbeats.


Sam laughed, and Castiel heard a thump on the wall, one of them pushing the other. They both laughed now, snorting, grunting – then Sam yelped, and Dean’s raucous laughter moved away, reverberating off the back wall as he retreated.

Castiel managed to smile, heart lightened by the brothers’ easygoing rapport. Taking a deep breath, he squeezed the last drops from his bladder, shivered once, then shook himself dry, not bothering to wipe before pulling his boxer-briefs back in place. Sheepishly, he unlocked the toilet door and slid it back, emerging into the brighter bathroom, peering shyly at Sam, then at Dean. He couldn’t hold Dean’s eye, however, instead turning to wash his hands in the sink.

Dean approached slowly. “You okay?” he asked.

“Shouldn’t I be asking you that?” Castiel replied.

“Me?” Dean met his gaze in the mirror, rocking closer so their bare shoulders touched, sharing warmth. “I’m walkin’ on sunshine, Cas.” Dean tilted his head. “Got a little stormcloud hanging about, too, so it seems.”

Castiel’s stiff expression relaxed into a wide grin, head lowered.
“Theeere’s the silver lining,” Dean uttered, placing a hand on Castiel’s back, rubbing him.
“C’mon. I think you need some sleep. You turn into a flirty, emotional little shit when you’re tipsy. Can’t have you hitting on my brother, now, can I?”

Castiel huffed, avoiding Sam’s eyes as Dean guided him past. “No offence, but Sam is really not my type. I prefer Deans.”

Dean laughed. But what made Castiel smile most was seeing Sam laughing too. Castiel looked back to see the younger Winchester smile acceptingly, and they each gave a friendly wave to say goodnight.

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Less than a minute later, Dean and Castiel sat down together at the foot of the bed, sharing a burdened silence. Dean leaned over his parted thighs, hands clasped behind his head. Castiel leaned back with his weight on his hands, head tipped back to touch his shoulders. He stared at the rafters over the bed, which had long ago been painted white. Dusty tinsel was draped between them, twinkling with fairy lights that Dean had strung up earlier.

Dean eventually sighed. “Do we need to talk about this?”

“Talk about what?” Castiel asked, leaning forward, elbows on his thighs, head turned to look at Dean. “The fact your brother thinks we’re a couple, engaged to be married? Or the fact you’re acting like it’s true?”

Dean bowed his head further, shutting his eyes. “I’m doing what I always do,” he said. “You’re my best friend, Cas. Period. I can’t constantly edit my actions, worrying what it really means. I can’t be bothered freaking out about what people will think if I wanna hug you for two fucking seconds.” He relaxed, gazing coolly at Castiel. “If they think I’m head over heels for you, that’s their problem, not mine. I’m doing whatever comes naturally, and I ain’t in any mood to second-guess my instincts. Christ, I did enough of that when I was with Bela.”

“But you haven’t said a word to Sam or your mother, have you?” Castiel queried. “They don’t know about Bela. They don’t know you just had a breakup. They don’t know I’m ‘just a friend’.”

Dean frowned. “I told them what they needed to know. Sam asked about a wedding, so I gave him an answer he’d accept.”

Castiel huffed in frustration. “Do you want them to think we’re a couple?”

Dean’s eyes flicked to Castiel’s, then back down. He breathed out roughly, covering his mouth with a hand, then releasing it. He stared at the carpet, shrugging a shoulder. “Maybe it’s easier, okay? I told them if they came here they’d meet my fiancé. And they get up here, and they meet you. What am I meant to say now? Jesus, if I tell them you’re not my fiancé, what’s the other option? I can’t talk about breaking up with Bela. I don’t want to talk about Bela. You know that. You covered for me when we talked about Anna’s wedding. Thank you, by the way,” he added, gruffly.

Castiel moved his knee to bump Dean’s in acknowledgement – but Dean chased the touch, pressing his knee to Castiel’s, apparently unconscious of his own movement.

“I needed this feeling, Cas,” Dean confessed, gaze soft on Castiel’s lips. “Just being content with myself, and my... desires.” He swallowed, shamed by his use of that word. “I pushed it all down while I was with Bela. I told myself all that mattered was being with a woman, showing the world I
was capable, having a big happy family. But then I find out Bela doesn’t want kids. So that part of my life was just... gone. Obliterated, poof! Business failed – then what? Every night I was fantasising—"

Both hands covered Dean’s face, and he shook his head. He took a moment to pull himself together, then he parted his hands, licking his lips. “Listen, the point is, I don’t have Bela in my life any more. For the months and months leading up to this week, the future just looked like a big, dark void to me. Everything was up in the air. I wasn’t sad, as such, but I sure as hell wasn’t happy.

“Then Bela and I broke up, and everything felt like nothing for a while. Just... blank. I don’t know.”

Dean swallowed, and he said, quietly, “First time I properly felt anything was – after. After you and me did it. And I felt so much, Cas. All the things I’d been missing rushed back at once.” He looked up to the ceiling, eyes shining, a smile playing on the corners of his mouth. “The drive up here, the snow fight we had. The baking, the smell of cinnamon. Hot cocoa and gingerbread, eating while you read to me. Your red little Rudolph nose when you came in from the snow. All of it hit me, all in a second.

“And the moment Mom and Sammy got here, and I introduced them to you...” Dean’s smile shook, and he breathed out a small laugh. “God, I don’t know. Every emotion that made my life bearable kinda... flooded back into existence.” Now he looked Castiel in the eye, smiling serenely. “I felt comfortable, Cas. It was fucking weird. I’m not saying it makes sense. But you’re sleeping where Bela would’ve been, and I— Cas, I can’t help but think this is better.”

Castiel stared. He wasn’t sure what to feel, or think, or say. He sat frozen in static, his insides blurring with dark sparkles.

“So, fine,” Dean muttered. “Sam and Mom think we’re a couple. But they seem happy enough with the idea, right? So long as they’re happy, I’m A-okay with them believing whatever they like. Honestly, I think I get a little rush from pretending. I had butterflies in my stomach the whole time Sam was looking at these handprints you gave me.”

“You get a rush from... pretending,” Castiel echoed.

“Mm-hm.” Dean smirked, rubbing his palms together slowly. “Don’t you get all – fluttery? When we touch? And pretend like we’ve been dating for years?”

“Yes,” Castiel promised, “but I don’t think it’s for the same reason as you.”

“Oh.” Dean looked worried.

Castiel swallowed. “Did you ever feel this way with Bela?”

A startled laugh escaped Dean’s mouth. “Seriously?”

“Did you?”

“Fuck no. Come on, you’re my friend. Bela was – not that. We were gonna get married, that’s totally different.”

“You weren’t friends with her?”

Dean became distracted by his thoughts. “I mean, I loved her...”
“What did love feel like for you, then?” Castiel asked.

Dean scoffed, frowning. “Y’know.”

“Tell me?”

Dean shrugged, clearly a bit annoyed now. “Y’know. Take her for fancy dates, give her flowers. Walk arm-in-arm at her business meetings, wearing a suit and lookin’ good. Fiancé stuff.” Dean swallowed. “Being with Bela— It was kind of...” His eyes darted to the side, lost for words. He huffed. “No. Forget it. It doesn’t matter what it felt like, Cas. It’s over.”

“But how does it feel being with me, now?” Castiel insisted. “Is it different?”

Dean rolled his eyes, sighing dramatically. “What do you wanna know, exactly? I’m happy and I know it, clap your hands? I like fooling around with you? I’m—” He stumbled on his own words, and finished more softly, “I’m glad it was you who came up here and not Bela? What?”

“Dean,” Castiel started. “Listen... I think this is important. I know full-well why I get excited when you touch me, or kiss me, flirt with me. But – do you know? Do you understand why it feels good for you?”

Dean ground his teeth together, looking away forcefully. “Quit talking to me like I’m a kid. I know what I’m feeling.”

“Then answer me this. Do you really want to pretend to be a couple?” Castiel asked. He took Dean’s hand, thumb stroking his knuckles. “Or is there—”

“No, no, shut up.” Dean growled, glaring at Castiel. “Dude, come on, don’t ruin it.”

“Ruin what?”

“The friend thing. The best buddy thing. Come on.” Dean’s voice turned pleading. “Don’t fuck this up, I need you right now. I need my friend.”

“You know I won’t stop being your friend, don’t you? If we were in love?”

Dean looked immensely upset, eyes cast away, shoulders rigid. “Don’t say it, Cas. God, I can’t do this. I can’t do this...”

“What can’t you do?”

“Lose you.” Dean looked back at Castiel with grim tears shining in his waterline. “The second it gets real, everything falls apart again. You’ve seen how I am in relationships. You saw how I got with Bela. I get – distracted. Bored. And when I don’t see an end goal that matches my perfect fucking vision of the future, I lose all hope. Emotional blackout. Everything shuts down. Dick stops working, can’t find the time to talk to my family, business crashes and burns. I destroy everything I touch. I can’t do to you what I did to Bela.”

“I’m not Bela,” Castiel said.

“But I’m still me,” Dean replied, forcefully, not meeting Castiel’s eyes. “You’re the best thing that’s ever happened to me, Cas. I can’t trust myself to love you, let alone be with you.”

He swallowed twice, eyes widening as he realised what he’d said. “Fuck. Don’t. Don’t say anything, don’t. It’s the booze talking, not me.” He pushed a resisting hand towards Castiel.
“Here’s what’s gonna happen. We go to sleep. We wake up tomorrow, we have a picture-perfect Christmas with the family. We act like we’re engaged so I’m not forced to explain what happened with Bela, but you and I, we’re friends. That’s all.”

“Dean—”

“That’s all.” Dean lifted his eyes to Castiel’s, determination making him tense. “After this is over, we go home. And things go back to normal. We forget we slept together. We plan cooking classes together, we get burgers, we get you a pet otter – or whatever it was you wanted – and we go on with our lives. What happens in the lodge stays in the lodge. Understand?”

Castiel couldn’t find a word to agree; he felt his insides curdling at the thought that this might be over in a day or two. He might never kiss Dean again.


Castiel needed to sit for a while longer. He listened to Dean getting into bed, rolling until he was comfortable. After a minute, Dean turned off the bedside lamp, plunging the bedroom into near-darkness, leaving only the door framed in gold and the window bright with moonlight. The radio played on from the kitchen, and Mary sang along.

Castiel stayed hunched, knuckles touching his forehead in dismay.

How could Dean do this to him? How could he do this to both of them?

As a huge shuddering breath escaped his mouth, Castiel turned around to look at Dean, ready to impart a scathing comment. But Dean had hidden himself under the covers. Maybe later there would come a time for rebuttal, but... not now. For now, it was just time to sleep.

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accept the gift you're given

How was he so tanned in winter? Castiel’s skin radiated warmth like... fresh, just-crisp toast. Roasted chestnuts were too dark to compare, though they did come to mind. Castiel was lightly toasted white bread. With butter and... hm, some kind of citrus preserve...

Dean’s fingers curled up, too afraid to touch Castiel’s hand. Though Castiel slept soundly, eyes closed, face turned mostly away, he couldn’t be far from waking.

Dean ignored his rumbling stomach. He didn’t want to get up and miss this. Food was important, but unless Sam ate everything, food would still be there later in the morning. Watching Castiel sleep was rare and precious.

In a show of bravery, Dean stretched out his fingers and let them settle against Castiel’s hand. Every crease in his palm was delicate, soft. Dean ran his fingertips over and over Castiel’s life-line, then his love-line. They were both long lines; Dean wished his name wasn’t spelled out in the grooves.

Dean’s heart beat with a pain he felt throughout his body; heartache. Heartache, heartache.

Why did it have to be Castiel? Why did Dean have to set his clumsy feet in fresh white snow? Castiel had been fine without him, untouched, uncorrupted by thoughtless want. And Dean had ruined him out of greed. Whatever he’d done over the years, he’d made Castiel fall in love, and Dean wished he could take it back. He wished he’d smiled less, shared less, never let Castiel borrow his vinyls. Yes, Castiel’s kindness had been Dean’s saving grace throughout his darkest, loneliest years, but if this was the outcome—? It couldn’t possibly be worth it.

Dean held Castiel’s hand in his sleep, and he wished with all his heart he didn’t feel so much joy at the contact.

“I’m gonna hurt you, Cas,” Dean murmured into his pillow, holding back tears. “I’m nothing but poison.”

Castiel did not respond. He was too deeply asleep to hear.

Dean shut his eyes, letting one tear absorb into the pillowcase. He shifted closer in the bed, pushing his body against Castiel’s for warmth. Their joined hands touched against Dean’s lips, and he kissed Castiel’s hand, frowning. Hiding his face against Castiel’s knuckles, Dean sighed.

Castiel stirred, disturbed by Dean’s breath on his skin. Dean dared not move; he pretended to sleep, unwilling to be discovered seeking affection from an unconscious man. Maybe other people reached for hands while dreaming. Maybe Dean had always been an early-morning cuddler, but he’d never been certain, as he’d always been pushed away.

Dean felt Castiel roll over, legs moving to entwine around Dean’s. Their toes touched; Dean twitched. Castiel exhaled.

Dean had his eyes closed, so did not see Castiel move in to kiss his cheek.

Asleep. Asleep. Dean knew how to fake it. He hoped it was believable.

Castiel kissed his cheek again. Dean let his lips part without realising – and Castiel moved to kiss them. He lingered, so close but not touching...
Dean’s eyes flickered open – he couldn’t help it, he needed to see Castiel.

But Castiel had rolled back, inhaling deeply, removing himself from Dean’s touch, now putting his hands behind his head to stretch. His body juddered like a cat’s. Fluffy dark hair fanned out from his underarms, darker skin following the curve of his muscles as he pushed himself into a bridge, hips rising from the bed, head tipped back to expose his throat. Dean felt arousal stir between his legs, moving up through his belly, but he willed it away.

Twisting onto his front, Castiel set himself into an arch, ass in the air until the comforter fell, cool cotton folds flopping down onto Dean’s body. Castiel grunted, his pose strengthening as the seconds wore on. After thirty beats, he sighed and lay on his front, scuffling his hair with uncoordinated fingers.

Soon he drew a breath, turning his head to look at Dean.

Dean gazed back, smiling lopsidedly, blinking like he’d just woken up this second. “Mh... hey,” he croaked, words shredded by his sleepy drawl. “How’s it hangin’, sunshine?”

Castiel blinked slowly. “Left,” he grunted. “And uncomfortable. These boxers need a wash.”

Dean grinned, averting his eyes. “I’ll, uh, see what I can find in my bag. No promises though. I only packed for three days.”

“I can do some hand-washing.” Castiel said. “Or go without.”

Dean ignored the flush of heat he felt at that idea. Sam and Mom were here now; Cas wandering around with his ass hanging out probably wouldn’t be appreciated equally by everyone.

“Come on,” Castiel said, reaching to boop Dean’s nose. “I can hear your stomach grumbling. I can make you French toast, with fresh orange... cinnamon – mm, and chocolate. I want chocolate.”

Dean definitely felt his dick jump at that idea. “White bread?”

Castiel smiled, rubbing his squinty eyes. “White bread, then. As you wish. But first I need some fucking coffee.”

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Dean was probably glowing. Glowing like a goddamn star. Here he was, safe, in a place he loved, surrounded by his favourite people, and he was privileged enough to be able to watch them laugh, passing each other gifts which they wrapped themselves, put under the tree they felled themselves, which was hung with baubles they decorated themselves. There was even a rainbow bauble with Castiel’s name on it, and “age 37 ½” inked in on the back. Dean’s hung beside it, painted in galaxy colours, its back reading “age 34”.

Lights in a dozen colours sparkled around them, the fire burned with a steady orange flame, and the wooden walls of the lodge stood strong and cozy, like a hug. The couches were big enough that they could all fold their feet under their thighs, with Sam and Mary on one couch, Dean and Castiel on the other. They laughed, and they laughed heartily. Dean watched his family’s eyes shine with mirth, and he felt like the whole sky didn’t have enough constellations to properly compare how bright with gratitude he felt.

“It’s accurate for the northern hemisphere,” Dean explained, as Sam put batteries into the star map nightlight Dean gave him. Sam switched it on, and it turned the living room into a faintly-rendered planetarium. Small white lights rotated across the rafters, adding to the coloured twinkles from the
fairy lights.

“Our moose is having a disco up there,” Mary laughed, pointing to the painting behind Dean’s head. Dean turned, grinning. That moose wore an expression uncannily similar to Sam’s resting face; its existence had spawned years of moose-related jokes directed at Sam.

Sam chuckled, putting the star light on his knee, raising both hands to his head and spreading his fingers. “Golly, I always wanted a dance party,” Sam said, in a deep, goofy moose voice. Without leaving his place on the couch, Sam mimed a square dance with his whole torso, keeping his hands as antlers. The display made Castiel laugh so hard he almost fell off the couch. Dean watched Castiel grip the armrest, eyes tight and watering, lips drawn back to show his gummy grin. He was breathless, shaking, and the sight of him laughing was almost funnier than Sam’s dancing. Dean could hardly breathe through his guffaws, and he could see Mary had collapsed back into her cushions, sobbing into her hands.

Castiel made several attempts to pull himself together, but each time he put a hand on his stomach and drew in some deep, calming breaths, Sam would make a moose noise and set him off again. Dean had a headache from the pressure of laughing, hands reaching for Castiel to stop him collapsing. Dean was sure his face had gone bright red, and a vein was visible on his forehead. Mary was just openly wailing now, slumped back with her hands in her hair. The room went silent for long periods as they all laughed, too breathless to make any noise.

At least four minutes passed before they could collect themselves, gasping, getting oxygen back into their systems. Dean wiped tears from his chin, sniffing, flapping hands at his face. “Oh my God,” he whispered, shaking his head, eyes rising to the rafters. “Oh my God, I haven’t laughed like that in years.”

Castiel looked like he’d passed out, resting underneath a couch cushion he’d pulled up to hide his face, but he lowered the cushion now, smiling at Dean. The laughter lines beside his eyes were the boldest lines on his face.

Slowly, testing, Sam lifted his hands towards his head.

“Don’t!” Dean shouted, taking the cushion from Castiel and hurling it at Sam. Sam gave a weak laugh. “Don’t you dare,” Dean said warningly, though he grinned. “I cannot. Laugh. Any more. I will die.”

Sam looked like he was going to stop. He really did, he looked apologetic and everything. And then—

“MAAAAUUGH,” Sam yelled.

Castiel actually fell off the couch this time. He screamed in laughter, and Dean just fell on top of him, sobbing into his shoulder, grabbing for him, crying helplessly against his wrinkled t-shirt. He smelled like orange peel and bedsheets. Dean accidentally drooled on him.

When Dean finally looked up, shuddering and weak, wiping tears from his face with his inner bicep, he caught Sam’s eye. Sam bit his lip, grinning.

“I won’t, I won’t,” Sam promised, hands up in surrender when Dean threatened to throw an unopened gift his way. “Moose Sam has officially left the lodge.”

Dean slowly lowered his gift. He checked its label, then tossed it to his mother, who caught it in confident hands.
“Ooh, what’s this,” Mom cooed, still out of breath. She opened the newspaper wrapping in one rip. “Socks! Oh, hell yes!” She held them up happily. “I love socks!”

Dean lifted his hand, and Castiel reluctantly gave him a high-five. “Told you,” Dean said proudly in Castiel’s direction. He settled with his arm around Castiel’s shoulders, resting back against the seat of the now-uncushioned couch. Dean explained to Sam, “Cas was convinced socks are the world’s lamest gift.”

“Socks are perfect,” Mary said. “I’ll have happy feet all year round. Aw, they’ve got little birds on them. Look, Sam.”

Sam nodded, smiling. Dean could see him thinking his already-opened gift from Dean was cooler, which made Dean smirk. Mary was genuinely delighted though. She loved birds, and good quality socks. Win-win.

“This one’s for Cas,” Sam said, turning a tiny parcel one way, then the other. Dean saw it and felt a tension in his gut, uneasiness meeting with excitement. “Here.” Sam passed the package to Castiel, who took it gratefully.

“Hm, I wonder who it’s from,” Castiel said, with a dramatic look towards Dean. There was only one person here who wrapped in newspaper – and, for that matter, had known Castiel’s name.

Dean kept his eyes down while Castiel unwrapped his first gift. Shyness made Dean curl his fists, wanting to hide behind the tree like a child, peeking out only once Castiel declared that he was satisfied. Alas, Dean was forced to stay frozen with his arm at Castiel’s back, lips pursed as he waited for the verdict.

“A little box,” Castiel said, intrepidly removing the newspaper, holding the box in his hands. It had once held four exquisite chocolates from a coffee shop’s gift counter, but Dean had taken out the plastic tray, eaten the chocolates, then decorated the box with Sharpie. “A Selection of Promises,” Castiel read on the lid. He seemed intrigued. “Can I shake it?”

Dean shrugged. “Won’t do much, but sure.”

Castiel gave the tiny box a soft shake beside his ear. It shuffled like sequins inside a matchbox.

“Can I open it now?” Castiel asked.

Dean nodded. He watched attentively, despite the sweat on his lower back and the electric shock each heartbeat gave him. He wanted to see Castiel smile.

The box lid slid off, revealing a square tray full of scrolls of paper. Each pastel-coloured scroll was the size of Castiel’s pinkie fingertip, bound in a matching elastic band.

Castiel put the box on Dean’s knee, lifting out one pink scroll. He pulled off the elastic band, unrolling the paper with both thumbs.

“One fancy coffee and a full-sized muffin,” Castiel read. He blinked. He reached down and pulled up a blue scroll, undoing that too. “Home-cooked pizza and a movie of your choice.” His eyebrows rose slightly, and a smile twitched on his lips. He was starting to understand now. He reached down again, taking a green scroll, then a yellow one. “Dinner, drinks, and dessert at a good restaurant. Aaaand... One full weekend of hands-on housework help.”

Dean wet his lips with a nervous tongue.
“Dean,” Castiel said sweetly, gazing at Dean from beside his shoulder. “‘A selection of promises’? This was such a thoughtful idea. Thank you.”

“Yeah. Well,” Dean uttered, looking down at his knees, cross-legged on the floor. “I kinda burned through my gifting budget, buying fuel to get here, and food, and all that. So.” He shrugged. “Figured I’d owe you one. Or twenty-five. You always end up paying for my coffee, and desserts, and you keep complaining we always watch my movies rather than yours. So you can pick a gift whenever you want. And I’ll be at your beck and call, like you always have been for me. About time I actively returned the favour, right?”

“About time,” Castiel repeated, still speaking softly. Enormous fondness showed in his gaze, and seeing it made Dean’s skin prickle. So he looked away, fingers picking at a scuff in his jeans. He certainly wasn’t expecting Castiel to lean close and kiss his cheek. With a sharp intake of breath, Dean turned his head to stare at Castiel. Castiel smiled, then pulled away, speaking cheerfully to Sam: “So! What’s next?”

Sam was smiling, far too happily for Dean’s liking. “One more!”

Mary was the one who lifted it, holding it in her lap. “Okay,” she said, meditatively. “Just as a disclaimer, Castiel, this was purchased in a sale—”

“Mom, he doesn’t care,” Dean said quickly. “If it’s cheap shit off the rack, he doesn’t give a crap. I just gave him a box of paper, for God’s sake.”

“No, no, no, it’s not about that,” Mary said, waving a hand to quiet Dean. “This was purchased for Dean’s fiancée at a time when I— I’m sorry— I wrongly assumed Dean was engaged to a woman. I completely understand why he never said! Really, I get it. I get why he never gave us your name, either. I would’ve told Sam to ask the Google about you immediately. It’s a complicated business.”

Dean hid his face behind a hand. Castiel just smiled pleasantly. “I’m sure it’ll be wonderful, Mary.”

Mom still fidgeted in discomfort after she passed Castiel the box. Dean could relate.

This final gift was one of the largest they’d exchanged today, wrapped in a store clerk’s gold paper, tied in a ribbon and sprinkled with glitter. A few specks of glitter fell on Dean’s jeans; he tried to wipe them off but they just got stuck, and when he looked at his hand, the flecks had practically welded to his skin; no amount of wiping could dislodge them. Castiel’s hands were now speckled with glitter, and more attached to him as he undid the ribbon slowly, like he was teasing himself.

“Just get it over with,” Dean grouched.

“Shhh,” Castiel hushed, letting the ribbon relax down onto his thighs. His hands spread across the box top, pushing a waterfall of gold dust onto Dean. Dean flicked it, but with a sigh, he resigned himself to the fact he was now going to be glittery forever.

Castiel unwrapped his gift in reverse, pulling up the tape the way the store clerk would’ve stuck it down. He was careful not to rip the paper. He liked to collect craft supplies, so this was – ha ha – a golden opportunity for him.

At long last, Castiel revealed a cubic box, half the size of Dean’s duffel bag. Castiel gave it a shake, but it made no discernable noise. He pulled up the lid, and it came up with a crunch of crumpled tissue paper.

Dean peered in to see a bird’s nest of metallic gold streamers, protecting whatever was buried
within. Gleefully, Castiel began pulling out the golden stuff, setting it on Dean’s lap. Dean sighed, looking at the ceiling in a put-on show of dismay. Sparkly things were not manly enough to touch Dean’s thighs. But Cas put them there, so... whatever. Cas was manly enough.

“I’m sorry,” Mom said again. “I can’t take it back, since it was on sale, but I’m sure there’s something I could give you instead—”

“No!” Castiel said, offended. He hugged the box to his chest. “I love it.”

Mom clearly thought Castiel was just being polite, but when Dean craned to see into the box, he laughed.

“Mom, it’s fine,” Dean said. “This frou-frou crap is totally up Cas’ alley.”

“Smell this,” Castiel said, shoving a huge gold-and-black candle under Dean’s nose. Dean breathed in, then hummed. Castiel snatched the candle back, shutting his eyes as he inhaled its clove-and-pomegranate scent. “Mmmm.”

“Oh, yeah, this’ll look great on your couch,” Dean said, pulling out a stuffed round pillow, black satin with gold edges and tassels. “Now you can hug this while you’re crying about Lilo and Stitch, huh?”

Castiel gave Dean a narrow-eyed look. “Excuse me. You were the one who wanted to watch Lilo and Stitch. And I distinctly remember which of us was crying, and it wasn’t—”

“Hey, look,” Dean interrupted, pulling a set of tiny glass vials from the box. “That’s your glitter-paint shortage sorted.”

“Those are nail polishes, Dean.”

“Oh.” Dean blinked. “Well, can’t you use them to paint calligraphy?”

Castiel rolled his eyes. “I can use them on my nails.”

“Yeah, but that’s...” Dean’s sentence trailed off in a forethought, imagining Castiel’s rant about gender-neutral everything before Castiel even opened his mouth. “Okay. Cool. Yay, nail polish.”

Castiel smiled. He turned to Mary, and his smile became even bigger and warmer. “Thank you very much, Mary. I do love it, and I will use all of it. And I’ll think of you fondly when I do.”

Mary shot Dean a surprised glance, but when Dean smirked back, bursting with gratitude for gifting something Castiel actually liked, Mary’s smile became radiant.

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“Hey. Hey, Cas.” Sam slid into the kitchen, taking up a lot of room beside Dean and Castiel, who were busy washing plates after their French-toast-and-roast-beef brunch. “Cas.”

“Hello?” Castiel said, handing Dean the dishtowel.

“I’ve been thinking,” Sam said, “I know you liked what Mom gave you, but I kind of signed off on it before I knew the first thing about Dean’s partner. You ought to have a separate gift, just from me.”

“Oh, no, Sam, you don’t have to—”
“Ugh, modesty is so overrated,” Sam complained, making Dean grin. “I wanna get you something, Cas. What’dya want?”

Castiel flustered. “Um, I don’t know. I never planned— Nobody’s ever asked point-blank—” He looked at Dean worriedly.

“He wants an otter,” Dean said.

“Ferret,” Castiel corrected, then he blanched. “No, you can’t get me a ferret, Sam!”

“I can get you a ferret,” Sam said. “Two ferrets, even, since I’m pretty sure they prefer to have friends. Or, how about I get you all the stuff you need before you get a ferret. What do ferrets need? Food, a climbing frame, some toys... Litter boxes. A leash, vaccines, a carrying cage? A tiny ferret bed?”

Castiel breathed, and Dean turned off the kitchen tap, distracted by Castiel’s flushed cheeks. A smile eventually rose on Castiel’s face, and he looked down. “That does sound amazing.”

“It’s gonna be a lot of work, Cas,” Dean said, nudging Castiel in the shoulder. “Like having kids.”

Sam snorted. “I think caring for ferrets is easier than caring for actual kids.”

“Same realm, far as I’m concerned,” Dean said. He clapped Castiel on the back. “Congratulations, you’re gonna be a father.”

Castiel’s smile was freaking adorable – no other way to say it. “Thank you, Sam,” he said faintly. “That’s extremely kind of you.”

“You better stick to your word, moose-face,” Dean said, pointing a threatening finger at his brother. “I don’t wanna be on a coffee date with Cas while he’s moping he never got his weird fur baby.”

Castiel looked at Dean with sparkles in his eyes. “Our weird fur baby,” he said softly.

Dean’s lips parted, and for a second, he forgot they weren’t actually a couple, and Cas was just pretending for Sam’s sake. Dean’s smile felt so damn comfortable on his face. “I’m gonna be a ferret dad,” Dean whispered. He blinked, then his eyebrows drew together. “But seriously, Cas, what the fuck is a ferret?”

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Dean breathed out a plume of white air, barely visible against the grey clouds. His eyes roamed across the misty afternoon skyline, admiring the snow-draped boughs of the two hundred green fir trees he could see from beyond the front step of the house. Snow shuddered below his feet, and he took uneven steps, meandering along what seemed like the safest route around the lodge, heading to where they stored the firelogs.

Castiel’s footsteps hurried after him, scronch-scronch-scronch in fresh snow. He met Dean at the rear of the house, the only side with no windows. Castiel was wearing Sam’s scarf around his neck and muzzle, swaddled up tight beneath a bobbed grey hat. His breath clouded through the grey knit, particles bleeding into the sharp air.

“All right,” Castiel said. “I’m here, I’m cold, what did you call me out here for?”

Dean lowered his own woollen scarf, the pretty red one his mother liked to wear every winter.
“What, you don’t believe I needed help carrying wood?” He patted the wood store, a six-foot-wide, four-foot-tall trough full of tree stumps and branches, all chopped to the length of Dean’s forearm. “These bastards are fuckin’ heavy.”

“I know they’re heavy, I made three trips last night,” Castiel said in a no-nonsense tone. He folded his arms. “You called me out to talk privately. So talk, before someone comes out to find us.”

Dean sighed, scrunching a mitten in his hair. “Uh. I kinda thought I’d have two trips to figure out how to word this.”

One blink of Castiel’s eyes showed Dean he was willing to wait, even though it was bitterly cold.

Dean licked his lips and immediately regretted it, as the air’s chill stung his saliva. He gathered up a breath, then released it along with a sigh. “So here’s the thing,” he started, trying to be forthright. He quickly lost steam, fretting in place, picking at his mother’s mittens with his fingertips. “Ugh. God. It’s about Bela, okay? And you. And— And how I never—”

He rolled his eyes to the sky, letting go of another tense breath. “I was never happy with Bela. I know you already know. But I wanted to tell you. Because it’s important. I know the difference, all that stuff we said last night—”

Castiel wrapped his scarf from his face, but even showing his face didn’t make his expression discernable.

“I was never comfortable with her,” Dean said. “We never had deep all-night conversations like I do with you. We never had dates unless someone else was watching, and we’d make a big show of doing it fancy and expensive. We were never mutually supportive. I was arm candy. She used me to look emotionally stable in front of people who would judge her for being single. She’d see other people – guys, girls, I don’t know – and I’d sleep with her when she was in the mood, but, man…” He shook his head, eyes cast downwards. “It wasn’t how it was with you. Any of it. What I did with Bela was consensual, but it wasn’t what I liked, or craved. I needed—I needed cuddles, all right? Afterwards. And she wasn’t like that. So we stopped trying after a while.”

Castiel stayed quiet, listening. There was pity in his eyes.

“I wasn’t in love with her,” Dean said. “I might’ve been at one point, I don’t know. But I agreed to marry her because I couldn’t bear to imagine my life vanishing without anything decent to show for it. Beautiful wife, well-respected mechanic business. I thought I was on the fast-track to livin’ the high life. But it wasn’t what I wanted. It was like a farce of what I wanted. The poser’s version. The nineteen-fifties’ postcard version of existence. Life with Bela was an endless schedule, doing the kind of things people put on Instagram, not the kind that makes you ugly-cry at a Disney movie at five in the morning, covered in Cheeto crumbs.”

He said that last part with a lot of passion. He really meant it.

“Truth is, I don’t really know what I want,” Dean said. “That’s why it was so fucking hard to move on from a relationship that went stale so long ago. I don’t know, Cas. I don’t know.” He spun around, stomping away a few steps, needing to reset his face in case he cried. He stomped back, huffing at Castiel. “I want to be happy. I want to be with— someone. I want children, I want a place to live. I want a family to cook for. I want someone to cook for me. And God help me, I want some freakin’ emotional comfort after sex.”

Castiel wrapped his arms more tightly around himself. His voice was monotone as he asked, “Why are you telling me this, Dean?”
“Because—” Dean raised his arms openly at his sides, “This is what you came here for, isn’t it? Bela just broke up with me, you said you’d come with me. To talk. Help me process.”

Castiel’s mouth rounded in realisation. “Oh. ...Right. Of course.” He pressed his lips into a line. “Is it helping to talk about it?”

Dean tipped his head noncommittally. “Been holding this in for a while. Yeah. Yeah, feels good.”

He took a full breath, held it, then set it free. “I wanna come clean to Sammy and Mom. It’s fun and all, having you as my stand-in fiancé, but where does it end, you know? If Sam drops by my apartment next month, what am I meant to say? We broke up? Still together? God knows. I never intended to lie to my family. This was a terrible idea, Cas, pretending we’re a couple. Maybe the dumbest of all my ideas, ever.”

“It wasn’t dumb, Dean,” Castiel said. “‘Dumb’ means speechless, not stupid.”

“Oh, you know what I meant.”

Quietly now, gaze softening, Castiel added, “Well, tell them about Bela, then. Tell them you broke up. But – do you really want to tell them you’re not engaged to me? They seem to like seeing you this happy. I love seeing you this way too. Perhaps it’s presumptuous to think you’re happy because of me...” He shrugged, looking away briefly, then back. “But nevertheless, once you tell them we’re not really a couple, everything changes between us. We go back to being friends, nothing else. Are you ready for that, Dean?”

Dean averted his eyes.

Castiel’s breath shuddered as he confessed, “I’m not ready for that.”

Dean felt the tiniest smile curl up the sides of his mouth. Warmth hugged his heart; Cas liked playing pretend too. They could have a little more time.

“Allright,” Dean said casually, tipping his chin down. “Good talk. Now, let’s shift some logs and get inside before I freeze my giant nuts off.”

Castiel rolled his eyes, smiling, then proceeded to assist Dean, hoisting a log under each arm.

... ※ ...

Dean found his mother in the kitchen, still in her nightgown and slippers. Just the sight of her bobbing along to festive music put a mile-wide smile on his face, and he went up to her from behind, wrapping his arms around her shoulders, embracing her fully. Mom chuckled, patting his arm.

Dean let go, his smile now simmering in satisfaction. “What’cha makin’?” he asked, turning his eyes to the big bowl on the counter.

“Two dozen cupcakes, for no reason other than I bought teeny-weeny edible baubles, and wanted to stick them on something. Castiel gave me a beginners’ recipe to try out. He’s very good at explaining things, I can see why you like his classes.”

Dean grinned. “You got time to talk?”

“For you Dean, always,” Mom said, putting down her mixing spoon and turning to face him. “What’s up?”

Dean’s eyes darted to the living room, where Sam and Castiel were enthusing over Dean’s baby pictures, which Mom had ever-so-thoughtfully decided to bring. They seemed fairly engrossed, laughing between themselves.

“I, uh, I wanted to tell you about something. Someone.” Dean took a deep breath, preparing himself. “This woman called Bela.”

“Oh?”

Dean scratched the back of his head. “This is gonna sound crazy, but... up until this week, I was... actually seeing someone else. Bela. She was the one you were meant to meet.”

Mom’s eyes widened. She took her mixing spoon and hit Dean’s forehead with it. “Dean Winchester, I did not raise you to be a lying, cheating, two-timing little dog!” Keeping her voice down, she hissed, “Does Cas know? Dean, how could you?!”

“No, it wasn’t like that,” Dean babbled, waving his hands in defense. He wiped icing from his forehead, looked at his hand, then sucked it clean, still shaking his head. “I wasn’t with Cas at the same time. Just Bela. This thing, my relationship with Cas is— It’s new.”

If anything, Mary looked even more livid. “So you lied?! All your sweet stories about attending his classes, going on dates—”

“That happened! Mom, that was all real. All real. I mean, they weren’t ‘dates’, but our time together obviously amounted to something. I’ve known him for years. And... And...” He hesitated, hugging himself, hands tucked into his armpits. “And I think— I’m pretty sure now—” Under his breath, he declared, “I’ve had a crush on him for years.”

For the first time, Mom relaxed, tossing the spoon back into the mixing bowl. She didn’t look thrilled.

Dean swallowed. “When Bela and I broke up, Cas came up here in her stead. He’s always there for me, Mom. Me and Bela would argue... I’d storm out, drive to Cas’ place. And Cas would take me in, even in the middle of the night. He’d make me pancakes, or let me...” Dean smirked, “let me
raid the fridge and eat all his pickles. He takes care of me when I get drunk, or sick. I do the same for him whenever he catches a bug – he gets super grouchy..."

Words became harder to pronounce; breath got stuck in Dean’s throat. “The whole time I was with Bela... I was fantasising... about Cas. Kissing him. Leaving Bela for him. Getting drunk and falling into bed with him, I don’t know. Even as friends, I just want him with me. I miss him when he’s not around. I think about him all the time, just as much as I think about you and Sam.”

Dean frowned at himself, burning up in shame. “He’s the best friend I ever had,” he whispered, avoiding his mother’s gaze. “I’ve wanted to be with him for so long, but I’m— Mom, I’m scared. I’m scared. What if I fuck up? What if I accidentally do to Cas what Dad did to you? I’ve come this close to losing everyone I care about. You, Sam, Cas – you’re all I have left. I don’t trust any of this.” He gestured at himself, up and down. “I’m going to break his heart, I know I will.”

“Now, how on Earth would you do that?” Mom asked, reaching to touch Dean’s chest.

Dean shrugged. “I don’t know. But I’ll say something wrong. Build up a bad habit that I can’t break, and it’ll drive him crazy. Get addicted to something that destroys us both. Tease him one too many times. Ask too much of him. Get freaked out because we’re actually going steady, then fall for someone else in that fucking self-destructive way I always do. Whatever it is, I’ve done it a dozen times before to other people. And isn’t that the definition of insanity?” Dean spoke under his breath, arms wide, “Doing the same thing over and over, expecting it to turn out different? I can’t think that, Mom. I can’t think ‘maybe it’ll be better with Cas’. Track record says I’ll screw up. Worst of all – what if I physically hurt him? Lash out? Or manipulate him so subtly that neither of us ever realises?”

“For God’s sake, Dean, you are not your father,” Mom said, taking Dean’s face in her hands, looking him straight in the eyes. “Whatever John would’ve done, you do the opposite. You learned from his mistakes.”

“But what if I haven’t?” Dean bit the back of his lips, eyes cast down. “God, I dunno. Maybe you’re right. Sometimes I wonder, at what point does fear of yourself become totally irrational? What if I’ve been told so many times that I’m the source of all problems that I believe it, even when it’s not true? Dad’s words are always there, in my head, I can’t undo what he did to me.”

With a sigh, Dean ran a hand down his face, covering his mouth. He held his mother’s sympathetic eyes, working up the courage to speak again. Finally he gulped, lowering his hand. “Cas said something last night, made me realise... I don’t actually know what a romantic relationship is meant to be like. I don’t know what being in love feels like. Up until now, I assumed being with Cas would be like all the other relationships I’ve been in. Unsupportive... Maybe abusive? I don’t know. I don’t know. Am I the problem, Mom? Is it me? Will it be different this time?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Mom said, stroking Dean’s hair back. “Have some faith in yourself, you silly, freckled child. A marriage isn’t one-sided, is it? Castiel has worries and fears too, you know. He has flaws. What if he’s not good enough, either?” Mom shook her head, gaze holding Dean’s, showing him the most potent of loves. “It’s okay, baby. It’s all okay. You’re not perfect angels, no-one is. You’ll probably both make terrible mistakes. If you’re afraid of doing Castiel wrong, that fear will keep you in check.” She smiled, patting Dean’s cheek. “And if Castiel has been supportive and kind up to now, there’s no obvious reason that would change once you’re married. You have to learn to trust your instincts. If you do love him, Dean, you’ll figure it out eventually.”

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“If you were an animal, what would you be?” Sam asked, turning the question to his mother. Sam
had insisted he’d be a moose; nobody disagreed.

Mary hummed, cupping her hand around her chin. “Hmm.” She shook her head, and her grey-blonde locks swept back and forth against her face. “Gosh, I don’t know. I’ve never thought about it.”

“I figure you’d be some kind of bird,” Sam said, adjusting the star light on the floor in front of him. All around the darkened, cozy room, the lights began to shift in rainbows. “You’ve always been graceful.”

“Pff,” Mary scoffed. “You didn’t see me while I learned to swim last year. A one-legged goose would’ve had me beat.”

From where he lay nearer the tree, Dean watched the stars rotate through the rafters. He rested on his back, head on Castiel’s new satin pillow, hands supporting his neck. He breathed deeply, inhaling the faint smell of wood smoke, listening to the others discuss trivial, personal things. The urge to fall asleep tickled at the edge of his awareness; the room was warm, the conversation was gentle, his stomach was full, and he felt absolutely content.

“What about you, Castiel?” Mary asked.

Dean turned his head, looking to see Castiel enter the room carrying a second tray of cupcakes Mom had baked, and Castiel decided to decorate. They’d eaten the first tray already.

“What’s that?” Castiel asked, having missed part of the discussion. He’d gotten icing on his borrowed t-shirt; he now wore the same white button-down shirt he’d arrived wearing, sleeves rolled to the elbows. Castiel was overdressed in a casual setting, and all was right with the world. His hair was mussed, his stubble was dark, and he walked in a relaxed slouch, leading with his shoulders and hips.

“We were just asking Mom, what kind of animal best matches your personality?” Sam asked again.

“A swan,” Castiel said without hesitation. He handed the cupcakes to Mary, who took the whole tray. “I’d definitely be a swan.”

“How’d you figure that?” Dean asked lazily, his voice thick and slow. He raised an arm straight in the air, welcoming Castiel to his side.

Castiel approached in bare feet. “Well, I like to think I’m beautiful.” He knelt down, then sat leaning on one hand, his thigh against Dean’s middle, smiling at Sam. “I’d love to have wings. Perhaps I’m a little feisty at times. Demanding.”

“Chuh,” Dean said, under his breath. “Understatement.”

Castiel turned to look down at Dean through his delicate, dark lashes. “I’m glad you agree.” Back to Sam, “I also mate for life. I always appreciated that in swans.”

Dean raised his eyebrows. “Mate for life?”

“Mm-hm.” Castiel smiled down at Dean. “I’ve only loved once, Dean. And I have no doubt whatsoever that it’ll be a lifelong commitment.” He touched Dean’s nose with the tip of a finger. Dean swallowed, suddenly short of breath. “That – doesn’t bother you?”

“Why would it?” Castiel raised his eyebrows. “After half a lifetime waiting, I finally feel like
“everything’s fallen into place.” With only the briefest pause, he moved on, asking, “Did you answer already? What animal would you be?”

Dean pretended his mouth hadn’t gone dry. “Hm. I— Uh.” He forced a sideways smile. “Now I think about it, I’d probably be a bear. Mauling everything in my path. Caring only about food and sleep.”

Castiel smiled as he lay down, head on Dean’s inner bicep. They snuggled up together, Castiel’s arm draped over Dean’s middle. “You care about hugs, too,” Castiel murmured. He pursed his lips, teasing fondly, “My big teddy bear.”

Behind his neck, Dean’s hands curled into fists. But he soon relaxed, because Castiel squeezed him, and frankly, it was nice.

After a moment, Mom said something about the cupcakes, and steered the conversation back to food. Dean half-listened, and he watched Castiel sit up to reply, but mostly he watched the stars turn across the ceiling, pulled along the rafters, pushed across the walls. He watched the full spectrum of light whisper across his eyelids each time he blinked, and he let his mind wander.

Castiel had all but confessed he was hopelessly in love with Dean. Providing he wasn’t just pretending for Sam and Mary’s sake, there was nothing Dean could do to change the facts now. Following what Castiel said about swans, then this was... permanent. No way to undo this mistake.

But was it a mistake?

Part of Dean was still curious what the cute doctor on MatchBook would be like. Part of him wanted to see Bela again, to try and make it work. Part of him was always going to be like that, wondering what-if, even if those what-ifs were clear recipes for disaster. He didn’t have the personality programming that let him enjoy something for what it was. He was always dissatisfied, content for only moments before something began to bother him. He had a jumpy leg and a restless soul.

John Winchester’s disparaging voice often intertwined with Dean’s own thoughts. Most comments Dean dismissed as garbage, but it had taken decades to reach that point. He had yet to figure out how to get rid of that voice entirely.

Mary Winchester’s influence was more prominent in Dean’s thoughts today than it had been other days. Today Mary told him to be strong, be loving, be open to his own feelings. It helped that she’d said those things out loud; they were real words, not impulses inside Dean’s mind.

Dean’s own voice had always felt drowned among others. He cared too much about other people, not enough about himself.

Right now, he thought not in words, but in deep-seated emotional fact, his and his alone: if Dean texted the cute doctor on MatchBook as soon as he got home, there’d be no way to take that back. Castiel’s heart would break. Regardless of whether or not Dean was in love with Castiel, he did love his friend. And he wasn’t cruel. He wouldn’t hurt Castiel if he could avoid it.

Basically, they’d bypassed the point of no return. Somewhere down this road, Dean had found himself committing to Castiel, and now his course was charted. Here they were, sailing full speed ahead. Castiel was it for Dean. Even if they remained ‘just friends’, Dean kinda wanted to delete his MatchBook profile.

Yeah. Decision made. He was officially steering himself off the dating radar.
And, actually, that realisation didn’t feel jarring.

Maybe for once in his life, Dean would be okay.

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Castiel closed the bedroom door behind Dean. They’d spent the last five minutes of the day wishing everyone else a merry freaking Christmas (no, seriously; it was hilarious), and the smile on Dean’s face was starting to ache. He ran a hand over his mouth, trying to relax, but the smile stayed. God, he was exhausted. And happy.

He took off his t-shirt, then turned towards Castiel, seeing his fatigue too. Castiel’s eyes drooped more than usual, and dark shadows had pooled beneath them; he blinked rapidly, his shoulders bowed forward, weighed down by a long day.

“Boy, helping Mom decorate cupcakes sure got you beat,” Dean uttered, smirking.

“It wasn’t the cupcakes so much as the roast dinner, the second roast dinner, the pumpkin pie, the apple pie, the whipped cream, the chocolate yule log, the third batch of eggnog – what else—”

Dean chimed in, “The fancy hazelnuts, cracking the shells with the nutcracker... The presents, the tree, the fairy lights coming down across the wall—”

“Oh, God, that madness,” Castiel muttered, covering his forehead with a hand. “If you don’t invest in some LEDs by next year, I’m inviting an entire fire department up here to share the bountiful spoils. And speaking of bountiful – you swore to me you’d be doing all the cooking. There are only three of you; I didn’t expect to be catering for fifty.”

“Hey, I did do the cooking! Most of it,” Dean amended, half-shrugging. “Not our fault we eat a lot. This is what Christmas with family is meant to be, man. Cooking for days, then eating and laughing until you pass out.”

“Well,” Castiel said, unbuttoning his shirt from the bottom up, “it’s not like I minded feeding you all, really. And I did volunteer to ice the cakes. Yes. Your family is...” he shook his head, perhaps in awe, “everything I’ve dreamed of. You included. No exaggeration, Dean, I mean it.”

“Ah, shucks,” Dean said, acting overly bashful, to cover the fact he really was bashful. “They’re always that awesome. Me, I’m a whole other kettle.”

“Indeed,” Castiel agreed, laying his shirt neatly over the end of the bed, then folding the sleeves in. “But you did help mold them into the people they are now. Sam especially. Three years apart, Dean, it doesn’t change the fact you were there for him his whole life. And your mother. It was obvious to me: she wouldn’t have done so well without your support. You were the seed of this family. You helped them all bloom. Them... and me, as well.”

Dean kept his eyes down, trying not to look proud. He did think Castiel was right. And he didn’t think he’d ever received a compliment that touched his heart so deeply.

With his shirt all folded into a square, Castiel then proceeded to undo his jeans, taking off his underwear along with them. “Unless you have another pair of boxer-briefs, I’ll be going commando tomorrow,” he said, tossing the dirty ones into a pile of laundry by the door.

Dean, now also nude, sat down on the end of the bed with a happy bounce. “Hope you don’t chafe easy. ‘Cause I got nothin’.”
Castiel narrowed his eyes. “You are far too cheerful for this time of the night.” He pushed up close, easing Dean’s knees further apart to fit between them. “How would you like me to wipe that smug smirk off your face, mm?” he asked, eyebrows up, fingers curled around Dean’s chin. His stubborn blue eyes sparkled with amusement.

“But there’s nobody here to see,” Dean said. “I thought all the kissing was for the sake of faking an engagement.”

“It’s practise,” Castiel said slyly. “For when someone is looking. Can I kiss you, yes or no?”

“Ummmmm. O...kay? I guess? Yeah.”

Castiel laughed softly, then kissed Dean’s lips in a strangely familiar way, still cupping his chin. Dean associated that kind of kiss with husbands and wives, a hello after work, a greeting in the morning. A goodnight kiss. When their lips separated, Dean’s heart was floating somewhere near his navel, and his fingertips were pulsing against his palms. He’d never been kissed so lovingly.

“Why are you looking at me like that?” Castiel asked.

Dean blinked. “Like what?”

Castiel wet his grooved lips with the tip of his tongue, eyes searching Dean’s for answers. “I don’t know, it was just... different.”

Dean smirked at his thighs again. He knew what it was Castiel saw: acceptance. Bela was gone, the sadness was gone; Castiel was the future. The years ahead were once again blooming with flowers adorning a nonsense fairytale cottage, a dog, some ferrets, and two-point-four children.

Except it wasn’t just sunshine and sprinkles; Dean felt Castiel’s hand slip into his own, and he accepted, not for the first time, that things might not turn out the way he’d hoped. But unlike all the other times his dream collapsed down around his ears, he was convinced that, like with Castiel himself, any unplanned turn of events might actually turn out to be the most magical things of all.

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the cure is in the venom

Dean couldn’t sleep. Too much heavy food. His stomach gurgled in complaint, struggling to do its job.

Dean breathed deeply, eyes shut, going for the fake-it-‘till-you-make-it approach. Six more hours until sunrise. That was more than enough time to get the sleep he needed. But six hours could’ve been five minutes for all the rest he was actually getting.

He shut one eye, then the other, staring blindly into the dark. He pulled silly faces. He tried visualising an old staticky TV monitor being switched off and staying off. He tried visualising total blackness – but that was hard to do when moonlight crept in, having other ideas. Hell, Dean tried visualising a tiny, glowing pumpkin coach being pulled by unicorns trotting across the ceiling, then swooping down to run him over. No luck. He was still thoroughly awake.

At least he was calm. At least all his thoughts weren’t consumed by anxiety and self-hatred. At least Cas was with him. Cas smelled nice. Like toothpaste, and the body wash that Dean’s mother had brought along. Passionfruit? Something red and delicate. Myrrh.

Dean thought about swans. He thought about little swan families, floating serenely across a pond, trailed by a long line of fluffy babies. Dean smiled, feeling his closed eyes wrinkle with joy. Cas would be a good swan papa. Dean would be an okay-ish swan papa, – but by God, he was trying his best, and that was what mattered, right?

Then there were ferrets—

Sharp teeth—

Dean awoke with a sharp inhale, tense in the bed. Just a nightmare. Just a stupid, horrible, weird food-induced nightmare.

What bothered Dean was that he completely understood it. Was he a goddamn psychic now, or what?

Swans represented his perfect fantasy future. Grace and beauty, small fluffy babies, swimming along happily. And the ferret was reality, sneaking up to literally bite Dean in the ass.

There was nothing wrong with ferrets. Castiel had readily convinced Dean they were cute and fluffy cat-snakes. But Castiel might actually be getting a ferret, potentially raising it with Dean’s help – and for whatever reason, Dean’s subconscious wasn’t having it.

Fucking commitment issues.

Dean sighed, forcing himself to relax. He shut his eyes again, taking deep breaths. Deep breaths.

In, out.

In... out.

In...

Castiel stirred beside him, rolling closer. Dean felt Castiel’s bristly chin rub against his shoulder, and a moment later, one kiss.
Dean raised an eyebrow, too lazy to open his eyes.

Castiel kissed Dean’s neck again, then cuddled him. One more kiss. Then another. This time he gave a nuzzle against Dean’s clavicle.

Dean properly relaxed now. Clearly Castiel had everything under control. He was The Banisher of Bad Dreams.

Castiel gave Dean’s torso another single squeeze, smiling against his shoulder.

“Hmm,” Dean purred appreciatively. “Don’t stop...”

Castiel startled. He huffed a laugh over Dean’s shoulder, slurring thickly as he mumbled, “You’re awake. H’llo.” He hid his face against Dean’s neck. He yawned, stealing air from behind Dean’s neck. He moaned through his yawn, then huffed, snuggling closer, kissing Dean’s ear.

Dean smiled, turning his head, accidentally bumping Castiel’s face. They inched back, so they were instead nose-to-nose. Dean’s eyes slid closed, heavy with fatigue.

Castiel hand stroked Dean’s middle, pushed up as Dean inhaled. Dean exhaled again, feeling Castiel’s hand drift to finger a nipple. With a murmur of delight, he slid a hand to join Castiel’s.

Taking Dean’s interest as encouragement, Castiel made a soft noise, and squirmed in bed again, pushing close. Dean smirked: Castiel had the start of an erection, and had chosen to share that information by resting it over Dean’s hipbone. It was warm, and impressively heavy.

Licking his lips, Dean slid one hand across his belly, reaching to touch Castiel’s hip.

Castiel kissed Dean’s lips gently. He waited a second, then did it again, pressing harder this time. He breathed in through his nose, still pushing – and when Dean pushed back, chin lifting to chase another kiss, Castiel raised his body to roll onto Dean, climbing into his lap. Both Castiel’s hands framed Dean’s cheeks, warming him as their lips finally separated.

“Wuhh?” Dean asked, too sleepy to communicate properly.

“Hm,” Castiel replied, his body drooping languidly over Dean’s chest. He smooched Dean again, missing his mouth in the dark. Castiel’s movements were unrefined; he clearly wasn’t any more awake than Dean was. But boy, was he aroused.

“You wanna?” Dean asked, one clumsy hand taking Castiel’s waist under the comforter.

Castiel nodded, hair ruffling against Dean’s ear. “Yeah.” His hips tipped back, angling his erection against Dean’s upper thigh. “Mm. Yeah,” he breathed, words verging on a groan.

Dean let Castiel squirm against him, feeling his muscular thighs tensing then relaxing in his excitement. Castiel gave a little gasp, biting his lip, then groaning at the back of his throat. He drove his erection between their bodies – and to Dean, the sensation hung somewhere between blissful and kinda naughty. Here they were, trying for a lazy quickie in the dark. Not speaking, not talking about what it meant – just going for it.

Castiel’s breath began to shudder, rattling across his lips. “Ah— Mm. Dean.”

Dean slid both hands up Castiel’s back, holding the base of his skull, fingers scrunching into the locks of hair that curled behind Castiel’s neck. Castiel’s skin flared hot, his breathing erratic. Their foreheads bumped, Dean chuckled; Castiel kissed him, and kept on kissing him as they made the
bed rock ever so slightly, foreheads pressed together.

“Roll me over,” Castiel whispered, breaking their kiss. “You be on top now.”

Dean hesitated. But even so, he pushed up, rolling their bodies into a cooler section of the bed, where Castiel had lain before. Castiel spread his thighs, and Dean sank between them, shivering in excitement. He set his attention on the sparkle he saw in Castiel’s eyes. The moonlight was faded by clouds, but Dean could just make out the shape of Castiel’s cerulean form against white sheets, black hair and silver lips.

Dean took Castiel’s waist with both hands, going slow, teasing with a hump against Castiel’s taint. Castiel grunted, eyes fluttering shut. Dean kissed his chin, feeling the swirls in his belly rise higher, encompassing his heart, making him tingle all over. Castiel’s hands moved to grip Dean’s shoulders, holding him close and steady as they set a real rhythm: push, push, push. Where their skin met, it was not slick, but it was hot, and they were eager. Dean quivered as he rocked against Castiel’s erection, not sliding beside it, but putting pressure on it with his body weight. Each time, he felt a pulse of delight from both of them.

“Mmm,” Castiel groaned, mouth shut, one slow noise from the back of his throat. “Mh. Mhh.” His head tipped back into the pillow, lips parting to moan and exhale. “Deannn.”

“Auh, yeah,” Dean whispered back, kissing Castiel’s throat. “Fuck, you’re beautiful. You’re so beautiful, Cas.”

Castiel smirked, showing his teeth on one side. “Mm, that’s it, Dean. Tell me – all that. Everything. Everything you wouldn’t dare to say later.”

Dean paused while kissing Castiel’s ear. “Wuh?”

“Last chance,” Castiel muttered, lifting his hips to make Dean change his angle.

Dean obliged, pushing harder, slower, one hand holding the headboard for stability – but he did so while frowning. He wet his lips with a slow tongue. “What’d you mean? Las’ chance for what?”

Castiel’s eyes showed in a thin slit of light, cheeks flushed a darker blue. His swollen lips moved, but it took Dean a second to comprehend: “I need to head back tomorrow,” Castiel said. “Ther— Ash. There’s a bus— Fuck. Ngffh, yeah, keep going, keep going... Bus stop. Bus route that goes to the bottom of the mountain, I saw it on the way up. Maybe – drop me there – tomorrow...”

Dean opened his eyes fully now, staring at Castiel. He could make out the silvered rings of his blue eyes, hidden beneath drooping eyelids. Castiel shut his eyes to savour his pleasure, so didn’t see Dean’s expression of distress.

“Wh— Why you goin’?” Dean managed. “Why tomorrow?”

“Hm.” Castiel stretched slightly, toes brushing Dean’s. “Got people’s orders to deliver. Post services are on-off all this week, I have to ship things out or they’ll get backed up early next year.”

Dean frowned, burying his face in the darkness beside Castiel’s neck. “Do you have to go?”

Castiel kissed Dean’s cheek, fingers tangling his his hair. “Yes. I’ve been gone three days, Dean. I haven’t been able to check my email. This is peak—” He broke off to grunt, lips rounded, eyes shut tight, legs spreading further as Dean became more aggressive, more demanding, desperate to stop him talking and saying these unnecessary silly hurtful sad things that Dean didn’t want to hear. But Castiel just moaned, gripping Dean’s hair and making his eyes water – not crying, not crying, just
pain – Castiel gasped, gasped, grunted, making sounds of pleasure, “Mm, mm, mm, Dean, oh—” and Dean breathed down over his shoulder, eyes wide, unable to slow down now he’d set a precedent.

“This—” Castiel struggled to talk, but he tried anyway. „This is peak – order season – for me— Uah, oh, Dean, Dean, oh my God, uh— I have to – check my emails – there’ll be – more – mh – orders – shitshitshityes, Dean, Dean! Dean. Please. Rrrrhghffyes.”

Dean squeezed his body around Castiel’s, arms bracketing his torso, thighs apart to pin down Castiel’s. Dean’s hips worked hard, fighting to keep a rhythm through the chaos of pleasure and fatigue he felt. He and Castiel rode together, Dean down, Castiel up, thumping into the mattress, displacing both pillows.

Castiel’s hand rose to join Dean’s on the headboard, and Dean immediately let go, grasping for Castiel’s palm instead, fingers spread so they’d lock together. Dean felt his heart rush, his world blanking out for a quiet moment as Castiel’s fingers folded down against his knuckles. Sweat and heat and exhaustion flooded back, and Dean kept pushing, making desperate sounds, hearing himself whine but not caring. He was close, he was riding the edge—

“No, don’t,” Castiel uttered, shaking his head against Dean’s temple. “Don’t come yet. Hold on. Hold on, Dean, make it last.”

Dean trembled all over, whining again. He had to force himself to a halt, frozen in place, erection lifted from Castiel’s body in case friction set him off. He thought it would be impossible to keep from coming; he’d been moments away. But without a touch, his release soon felt less like an inevitability and more like a strong urge.

“Keep going now,” Castiel groaned, grasping Dean’s back with his free hand.

“Wait,” Dean whispered, shaking his head. “I’m still— Still— Shit, don’t kiss me, don’t kiss me, it sets me off.”

Castiel smiled, pulling back, fingers up to trace the shape of Dean’s lips instead. “Oh, I’m going to miss this,” he said, his voice a low, sultry rumble. “I’m going to miss this so badly, Dean.” He looked up, meeting Dean’s curious eyes. Castiel gave him a brave smile. “I’ll never forget,” Castiel promised. “These moments together were... special. This was so special to me.” One chaste kiss on Dean’s lips. “We can go back to being friends tomorrow. But this is our final chance.” A small frown – then it was gone. “Final chance, Dean. Let’s make it last. Let’s make it last forever.”

Dean breathed out a chuckle. “Speak for yourself,” he muttered. He gently allowed himself to touch Castiel again, both their erections aligning below Castiel’s navel. Dean sighed in relief, trying out a slow frot. He licked his lips, holding Castiel’s gaze. “If it took me forever to come, I’d lose my fuckin’ mind, Cas.” He grinned, tilting his head to kiss Castiel, slowly, deeply, tongue mapping the rim of his lower lip.

Castiel’s warm hand trailed up Dean’s side, purposefully pressing the bruises on his hips. Dean breathed in, eyelashes fluttering on Castiel’s cheek.

“Does that really feel good to you?” Castiel asked, confusion in his voice. “Doesn’t it hurt?”

“I like when it hurts,” Dean whispered. “And – I like when I’m not the one in charge,” he added, in a tone of confession. “Don’t ask me why. I don’t know.” He shook his head. “Just feels better for me when I’m...” he shrugged, too embarrassed to say the words ‘someone’s broken toy’. But they were plain as day in his mind.
“Do you want me to hurt you?” Castiel asked, unsurely. He ran his hand over the bruises again, eyebrows lifting when Dean smiled. Dean could see Cas didn’t get it – but that didn’t stop him from offering, did it? No way. That fact made Dean appreciate every aspect of Castiel’s personality as a whole. Cas was a living, breathing angel, and nobody would ever convince Dean otherwise.

“Dean?” Castiel prompted, since Dean hadn’t answered yet.

“Do you want to hurt me?” Dean asked, since Castiel’s doubt was obvious. “Unless you want to, I ain’t agreeing to anything.”

As they slowly shifted together, keeping each other simmering, they held each other’s gaze, communicating without a word.

“Do you trust me?” Castiel asked, eyes gorgeously dark and intent.

“Million dollar question, huh,” Dean uttered, sucking his lower lip. He snorted the softest laugh, nodding. “Yeah, I do, Cas. ‘Course I do.”

“Then roll over.” Castiel kissed Dean’s jaw. “Roll over and lie on your front, pillow under your hips.”

Dean’s breath caught in his throat. “You wanna? Seriously?”

Castiel grinned devilishly, gripping Dean’s neck and bringing him down so their foreheads connected, applying firm pressure. Against Dean’s lips, Castiel mouthed, almost in a growl, “I’m going to spank you. Yes, I want to.” His smile became soft, all of a sudden. “The fact you trust me to do it turns me on, I think. I like that. I like being trusted.”

Dean tried to tone down his trembles of excitement, masturbating slowly, in silence.

“Go on, Dean,” Castiel insisted. “Roll over now.”

With a happy grin, Dean did as he was told. He wriggled into an empty part of the bed, grabbed a fallen pillow off the floor and crammed it under his erection, humping it twice. God, he was practically vibrating with arousal. He held the bedsheets in his fists, breathing heavily, one cheek against the mattress. He arranged himself as Castiel had described: face down, ass up. He whined, feeling pre-come leak from him, absorbed by the pillow. He couldn’t think about the mess; he just wanted what Castiel offered.

Big hands. Big, comforting hands swept up Dean’s back, through sweat, undeterred by the slickness. Dean gasped as Castiel took the mounds of his ass in his grip, pushing it, massaging it. Dean had never been treated so roughly in his life, and he loved it, he fucking loved it. His fists dragged the sheets to his mouth, trying to use them to stifle his whimpers.

“Is this comfortable?” Castiel asked. His voice was level, patient – sweet. It was like he was born for this, to provide Dean his most shameful fantasy.

“Yeah,” Dean whispered. “Yeah, I’m good.” He hesitated, then whispered, “I’m all yours, Cas.”

Dean couldn’t believe his provider was Cas, his best bud, his best friend. How the hell was this one person making Dean feel so much at once? Chemical elation and physical ecstasy were usually enough, that was all Dean ever got – but right now there was also peace inside him, and gratitude, and an almost overwhelming sense of confidence – and love. Love. Of all things.

Castiel kept on working his hands across Dean’s back, down his thighs, squeezing his ass, pulling
apart his cheeks to look at his hole. Dean felt a thrill every time; he knew he was being appreciated, not judged. Cas liked to look at him naked, all spread out, shaky and turned on. Cas liked to see Dean presenting himself like a gift. The awareness felt good. For once in his life, Dean bared himself completely and did not feel shame.

Castiel left a trail of kisses up Dean’s back. Dean bit his lip, loving each one.

“Are you ready?” Castiel whispered against the nape of Dean’s neck.

Dean nodded. “Yeah. Yeah. Make it sting.”

Castiel turned his head and kissed Dean’s ear. “Tell me if you want me to stop. Promise me.”

Dean nodded again. “Don’t hit above my ass. Might bruise my kidneys or somethin’.”

“I know.”

“Just making sure,” Dean replied.

Castiel smiled, kissing Dean’s shoulder. But he stayed there for a while, and Dean felt his smile fade. “Dean?”

“Mm?”

“I— I’ve never done this before...” Castiel breathed out heavily, clearly worried. “I want to make you feel what you like to feel. Pain... pleasure. I want to cause you indescribable pleasure. Want to make you scream. I want to be rough with you, I like that, I like rush it gives me. But I don’t know if I can hurt you.”

“It doesn’t count, Cas,” Dean said, trying to lift his face from the bed to see behind him. “Like when you ‘n me say we’re engaged and in love, it doesn’t count. You hurtin’ me when both of us agree to it, it only exists in a bubble. Soon as you go tomorrow...” Dean ignored the twinge of sadness, “bubble pops, and it never happened. At least try it, Cas. We can stop if you don’t like it. And we can cuddle.” Dean smiled, enchanted by the thought: even if Castiel bailed, Dean wouldn’t be left disappointed.

Castiel steeled himself, giving Dean’s shoulder one more kiss. “Doesn’t count,” he repeated. “Okay. Okay. We can do this.”

He drew back, and his warmth left Dean’s back for a moment. Again, Castiel’s hands groped Dean’s ass, getting the blood flowing. Dean grunted, humping the pillow slowly.

Then! Dean gasped, feeling the sharp twinge as Castiel’s fingers bounced off his ass.

“More,” Dean said. “C’mon.”

Castiel went again, tapping the other buttock. Dean lifted his ass, but Castiel eased him back down. He moved in the bed – Dean looked back and saw Castiel shifting to kneel at his side, arranging himself for a better angle. Their eyes met. Castiel’s hair drooped over his forehead, casting a crooked shadow across the bridge of his straight nose. He looked at Dean fondly, examining his expression. Once Castiel determined that Dean was fine, he set his attention back on Dean’s ass, smacking him once more.

Dean ground himself into the pillow, breathing out through pursed lips. Yes, it stung, but somehow it felt satisfying, and reassuring. It almost tickled.
Harder this time: Castiel’s fingers connected with Dean’s butt, and Dean sighed, relaxing. Castiel began to settle into a pattern, giving Dean three strikes – left, right, left – before letting him rest, and they breathed together, huffing, reaching to hold hands. Then he’d go again: right, left, right. Castiel’s other hand still held onto Dean’s.

After five rounds of that, Dean was sweating, his erection half-flaccid, one fist white in the sheets, the other white around Castiel’s fingers. Castiel lay down beside Dean, kissing his bicep, hugging his back. “Are you all right?” he asked.

Dean nodded, smiling shakily. “Uh-huh. Yeah. ‘M good.”

“Want to keep going?”

Dean nodded. “Use your whole hand, go hard. Put your back into it. Fuckin’ wallop me.” He grinned tiredly at Castiel.

Castiel tilted his head.

“C’mon,” Dean encouraged. “I wanna jack off while you spank me.”

“Truly,” Castiel said, rolling his eyes upward, “I did not expect to come to this lodge with you, only to find out you like to masturbate while being beaten up.”

Dean scoffed. “Oh, like you’re one to talk. You totally get off on making out with me in my sleep.”

Castiel raised his eyebrows. And he quickly looked away.

Dean laughed, lifting his chin from the mattress. “You do, don’t you?”

“No, it’s not like that,” Castiel said breathily. He hesitated, and shame quickly cloaked him, weighing down his shoulders. “I-It’s not a problem, is it...?” He looked at Dean for reassurance.

Dean rolled a shoulder, wetting his lips with his tongue. “Depends. Does it stop once we get home?”

The answer Dean wanted and expected was along the lines of ‘No, I was hoping I could kiss you forever.’ So it felt like his heart was thrown into a brick wall when he heard the real answer.

“Of course it stops,’ Castiel said, without hesitation. “The moment I set foot outside your car, the bubble breaks.” More bashfully, he added, “I, um, didn’t want to leave without being with you one last time. That’s why I... wanted to have sex now. Middle of the night.” He gulped, eyes turned down. “Dean, we both agreed this was one time only. We’re friends, nothing else: those were your words. I just—” He rolled a shoulder, grinning awkwardly, “I think you always look so beautiful while you’re sleeping. And for once, we were in a situation where kissing could be acceptable. You seem to want that from me, at least. So I kissed you.” He breathed out, then met Dean’s eyes again. “I’m sorry. I won’t do it again, Dean, I promise.”

Dean looked away, down to his hands, smoothing out the wrinkled bedsheets. He nodded.

Fine. That was... fine. Yeah, Dean had very nearly come to terms with being in love with Cas. Didn’t matter any more. It was probably better they remained strictly friends anyway. It had always worked out that way. Dean had enough reasons floating in his head for why they shouldn’t be together. This made sense. This was acceptable.

So why did it feel like death?
“Lie down,” Castiel whispered, kissing Dean’s cheek. “Let’s keep going.”

Dean nodded, doing as he was told. But he felt melancholy. Too sad for spanking. If he was hurt now, it wouldn’t feel good, he’d just cry. “Cas?”

“Hm?”

Dean turned back, searching for Castiel’s eyes, finding them. Castiel waited patiently, one hand on Dean’s lower back. Dean drew in a small breath, and spoke softly, “Can we just cuddle now?”

Castiel seemed surprised. “Oh. Okay.” He shuffled forward, offering an arm. Dean shut his eyes and rolled onto his back, accepting his embrace like a child.

“Dean, is everything okay?”

Dean nodded: a dishonest gesture. “Just had enough. Get the covers?”

Castiel pulled up the loose sheets, leaving the comforter crumpled over the foot of the bed. He wrapped himself and Dean up, arms around each other, staring into each other’s eyes. Castiel gave Dean a comforting kiss, the backs of his fingers stroking his cheek.

Dean smiled, snuggling closer. His right hand trailed down Castiel’s chest, past his nipple, going down. Castiel realised what Dean was prepared to do, and his eyes immediately darkened, locked onto Dean’s.

Dean wrapped his hand around his friend’s erection, giving him slow, even strokes. Castiel squirmed at first, trying to find a good position – and soon found it, one thigh crooked over Dean’s hip, one stretched straight. Dean moved slowly, using the pad of his thumb to explore Castiel’s hooded shape, feeling the texture of his cockhead. His other hand slipped under Castiel’s face, cradling his cheek as he kissed him and pleasured him, making him moan. Castiel groaned so quietly: soft purrs, quiet hums of appreciation.

Castiel’s eyes closed after a while, and Dean was left to adore the sight of him without Castiel seeing how much Dean loved him. He was sure it showed in his eyes. He felt his heart glowing from being so close to Cas, skin prickling with heat. His hips wanted to be closer.

Could it be that they both ached to touch and kiss and grow old together, but both carried on lying to each other, and to themselves, saying it wasn’t true? What was it that kept Dean from simply saying he wanted out of their deal? The truth was, he wanted to be with Cas for as long as he possibly could. He wanted to be his swan buddy. Forever or bust.

Fear was so, so powerful. Fear of oneself, most of all.

No— Fear of happiness. Fear that everything might be okay. Might be good.

Fear that, at any moment, anything could take that happiness away. Loss felt like death to Dean. Thus, it was inevitable.

Better never to have something good, Dean thought. That way it wouldn’t hurt so much when it left him.

Oh, but it was too late for that. Too late. Here was Cas, letting Dean kiss his lips, touch him under the covers. Heartbeat-to-heartbeat they lay. It was too late.

Castiel came slowly, sighing sleepily, and then fell asleep within seconds. Dean knew he hadn’t
meant to fall asleep – he’d meant to lie awake, holding Dean, smothering him in affection until Dean fell asleep first. Dean forgave Castiel for the forsaken cuddle. He forgave him in kisses. He kissed him, and kissed him and kissed him, and Castiel let him. He was so incomprehensibly gorgeous while sleeping, a silver angel bathed in crystalline blue moonlight.

Dean cleaned his hand and Castiel’s skin with a tissue, then again lay down in Castiel’s arms. Dean tried touching himself, but even his stronger hand was incompetent; he was too tired to finish. He yawned, wrapping both arms around Castiel’s waist, sliding one under his body.

Forever or bust, Dean thought again, as sleep snuck up to claim him at long last.

... * ...
The box on the bed was full. It was crammed with Castiel’s Christmas gifts, taped up, alongside the box of craft supplies and finished calligraphy signs.

Dean leaned on the door frame, staring into the vacant, newly-tidied bedroom, with a foreboding sense of finality looming in his chest. He looked down at the bag of laundry by his feet. They were all his clothes. Castiel didn’t need to take anything, since he’d arrived with nothing.

“Got my toothbrush,” Castiel said, cheerfully, coming up behind Dean. He touched Dean’s back, easing him out of the doorway. “Now, I think that’s everything. I just have one gift to give you and your family, then I’ll be ready to go.”

“All right,” Dean said, trying to keep his voice level. “I’ll, uh, wait in the other room. Come through when you’re done.” He pushed up a neutral smile, and it felt terribly wrong, but he couldn’t muster up a real grin.

Dean slouched into the living room with his hands in the pockets of his jeans. The tree still sparkled, wrapping paper still littered the floorboards, and the fire still burned. Sam was kneeling on the hearth in his bathrobe, stoking the fire with fresh logs.

“Is Cas really leaving?” Sam asked, a small frown between his eyebrows.

“Yeah,” Dean breathed, folding his arms around his middle. “Sucks, huh?”

“Yeah, it does.” Sam poked the fire with the tongs once more, then stepped back and arranged the fire grate to shield the room from the strengthening flame. “I’ll miss him. He’s fun to have around. Interesting, too. He knows a lot about... nearly everything, actually. Almost as smart as you.”

Dean grinned. “Big compliment coming from Dr. Sam Winchester. Now I have fair reason to call you a smart-ass, smart-ass.”

“No! Those buses are run by the devil himself. Oh, you’re just taking him on a short trip down the mountain into Hell, are you? Over my dead body. Get your bag packed and put your things in the car. You’re taking him back home. No, I don’t care!” Mom interrupted Dean’s mumbled argument, “No son-in-law of mine is crammed into a sticky van and shipped like a parcel. I did that mountain route twice every day while we lived here, and I wouldn’t wish it on my worst enemy. Why do you think we moved away? That bus taking me to work was half of it. If you can call it a bus. Satan’s sleigh, if you will.”

Dean huffed. “You want me to drive Cas home now?”

“Damn right I do.” Mom’s frown cleared away, and she stood on her tiptoes to kiss Dean on the cheek. “Go quickly, and you’ll be in town by lunch. The good sandwich shop will be open today. Say hi to Swampy for me.”
“Will do,” Dean said, with a dramatic sigh of resentment, though he felt a happy skip in his heart. Three more hours of being fake-engaged to Cas? That was A-okay with him.

When Castiel entered the room, he was again dressed in his white shirt and signature navy-blue tie, with an overlarge navy-blue holiday sweater over top, kindly lent to him by Sam. Castiel held a wooden sign in both hands, pressing its decorated side to his chest. “I wasn’t sure what to get any of you,” he said sheepishly, as the Winchesters gathered around him. “I was short on time and resources, so I did what I could...” He looked down, tipping the sign down so he could see it. “Well.” He turned the sign around, handing it to Mary. “It’s not much, but I hope you like it.”

“Oh, honey, this is beautiful,” Mom crooned, reaching to take the sign. “It’ll look right at home on the lodge’s front door.”

“What is it?” Dean asked, craning to see.

Mary angled the sign his way, and Dean grinned. Welcome All Winchesters, it read. Flamboyant swashes had been cut into the wood and filled with white paint and glitter. Diamante stars decorated the surrounding wood, and the overall effect was classy, elegant – clearly made with love. This was prettier than all of Castiel’s other signs. Obviously he’d spent a great deal of time and effort making it.

“‘S beautiful, Cas,” Dean said, stepping closer, slipping his hand into Castiel’s and squeezing.

“You’re welcome back here,” Sam said, taking Castiel by the shoulders, drawing his attention. “Anytime. Think of this as your safehouse. We always do.” Sam let his hands fall, and he gave a full, tight-lipped smile, glancing at Dean, then back to Cas. “You’re a Winchester now, too. Sappy as it sounds, Dean chose you as family. And any family of Dean’s is family of ours.” He patted Castiel’s arm. “We love you.”

“Hear, hear,” Mom said. Dean nodded.

Castiel’s eyes gleamed. He was over the moon to be accepted like that. But, as fantastic as it was to hear those words said, and to see Castiel’s happy response, Dean’s joy was marred by guilt and sadness. Castiel wasn’t really going to be a Winchester. He was family, but he wasn’t family the way Sam and Mom thought.

It was all a lie. It was all a horrendous, tragic lie, and Dean was glad it would be over soon. He didn’t know what was worse, losing Cas, or letting the rest of his family down.

Dean watched Castiel hug Sam tight, both smiling. Castiel then hugged Mary, even tighter, smiling even more.

“You have a safe trip, all right?” Mom said, pulling back. “Dean has the landline number for this lodge on his cellphone, call us if you need us. We’re heading home in a few days. Dean—” Mary looked over at Dean. “When you get home, you call us. And take Castiel on a nice date, okay? Make up for the missed festivity up here.”

Dean nodded, wishing he wasn’t agreeing to empty promises. Sure, he’d take Castiel somewhere nice, but it wasn’t going to be a date.

“Mary. Sam.” Castiel nodded deeply to them both, practically giving a bow. “Um. Merry Christmas. My experience here... these were some of the best days of my life. Thank you. Thank you for being so kind. It really changed a lot for me.” Castiel took a refreshing breath, then smiled at Dean. “Dean, would you help me with my boxes? Let’s not leave anything behind this time.
Don’t forget the hats.”

Dean rolled his eyes, but grumbled his agreement. He gave Sam and his mother one last look, but found himself aching: their eyes followed Castiel instead. It seemed as though they loved Cas just as much as Dean did.

—— ★ ——

Dean had to take everything out of his duffel bag before he could put it all back in. All his clothes were dirty and crumpled; he became easily distracted, procrastinating, comparing the scent on his clothes. Some smelled like nothing to him, while others smelled strongly of Cas. One t-shirt in particular gave Dean chills. Once he remembered it was, in fact, dirty, he hurriedly crammed it in with the rest of the laundry.

He’d wash it when he got home, he thought to himself. He’d take it all out, dump it on the laundry room floor—

A laundry room he no longer had.

Dean’s blood ran cold. All this time, days away from Bela, it had completely slipped his mind that he was now homeless. All his things were at Bela’s place. All his clean clothes, all the food he’d been looking forward to binging on. The fridge, his bed, and his favourite pillow – those were all Bela’s belongings.

Dean sat down on the foot of his and Castiel’s bed, staring forward, seeing the open wardrobe, its bar hung with unused, tangled coathangers. The sight perfectly represented his state of mind.

What the fuck was he meant to do now?

He blinked back tears, lowering his head. His eyes skipped to the door, expecting to see Castiel standing there, giving Dean a consoling look. But the door was shut; Dean heard Castiel’s laugh from the next room. He and Sam were bonding over something. Nobody knew Dean was all alone with a broken heart.

As Dean turned his head, he saw a glint of gold from inside his duffel bag. He forgot his troubles for a moment, recognising the wrapping paper. He reached inside his bag and pulled out an object he’d re-packed without a thought: his present for Bela.

This year he’d been proactive, since Bela wasn’t the kind of person to tolerate a slowpoke. This year Dean hadn’t left everything until the last minute. This year, he’d wrapped his gifts a month early, packed his bag for the trip a week before he left – and had forgotten about this particular thing the second he and Bela broke up.

He turned the package over, watching the gold paper catch the twinkling lights from the rafters. He ripped the tape without hesitation, tipping the contents onto his lap.

Dean snorted at his past self. “Dude, she would’ve hated this,” he muttered aloud. “God, what were you thinking?”

He shook his head, squashing the satin undergarments in a ball, then tossing them onto the bed behind him. Carelessly, he shoved the wrapping onto the floor, then returned to packing.

Dean’s eyes drifted back to the discarded lingerie on the bed. A satin brassiere and a matching pair of panties, both moss green with gold lace edges... They seemed to wink at him, enticingly.

Dean had chosen them at random. He’d stormed into a store full of lacy things, asked for something in Bela’s size, picked the first set that didn’t offend his eyes, bought them, then stormed back out.

Only now did he find it strange he’d picked a handsome green. Army green, right? With gold flecks, to match his eyes?

Dean scowled, telling his inner voice to fuck off. He didn’t need that right now.

But your jeans are chafing. Wouldn’t it be better—

Stop, Dean thought to himself, rubbing a hand over his forehead. Everything’s fucked over right now, I don’t need... The thought trailed off.

Don’t need what? Don’t need to question your manliness again? After playing house and making Cas act as a supportive ‘friend’ all Christmas? After bursting into tears because he pounded your ass just right? Give it up, Dean, you’re at rock bottom. Nowhere to go but up. At least satin would feel better than denim against your practically-non-existent balls. And look! It ties at the sides; you don’t have to worry they won’t fit.

Dean worked his teeth together, chewing his tongue.

He sighed.

Hey, if Cas could spend an hour painting holographic glitter onto his fingernails, Dean could wear a pair of panties out of necessity. None of it really mattered. It was just fabric. And hey, it wasn’t like this would be the first time...

With his heart pounding, Dean snatched up the panties, unbuttoned his jeans, spent half a minute untying the fiddly little bows at the sides of the panties, then re-tied them around his too-big thighs. They hung low on him; his cock was half-hard (because satin, holy shit that was smooth) and he was a fucking bull with huge fucking thighs and a fucking bubble butt – and given all the delicious foodstuffs he liked to gorge himself on, he wasn’t exactly skinny, was he? He filled these things out like a turkey sausage inside a macaron.

Dean stood, hands over his face, horrified at himself. Horrified he was getting hard. Horrified he actually thought the panties looked kinda cute with the lace and the bows and all that pretty gold stitching.

Pushing down his nausea, Dean put his jeans back on, trying to ignore the waves of arousal that coursed through him. He was fucked up. Oh, God, this was the worst moment of his life.

Homeless, single, in love with his best friend and unable to say so. Wearing panties, hating himself for loving it.

Dean had to pull himself together. He had to think clearly, and get everything under control, or he might accidentally-on-purpose drive him and Cas off that crooked turn on their way down the mountain. Dean might hate every fibre of his being at present, but he knew from experience that it was worth living through the shitstorm, just to see things turn out fine later. He’d miss seeing Cas smile, for one thing. And he kinda wanted to meet the ferret that was going to ruin all the furniture.

A knock-knock on the door— Castiel entered. “Oh, there you are. We’re waiting for you. Are you ready?”
Dean hurriedly did up the button of the jeans, nodding. “Mm-hm! Yup! Yup, just coming.”

Castiel lingered, one hand on the doorknob. “Are you okay?”

Dean shot him a blank look. “Yeah! Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?”

Castiel didn’t have an answer. He accepted Dean was fine, and gave him a smile before leaving. Again, Dean felt guilt consume him a little more. Castiel believed the lie. Why? Because he didn’t expect Dean to lie. Not to him.

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“Swampy?” Dean grinned. “He was Mom’s boss for all of two months. She was a waitress—Yeah, I know, how could a waitress afford to rent a mountain lodge, then buy it later? Nah, she quit real quick.” Dean said, sitting straight in his seat, keeping a keen eye on the edge of the road. “We moved to Salem for a couple years. She got hired at a temp agency, somehow worked her way up to management before relocating to Indiana. She was always boss material, never had the patience for customer service. Food industry is always the worst.”

“People do get very picky about their sandwiches,” Castiel agreed, thoughtfully.

“Oh, that’s fightin’ talk, Cas, coming from Mr. Toast-It-After-Arranging-The-Salad-Neatly,” Dean grinned.

“Did I exclude myself from my statement? I don’t think so,” Castiel remarked. “Now stop talking about food, pay attention to the road. A little to the left. No, left! Left! God-damn it, Dean, you almost killed us.”

“At least we’d die together, huh,” Dean joked, while not joking. “I’m Thelma, you’re Louise. How ‘bout we hold hands and sail off this cliff together.”

Castiel narrowed his eyes. “Don’t jest about that, Dean. Today is not a good day to die.”

Dean smirked. “Nerd.”

“I’m your nerd.”

Dean smirked a bit more. “Yeah. You’re my nerd for three more hours, until we get home. Then you’re just a nerd.”

Castiel snorted softly, watching the road straighten out ahead. “Get us home in one piece. Then we’ll see whose nerd I am.”

Dean’s smirk pushed up his cheeks and made his mouth ache, and boy, it felt amazing.

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They stopped to get sandwiches for lunch. Dean said hi to Swampy, as promised.

Dean and Castiel returned to the car with not only sandwiches, but coffee cups half the size of their heads, which Dean carried, and a bag of muffins, which Castiel carried.

“Mary wasn’t exaggerating when she said they have the best service in town,” Castiel said, smiling as he sat in the passenger seat of the car, taking off the mittens Mary had lent him, then reaching for his coffee. “Do they always decorate with lights like that?”
Through the parked Impala’s windshield, Dean and Castiel admired the impressive display of flashing, twinkling colours, including a life-size reindeer pulling Santa’s sleigh, which was made up of red lights. Everything sparkled.

“It’s cute, huh,” Dean uttered, sipping his coffee through the tiny opening. “This town goes nuts for seasonal decoration. We’re near the ski slopes, so it’s a touristic thing. Whole place is gorgeous in the fall, with the trees dropping leaves in a dozen kinds of red, and then there’s the lights and the pumpkins. Near the end of the year, it’s Christmas lights.” He gestured at the sandwich shop. “Swampy’s been stockpiling electronics since the eighties. But it ain’t the lights that set his place apart, it’s this.” Dean lifted the coffee, then nudged the bag of warm muffins on Castiel’s lap. “They always treated folks like royalty. Practically roll out the red carpet, throw in a few extras for next to nothing.” Dean swallowed another gulp of perfect-temperature coffee, smiling at the delicate balance of milk and cinnamon against the bitter tang of a dark roast.

“Seems like it would be a good place to live,” Castiel remarked.

“Sure.” Dean shrugged. “Guess someone could retire here. That’d be cool. Or, uh. Start a business. Charming local B&B.” He stared at the lights for a while longer, imagining what it might be like to live at the cabin, like his mom wanted to. That had always been the dream; that was why they’d bought the place. That was why they always came back.

Maybe someday...

“Let’s go,” Castiel said, after less than a minute. “The lights are pretty, but I do need to get home.”

Crestfallen, Dean tried to smile and failed. “That’s why you ordered the food to go? You in a rush or somethin’?”

“It’s a lengthy journey,” Castiel said, reaching for a seatbelt that wasn’t there. He looked, then sank back, hands between his thighs, holding his coffee. “If we keep stopping it’ll be dark before I get back.”

Dean handed over Castiel’s sandwich. “You afraid of the dark, scaredy cat?”

Castiel began unwrapping his sandwich, eyes on Dean. “No,” he answered, as Dean keyed the engine to life. “I’m afraid that every minute I spend with you—”

Castiel went quiet, turning his head in the other direction, looking beyond the window. Crisp flecks of snow fell onto road, melting straight away. Dean watched the snow too, but he saw Castiel gulp. “What?” Dean asked lowly, unsure if he wanted to hear. “What’re you afraid of, Cas?”

Castiel didn’t look back. “Every moment I spend with you feels like the last. I don’t know what things will be like if— If we weren’t together. I don’t know where we go from here. I feel comfortable as your romantic partner. Being something else afterwards... That perturbs me.”

“Yeah.” Dean looked down at the coffee cup, watching steam escape in a thin string of vapour. “You and me both, babe.”

Dean heard the swish of Castiel’s trenchcoat as his head whipped around to stare.

_Babe._

The word lingered, filling in the confines of the car, the way the smell of sandwiches and coffee and muffins smothered all. No escape.
Felt kinda nice, though. Warm and fuzzy.

Dean smiled, lifting his eyes to Castiel’s.

Castiel stared for a while. Then he smiled too.

Dean took one more sip of his coffee, then twisted in his seat to reverse the car.

... * ...

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ooh, baby, it’s a long way down to the bottom of the river

Overnight, the snow had mostly melted down off the mountains. After a wet winter, the soil in the hinterland had reached its highest point of saturation, and it couldn’t absorb any more water. As Dean and Castiel drove down a desolate grey road in broad daylight, they were forced to keep left, lest they drive their wheels through the broken banks of a river.

Once they reached higher ground, they stopped the car and climbed a grassy hill to look at the swollen riverbank. They could see the snow melting, slowly trickling to join the conglomerate water mass that heaved against the roadside. Brown slush pooled across the painted white lines, leaving a ragged edge that would only wash away next time it rained.

Castiel smiled, pointing out a family of ducks who came floating down the river, quacking happily, paddling in the shallow edges to avoid the torrent in the centre. They threw their heads under the surface without a care, and came up snapping their beaks around something tasty.

“I dreamed about swans last night,” Dean remembered, raising his eyebrows. “There was—” He bent his neck and laughed. “You and me had this weird swan family. You, me, and a bunch of grey fuzzballs. What’re they called—?”

“Cygnets,” Castiel smiled.

Dean took a deep breath, revelling in how fresh the air smelled, even with the sour note of mud that tainted it. His shoulders lifted, and he smiled at the sky, slinging a hand over to take Castiel’s, holding it.

Castiel met his eyes. That fact he didn’t pull his hand away said an awful lot.

“What’d you think,” Dean asked, awkwardly lifting a shoulder, tipping his head. “Seven babies too many for you?”

Castiel snorted. “Let’s start with a ferret, shall we? Frankly I’m a little worried you can barely take care of yourself, let alone a smaller creature.”

“Hey, babies are fine,” Dean said, waving a hand, then tugging his leather jacket tighter against his chest. “I can handle babies. They have set needs. It’s kind of a bigger deal when you’re... you’re not sure if you can even treat a partner right. I ain’t an easy fella to love.”

“I’ve handled you thus far, haven’t I?” Castiel said quietly. He wouldn’t meet Dean’s eyes, but he gazed at his chest, as if looking through him. “I think you’d be surprised how easy you are to care for. You have – set needs.” Now he smiled at Dean, shy gaze rising to meet his. “I know what I’m getting into.”

“Yeah?” Dean raised his eyebrows.

“I used to graffiti buildings,” Castiel said, seemingly unprompted. “I’d paint political slogans across banks in the dead of night.”

Dean grinned. “What?”

“Before I did calligraphy, before I taught cooking classes, before I became a teacher, I dedicated all my social and creative energy to protesting intolerance, and demolishing corporate corruption. I led a clan of renegade graffiti artists – all of us quiet types, who wanted our message to be heard loud
and clear.” He swallowed, holding Dean’s stunned gaze. “I grew up a rebel. And I spent two years of my life in jail.”

Dean let out a breath, speechless.

“There’s so much I’ve been afraid to tell you,” Castiel said, eyes lowering to Dean’s heart. “If you’re afraid too, please don’t be. You’re not alone in being a wayward screw-up, desperately trying to put things right. I want to know your secrets.”

Dean couldn’t think at first, only sensing his own warm breath lifted against his face by the wind. Finally his throat relaxed, and he rasped, “Cas... The hell you talkin’ about? What secrets? What haven’t I told you?”

Castiel turned his body to face Dean’s. The wind pushed up locks of his hair, battling it across his greyed face; his blue eyes shone like a crack of daylight through stormclouds. “Emotions can be deceptive,” Castiel sighed, touching Dean’s chin with curled knuckles. “What I’ve learned through lifelong observation, is that love isn’t always a feeling. Love can be an action. Love is an action. I’ve always shown that to you, since the first day I met you.”

“What?” Dean hurriedly glanced back and forth between Castiel’s eyes. “Y-You mean friend love, right?”

“I didn’t say it was romantic straight off the bat.” Castiel gave a careless grin. “But there is kind of a love in baking cakes for someone. And in being patient with insufferable teachers’ pets.”

Dean huffed, feeling a small smile tug at his lips.

“I’ve always cared for you, Dean, and you offered my love back on equal terms. You’ve shown me your love in every action you’ve made. The support you’ve given me, the kindness and affection you’ve provided me. The way you seek to make me feel happy, and safe; the way you show me your vulnerabilities. I can’t question it.”

Dean shivered, a physical response to the cold, and self-awareness. Every emotion had been flayed down to its trembling core, and exposed to the open air. He couldn’t believe they were talking so candidly. Was this how people in stable relationships talked? How come Dean had never talked to anyone like this before? Had nobody else ever seen him as an equal?

“I do love you,” Dean forced out. “I call you my friend, and I love my friends; that was never a secret.” Dean frowned at the churning river, wishing it could carry away the heavy stone of his heart. “Look, I get that you think I like you a certain way, but I don’t. I can’t. Nothing good feels real to me, Cas. I’m fucked up, I always said so.”

Castiel pressed his lips together sadly. “I know it’s over between us. I accept that that’s how you want things. But for what it’s worth... I wanted so badly to show you how good things could be. I’ll always wish we could’ve explored what romantic love is for us.” He sighed. “Alas, it is the way it is. I wouldn’t be here without you, Dean. Not only, here, in this place, with these ducks and this infernal wind – but here, on this Earth. Whether or not God exists, I believe I was created for a purpose – I was made for you. I exist to show you a better life. And I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

He leaned in, setting a soft, tender kiss upon numbed lips. Dean responded too late; Castiel leaned away. “However things progress between us from now on, just know, Dean: I will be content. If you are by my side, I will be fine. I’ve never needed anything else. I was always happy just to know you, my friend.”
One last, adoring look. Their gaze held; Dean moved his mouth to speak but no words came out. Castiel finally looked away, and he turned, taking his warm hands with him.

Dean was left with empty fingers, quickly growing cold. He touched fingertips together, feeling his own stubborn pulse. Somehow, after losing all his breath and his whole entire heart, he was still alive.

But loss, like death, crept up slowly.

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The Impala’s engine gave her infinite tiger growl, reverberating with great force as she made tracks towards the next town. Stones on the road leapt in fear as she approached; puddles of meltwater rippled, cowering from her purr. She was anything but quiet. Her beastly sound could drown out near-anything.

Yet, somehow, Dean was weighed down by silence. It was cold on his hands, wrapped around the steering wheel. It was blue against his cheeks, despite the stark grey light that clung to the clouds above. It was all-consuming, and unmoving, and it clenched like a fist in his throat.

How could he speak? What could he say to separate himself from the words Castiel had imparted, more than half an hour earlier? They were miles from the river’s edge but Dean still felt the wind in his hair. He still smelt the sodden dirt, as Castiel’s damning rebuttal echoed inside his head.

Had Dean been rejected? Or had he senselessly turned down an open-hearted offer?

Maybe it would be safest to talk about something else...

Dean’s voice cracked as he drew a breath, lips parting. “Uh... You...” Castiel turned his head to listen. Dean kept his eyes on the misty mountain ranges, up ahead. “Tell me about the graffiti,” Dean managed, lips rising on one side. “You were kind of a badass in the old days, huh?”

“I’m still a badass,” Castiel said lightly, smiling around his words. Thank God – the smile meant he and Dean were still on good terms.

“Yeah,” Dean chuckled, sliding his lower lip under his teeth. “So – what? You snuck around like a ninja, knocked out some security guards, abseiled off a skyscraper?”

Castiel laughed gently: “Ehe,” he coughed out, head tipping forward. “If that’s how you’d like to think of it.” He looked at his hands, palms up, thumbs rubbing against his fingertips. “It started as harmless bathroom wall tagging, and it progressed to spray cans in alleyways, then stencils on the faces of significant buildings. I found some kindred spirits – youngsters who saw eye-to-eye with me. I think that was the moment I became a teacher, really. I was never a leader. But I will forever guide others to salvation. Whether such salvation is right or wrong, I can’t say.

“Anyway,” Castiel went on, “things snowballed, and eventually I found myself running an underground tagging ring. In the end I was arrested face-down on the roof of a government building, charged with vandalism. It should’ve been over in a matter of days, I was kept in a holding cell— But, um.” He lifted both shoulders up to his ears, a shrug that Dean found kinda adorable. “Nobody paid my bail, and I lost the court trial. So prison happened.”

Dean gave Castiel a sorry look, meeting his eyes briefly, then accidentally holding his gaze for ten... fifteen seconds.

“Dean,” Castiel said, gesturing to the road with his nose. “Pay attention, would you?”
Dean looked back at the road, flustered and hot, and working hard to hide it. “Prison anything like the movies?” he asked.

Castiel exhaled. “I don’t... I don’t want to talk about it. I haven’t until now, and I still don’t want to.”

Dean felt a pang of fear. “Nothing real bad happened, did it—?”

Castiel smiled reassuringly. “Why do you think I learned how to fight? No, nothing terrible happened. I made it through my sentence, and emerged almost unscathed. I’m just not ready to delve into that. The same way you weren’t ready to talk about Bela.”

“All right.” Dean swallowed. “Actually, Cas, I’m surprised you kept this quiet for so long. I kind of, uh. Kinda thought we were on the level. Told each other everything.”

Castiel just smiled, staring at the side of Dean’s head.

Dean glanced his way, then scowled. “Oh, come on! Yeah, I’m a thirteen-year-old girl. So what? I like that we don’t have secrets. Sue me.”

“There’ll always be new discoveries to make, Dean,” Castiel said, smiling. “We might learn something different each day. It wouldn’t always be big revelations.”

“Oh, like the fact you were in prison for—” Dean mouthed silently, glancing at his fingers as his calculated, “over five percent of your life? Yeah, Cas, I’d call that a big revelation. Any other bombs to drop, or is that it?”

Castiel’s smile turned sly. “That’s it for now.”

“Great.” Dean pouted, glaring at the road. “Real... real great. Neat-o.”

“Some days,” Castiel said softly, “I think we’d learn the smallest of details, trivial facts about each other. I suspect there are certain things we’d learn together, as a team. Other things we’d learn from each other. It happens gradually, Dean – it’s not possible to know everything all at once.”

“Could take a lifetime to figure each other out,” Dean uttered.

“Yeah,” Castiel replied, quietly. “Yeah, it might.”

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“Did I ever tell you?” Dean asked, after a long bout of silence, “Bela was a huge fan of those books – Fifty Shades of Grey. You know the ones?”

“Um. I may have heard of them,” Castiel replied. Dean wasn’t sure if he was being sarcastic.

“Okay. Well. She was.” Dean gulped. He couldn’t look over at Cas out of shame or embarrassment, something that made his cheeks hot and his stomach squirmy. “Personally I never got the hype. Always seemed kinda... toxic.”

“But—”

Chewing on nothing, Dean worked up the courage to express something far more personal, and even more important. “I grew up being told I’m garbage. Can’t do my job, can’t do anything right. That was my dad, he was like that. Grew up believing it. Still believe it, you know? Can’t really shake the idea.”

Castiel exhaled, but Dean resisted glancing his way.

“The pain,” Dean said, “it’s punishment. ‘You’re a bad boy, Dean.’” He flushed hot after using a husky falsetto voice, but took solace in the knowledge that Castiel was not easily rattled by brutal honesty, nor silly voices. “For so long I’ve been told I’m a piece of shit, so maybe a little chastisement oughta help. I’m... I’m someone’s toy. And I’m broken. That’s why Bela stopped playing with me. Beyond repair, no point even trying.”

“Dean...” Castiel’s words were soft, upset. Full of apprehension and sympathy.

Dean licked his lips. “You don’t get it,” he said to Castiel, turning his head, then looked away roughly, scared he’d see tears in Castiel’s eyes, tears of horror, because Dean had convinced him to become part of an abuser’s game. “Cas, it was different with you, is what I’m saying. What you and me did wasn’t like what Bela did, or what my dad did.”

“Then what was it? How was it different?” Castiel was trying to conceal his fury but Dean still heard the shake in his voice.

“I didn’t know it could be rewarding,” Dean said, speaking through a breath that squeezed his throat. “I didn’t know I could feel good after. The cuddles, Cas—” Dean looked at Castiel directly this time, eyes unable to keep away. “The stuff you did during and afterwards made a massive difference. Asking if I was okay, checking on me. Not making me feel I had to see the session through out of obligation. Not leaving me to wonder if I even satisfied you. The way I feel about you, too, I guess that must’ve helped. It was never about losing control, it’s about letting someone else have it. I trust you, Cas. I trust you. Like I’ve never trusted anyone but Sam, or Mom. Closest family.”

“Dean...” Pausing to breathe, Castiel rubbed a hand over his forehead, then said, “You asked me to hurt you, and you thought it would make you feel... what, exactly?”

“Less like a failure.” Dean set his jaw and stared at the road. “Like I was worth something to you.”

“But you are—” Castiel’s voice frayed, and he expressed in a huff, “You are worth the world to me, Dean. You think you’re a failure – no! Look! Look what you’ve done for the people around you. Your family loves you, and you were the one who welcomed them back into your life. You’ve made me happy in ways you don’t even know, Dean. Maybe your purpose in life was never to graduate college, or run a mechanic business. Maybe it was to hold your family together for all these years. You’ve kept yourself from drinking to excess, and removed yourself from abusive relationships, on top of everything. You’ve done it, and you will keep doing it. You’re so far from a failure that— Oh, Dean, I don’t even know what to say. You deserve celebration, not punishment.”

Dean couldn’t answer.

“I’d still hurt you if you ever wanted me to,” Castiel said. “But not for the wrong reasons. Not because other people treated you like a ‘broken toy’ and you got used to how it felt.”

Dean felt his hands shaking on the steering wheel. He smiled gently, because that exact response from Castiel was precisely why he’d brought it up. “I know,” he stated. “Maybe it’s weird to say it, Cas, but I feel like you fixed me a little bit.”
Now Castiel had nothing to say. But his eyes were gentle when Dean glanced over, and his smile was understanding.

Dean took a deep breath, and then let it out in a sigh of relief, eyes back to the road.

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Dean slowed down, indicating his turn as they reached a junction. The sky was spitting out drizzle, and a hiss covered the windshield as the car straightened up. Ahead were the lights of a town, a mirage glinting silver and gold through a ghostly fog.

“Getting dark early,” Dean remarked, glancing up at the sky. “Heavy rainclouds. Gonna be a wet ride home. Sorry, pal, looks like you’re getting back a bit later than you bargained for.”

“It’s fine,” Castiel said. He wasn’t usually a fidgety person, but his leg was jiggling. Dean could take a hint: despite his patient response, Cas was desperate to get home faster. But the traffic was building up as they got closer to civilisation; roads converged, estuaries forming a steady stream of red brake lights, trickling forward into the haze.

“If this road weren’t backed up, we’d have a straight run from here. Half an hour back to your place.” Dean tapped his finger on the steering wheel. “Bummer, huh.”

“Yes.” Castiel’s leg bobbed frantically, one fist curled against his leg. “How long until we reach the next stop?”

Dean raised his eyebrows, scanning what he saw, cross-referencing with the remembered image of the town that was already obscured from view by water vapour. “Twenty minutes? I think this is the same place we stopped last time, where we stocked up on food, and bought hats. You remember? That was fun.”

“Yes.” Now Castiel’s heel hammered the side of the leather seats. “Let’s— Let’s listen to some music. Pass the time.”

He lurched for the stereo before Dean could, hitting buttons and twirling the dial until a tune filtered through. It was distorted by static, but Dean just about made out the chords of a Christmas song.

“Wow,” he chuckled. “These DJs gotta check their calendars.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” Castiel smiled. “I appreciate that they keep the festive spirit alive. I’d play Christmas music year-round if it wouldn’t drive everyone crazy. There’s something calming about a carolling choir belting their hearts out to the sound of bells.”

Dean settled in his seat, fingers tap-tap-tapping on the wheel in time with the singing.

“Hey, Cas?” Dean asked, after a few minutes, and a hundred feet of road.

“Hm?”

“Can I ask you a favour?”

Castiel looked over, both wary and amused. “Read me the fine print first.”

Dean grinned. But the grin wavered, and he had to take a deep breath before he could speak again. “Listen... buddy. Pal.” He licked his lips. “Can I— Can I stay with you? Tonight? At your place?”

They stared for a while. Castiel’s expression seemed unreadable.

“Not for sex,” Dean said, blushing because he had to clarify. “I got nowhere else to go. All my crap
is at Bela’s place—"

“Oh, of course,” Castiel interrupted. “Yes, Dean, you don’t need to explain. My couch is all yours. New pillow included.”

“Couch.” Dean said, more to himself than to Castiel. He looked at the road, letting the Impala drift to catch up with the car in front. “Yeah. Couch is perfect. Thanks.”

Castiel said nothing. He reached to turn up the radio volume, and, as if to deter further conversation, aggressively mumbled along to *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*, thigh jumping, both fists curled against the seat’s edge.

... ※ ...

It took until they reached the town’s border before Dean finally snapped. “Dude, would you quit it? I’m trying to drive the *car*, but you’re driving me *crazy*.”

“I’m sorry!” Castiel gripped his knee, trying to sit still. “I know it’s annoying, I hate when you do it too.”

“If you’re so eager to get home, just say so,” Dean said firmly, frowning at the red stoplight that lit up in front of them. “Don’t act like you’re so chummy with me if you’re mad, Cas. I get it, I’m letting you down, just like I said I would. Everyone who ever said it was right: I’m bad news. If you need me to rent out a motel tonight, fine. I don’t wanna sleep on your stupid couch anyway.”

Castiel gave Dean a bewildered stare. “That’s the conclusion you come to? I’m more animated than usual and you assume I’m mad at you?”

“Well, aren’t you?”

“No!”

Dean shot Castiel a exasperated glance, then looked back at the road. Darkness loomed, and Christmas lights shone bright: a thousand beacons gleamed from every store window, strung over the road like snowdrop bunting. Dean’s vision blurred, overwhelmed, but he focused when the stoplight turned green. He hit the gas and shot around a corner, careening down the main street of the town.

“If you’re not mad, then what’s eating you?” Dean asked, trying to be gracious. “Coffee finally got to you?”

“You could say that,” Castiel said testily. He lowered his face and said, quietly, “I need to pee.”

Dean snorted. “Seriously? That’s all?”

“I didn’t want to bother you,” Castiel snapped. “Last time you rolled your eyes so hard I actually thought you were possessed for a second.”

Dean chuckled, breathless as he scanned the surrounding road, looking for a turning. “You believe in demon possession?”

“I believe you have a demonic temper when you’re driving,” Castiel retorted. “‘Driving clears your head’, my ass.”

“It’s how I work out my issues.”
“Can’t be too effective then, can it? Maybe you should try talking about your problems instead of driving away from them.”

Dean resisted rolling his eyes, just in case Cas saw.

Castiel breathed, then swallowed. “You’re looking for a bathroom, right?”

“Yes, Cas, I am looking for a bathroom.”

“Good.” He breathed again, harder this time. His hands migrated to the tops of his thighs, rubbing them down.

“You okay there, buddy?”

“I— Um. Yes.” Castiel squirmed, curling his legs together. “No.”

“Jeez.” Dean finally saw a sign for the little mall they’d stopped at on the way out. He was on the wrong side for the entrance, so began circling the block.

“Fuck,” Castiel whispered. “Just drive over the flower bed.”

“Chill out, would you? One more minute, it’s not that bad.”

“You haven’t been ignoring your straining bladder for the last two hours,” Castiel hissed, throwing Dean a dark look. “I’m— Fuck. Fuckfuckfuck I’m so desperate, I’mmmm— Deaaaann...”

“Christ, all right, all right, we’re almost there, Cas,” Dean eased, tone becoming gentler once he realised Cas was seriously bursting. “God, I can’t see through the rain, hang on.” He switched up the wipers to flap faster, eyes squinting to make out the golden light from the mall entrance. The place was mostly closed, with the lights off, but the main doors appeared to be open.

“Dean,” Castiel panted, sliding one hand to press against his crotch. “Please. Please hurry up.”

“I’m gotta park, Cas. Get out now, I’ll come find you in a second.”

“I can’t—” Castiel sobbed. “Can’t move. Fuck, I’m gonna— Oh, no...”

Dean chilled with alarm as he heard a soft hiss while Castiel whimpered. Dean hit the brakes, halfway into a parking spot – another vehicle blared its horn and drove past behind them.

Castiel covered his face with a hand, shivering – Dean bolted into action, opening Castiel’s door pushing him halfway out as the overhead light ticked on. Rain lashed against the car’s dashboard, dripping over Castiel as both pee and the rain soaked through his jeans. Dean rested a cold hand against his own burning cheek, pretending not to notice Castiel frantically trying to unbutton his pants. Despite the rain, he could hear Castiel flooding the denim, a low ripping sound.

At long last, Castiel got himself free of his jeans, and used one hand to aim outside the car. Dean blushed, looking down at his lap, then out the steamed-up window on his side.

Castiel breathed shakily, sobbing a little. Dean turned to check on him: Castiel shifted forward, angling his hips off the edge of the seat. His torso twisted towards the back of the car, one arm crooked against the seat, face turned away from the rain. Dean glanced up, and was surprised to see tears shining down Castiel’s cheeks, reflecting the car’s interior light. Not rain. Definitely tears.

Castiel sniffed, and Dean actually felt his stomach clench.
“You all right?” Dean asked.

“Don’t talk to me,” Castiel breathed. He hid his face against his bicep.

God, he was still going. How much coffee had he drunk? Dean picked up Castiel’s empty coffee cup. Then he picked up his own, and raised his eyebrows. “Dude,” Dean said. “You finished my coffee too?”

“It was nice!” Castiel retorted. “You weren’t drinking it so I took the liberty.”

“And look how that turned out,” Dean muttered. “You done yet?”

“No,” Castiel said grumpily.

“Wow.” Dean chewed his lower lip, turning up the radio.

Castiel needed another full minute. An orchestral version of *Carol of the Bells* finished just as Castiel did, and Dean turned the volume down, not in the mood to listen to ads. He reached for the glove compartment, pulling out tissues and baby wipes. “Here,” he said, offering a tissue. “Leave your pants off, nobody likes soaking in wet clothes.”

Castiel wiped his tears before he even attempted to wipe anything else. “Thank you,” he said weakly.

“Hey, Cas?”

Castiel looked back in shame.

“Aw, no, don’t sweat it,” Dean said warmly, giving Castiel a heartening shoulder rub. “Why d’you think I keep baby wipes in the car? Long journeys, man. Happens to the best of us.”

Castiel looked away, unlacing his boots so he could get his jeans off.

When Castiel settled back on his seat, he was naked from the waist down – and clean, thanks to the baby wipes. He kicked his wet pants into the footwell, then pulled his shirt down to cover his genitals. He sniffed twice more, avoiding Dean’s gaze.

“You’re really upset, huh,” Dean observed.

“I’m embarrassed!” Castiel growled, glaring at Dean’s waist. He grabbed his car door and slammed it shut, sticking his hands under his thighs. The overhead light faded away into gloom.

“C’mon, it’s nothin’,” Dean said.

“Oh, I’d like to see you piss yourself, then tell me it’s nothing,” Castiel said, words tipped with venom.

“That’s not what I meant,” Dean replied, completely undeterred. He drove the Impala into a parking spot at last, and killed the engine. Directly ahead, a sapling tree flashed in lights of rainbow colours, shielding the car from passers-by. After glancing around to check nobody was looking, Dean lifted an arm and turned the overhead light back on, brightening the interior with amber-toned luminescence. “You wanna know what’s really embarrassing?” Dean asked. “C’mon, bet I can one-up you.”

Castiel tutted. “What.”
Dean licked his lips, hesitating as he lowered his hands to the bottom of the steering wheel. “Um.” He hesitated again. “You know what you said, learning new things about each other every day?”

Castiel met Dean’s eyes, shame vanishing to almost nothing as curiosity overtook. “Yeah?”

Dean swallowed. “Okay. Well. See.” He exhaled, and his breath shuddered audibly. He shut his eyes and leaned back, sighed at the ceiling, then flopped forward. It’s for Cas. Make him feel better. You’re just levelling the playing field, it doesn’t count.

Dean undid his jeans, hesitated one more time, then leaned back to push his jeans down and expose his underwear. “There. You see?” He looked at Castiel with fire in his eyes, and declared with brutal force, “I’m wearing pretty, lacy panties. And I think they’re cute, and wearing them kinda turns me on a bit.”

Castiel slowly raised his eyebrows. He looked at Dean’s panties, and his lips parted. Then he licked them. It had to be a good twenty seconds before he’d had his fill and his eyes roamed upwards to meet Dean’s.

Dean didn’t expect his body to ignite all at once. But heat readily consumed him, belly first, because Castiel’s eyes had grown dark and he seemed suspiciously intent on Dean’s mouth.

A tiny smile pulled one side of Castiel’s lips, and he murmured, “Dean,” he said, his voice husky, “you broke a gender role.”

Dean huffed. “What, that turn you on or something?”

“Mm. Perhaps.” Castiel tilted his head, admiring Dean’s wide shoulders, then his fists screwed up on his thighs. Then, again, Castiel let his eyes linger on Dean’s crotch.

Dean’s attention flicked to outside, hoping nobody else was out there. The parking lot was deserted, but the light was on inside the car, anyone might see in...

“Where did you get these?” Castiel asked, scooting a few inches closer. He reached to touch the lace, but resisted at the last moment.

“Gift for Bela,” Dean mumbled, trying not to look at Cas. “Was in my bag the whole time.”

“Were you curious?” Castiel asked, hungry eyes practically eating Dean up. “Did you wonder what you’d look like wearing them?”

“I just needed some underwear, ‘s all,” Dean muttered. “They were there so I went for it.” He moved a hand to cover himself, self-conscious about the fact he was getting more turned on by the second. Castiel’s bare legs were close enough that Dean felt his heat; his button-down shirt had ridden up, and Dean’s betraying eyes saw that Castiel wasn’t exactly flaccid. Oh, God. Dean hadn’t forgotten what it felt like to have that thick cock sliding into him, or rubbing alongside his own. Or those hips, snapping against Dean’s ass – or those hands—

Dean gasped, watching Castiel’s hand dip between his smooth, near-hairless legs. His touch was firm. Boldly, Castiel stroked Dean’s inner thighs, fingers playing against his skin, travelling up. Dean tensed, breath stuck in his throat; Castiel slid his hand underneath Dean’s to cup his bulge, holding it with a warm palm. Dean felt dizzy, light-headed; he was stiffening fast, and he felt himself swelling into Castiel’s palm through the satin.

“Cas...” The name came out as a shuddering breath. “Cas, I just showed you these to make you feel better. This was meant to embarrass me, not – ah! – not turn me on...”
“You turned me on first,” Castiel said. “You really want to make us even?” he teased, lips opening slowly against Dean’s ear. Humid breath tickled him as Castiel purred, “I’ll make you come into these panties you’re wearing. You’ll be wet, and warm, and sticky. And your clothes will be dirty. I think that would do it for me.”

Dean had no hope of hiding his red blush. “Oh... Oh.” He licked his lips. “Y-You wanna. Hm.” Dean’s hips shifted in place, already feeling a wetness spreading. Satin took liquid and spread it along its fibres into a grid of sleekness, leaving a dark stain and – if the liquid happened to be viscous – it left behind a gloopy sensation, which Dean felt now. He was vibrating in excitement, his body rigid.

“Backseat,” Castiel said firmly. “Now.”

Dean met his eyes, thrilled by the intensity he saw there. “Who put you in charge?”

Castiel smirked. “You did.” He winked, then leaned over the front seat and picked up something from the back. He set it on his head. “Call me Commander Castiel.”

Dean squeezed himself involuntarily, feeling pre-come spurt into the satin. Castiel had spoken too slowly, too deeply, too much like he knew exactly what he was doing. Dean was blazing, inside and out.

“I gave you an instruction, didn’t I?” Castiel asked, leaning in, nose touching Dean’s. “Go on, Dean,” he said, more sweetly. “Hurry, or I might withhold a few kisses.”

Dean grinned, stealing a kiss from Castiel’s lips without warning. “One last time before we go back to normal, right?”


Dean kissed him again. “Never call me ‘bro’ again,” he whispered against his lips. Then, in a rush, Dean availed himself of his boots and jeans, and climbed over the seat, tumbling into the back half of the car. He sat down in the middle of the wide leather seat, holding Castiel’s gaze as he spread his legs, hands in his hair, lips parted. “Come get me, Commander.”

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A cold front descended across the city. Something was brewing, miles above; electricity shimmered in static threads between the clouds, brightening spots, unobserved. Thunder began to vibrate the sky, throwing water particles together in fits of rage. The particles clung tight for security, finding friends, forming trembling, transparent planets. Bigger and bigger and bigger—

Down, down, through the clouds. Lightning struck, one flash across a darkened parking lot, outside a mall just off the highway. Rainbow lights went on twinkling, draped through their leafless trees, oblivious to the Earth’s power surge. Rain spilled over the rims of a black car, sparking bright from another burst of lightning.

The rain slowed, holding its breath, falling in slow motion. Every droplet squeezed tighter as it fell; it froze, expanding into a fractal of white.

Thudding splashes on the roof of the car became a soft freckling of white specks, coming down with a slow whisper.

The first flakes melted upon contact. They dripped down the car’s windows, turned gold by the light from inside. Thunder galloped through the sky, booming for as long as it could before dying
out.

The next wave of snow settled. Dots here and there. Flakes clung to the glass, sliding downward to lock with others, collecting at the base like Tetris blocks.

The air chilled further and the snow rushed in tremendous flurries, craving its first meeting with the ground. The car’s windows whitened out on the side facing into the wind; a layer of fluff collected atop the car. It settled like a blanket, hissing quietly as it grew.

Below the paling roof of the car, warm inside its shelter, two people remained oblivious.

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They kissed open-mouthed, Castiel pulling the shell of Dean’s ears with his thumbnails, backs of his hands steady against the seat’s backrest. Dean gasped, writhing; his hands slipped up the small of Castiel’s back, lifting his button-down shirt, grasping the hot muscles beneath. Castiel’s shirt hung open, the knot of his necktie loosened and dangling free of his collar.

The brim of Castiel’s captain’s hat shaded their faces from the car’s interior light. They kissed under it, a secret to the world. Dean worked their lips furiously, pouring every wish into his breath, hoping Cas would understand. Take me, take me—

Castiel pushed, demanding, grasping Dean’s body to press him into the padded leather. Castiel knelt with his thighs parted under Dean’s ass, bare feet hanging off the edge of the seat. They breathed each other’s air, panting against open mouths; Dean grunted, knowing his eyes were dark as a winter night. He looked at Castiel with desire brimming under his skin; last time. Last chance, last night together.

A flash of lightning, crisp silver. Thunder rolled, splitting the sky apart.

Castiel’s hands rounded Dean’s shoulders, squeezing, sliding down his biceps, all the way to his elbows. Then across – he pinched Dean’s left nipple between two fingers, and Dean broke their wet kiss to breathe, shivering in what felt like static, overheating electronics, his pulse tripping in blips of signal interference. His heart throbbed under his skin, providing a beat to which he tipped his hips, rubbing himself against Castiel.

Castiel bit down around Dean’s mouth, just off to the side. He didn’t bite hard, but Dean breathed in deeply, groaning at the way it felt. Castiel closed his mouth and tugged on Dean’s lip until Dean was forced to follow. Their mouth latched again – kiss, kiss, push against the seat.

Castiel met Dean’s eyes, blue stare slowly turning black as his pupils dilated further. Dean quaked, rippling with anticipation. Castiel kissed his cheek, then bowed his head, biting Dean’s shoulder. Dean shivered again, relaxing, tensing. Castiel followed his bite with a kiss, then another.

Castiel grasped Dean’s thighs with force and lifted them; Castiel slid out from underneath, dropping off the leather seat and into the footwell. He arranged himself, kneeling up so his face was level with Dean’s chest. And he leaned in, taking Dean’s nipple in his mouth.

“Oh shit,” Dean whispered. A grin fluttered across his face. “Oh, yeah...”

Castiel sucked like he meant it. He worked his tongue around the stiffened nub, pushing so hard he erased pink wrinkles from the peak. Dean felt strikes of pleasure emanating from that one point; Castiel’s pressure, the warmth and heat of his mouth— Dean cried out, humping in mid-air, head falling against the backrest. “Cas— Cas—”
Castiel paused for a moment. He looked up. Feeling himself observed, Dean bent his head forward to meet Castiel’s eyes. Castiel asked a question in the smallest tilt of his head and one fast dip of his gaze. Dean didn’t need to hear words; he nodded. He nodded, kept nodding. Yes, yes, yes, please.

So Castiel leaned in again, eyes hooded, eyelashes downturned. His mouth met Dean’s stinging nipple and again began to suck, but this time his teeth skinned the point, and Dean shouted, one hand up to thump the roof of the car, struck by its chill. His other hand gripped Castiel’s head, keeping him close, keeping him against his heart, biting, sucking, kissing. Castiel nibbled and Dean laughed, tickled by pleasure and pain and everything in between.

He already felt euphoria consuming him; he surrendered to Castiel’s teeth, then the tip of his nose dragged back through burning saliva. Castiel blew cool breath on the sore spot, and Dean whimpered, sucking his own bottom lip, eyes closed.

Castiel’s hands slid from under Dean’s thighs and swept around, gripping all the way, taking Dean’s waist. Dean felt secure in his touch: always bold, always confident. Castiel’s mouth slipped free from Dean’s nipple with a breath, and his hands hauled Dean’s body closer, slamming his chest into Castiel’s face. Castiel kissed, nose pressing the topmost ridges of Dean’s ribcage, the only place on his torso where the bones showed through.

Castiel’s lips were sore and puffy, so his kisses were soft. His breath felt even hotter than before. He breathed low, air touching the few hairs that stood out from Dean’s chest, lifted by excitement.

Castiel kissed southward, leaving a hot trail of shimmers that chilled in the seconds that followed, then heated on Dean’s skin and vanished into nothing. Dean murmured his enjoyment, watching Castiel’s hat drag his chest, following the path of the kisses.

Finally the hat tipped back and toppled away; Dean didn’t reach for it, too enraptured by Castiel’s mouth against his navel. Castiel’s teeth closed in a wide-open kiss, leaving a sting on Dean’s belly. Dean panted, feeling pre-come drip down his erect length and onto the seat under him.

Castiel took Dean’s thighs again and lifted them – hiked up over Castiel’s shoulders. Dean leaned back, putting his ankles over the front seat, wide apart. Now Castiel’s head of dark hair was all Dean saw between his legs, and he cried out as warmth swallowed him down. Castiel managed to fill his mouth, taking all of Dean’s full, thick length.

“Oh my God, Cas... OhmyGod. Oh’m’ghh... Mmmh...”

Dean trembled at the first swallow; Castiel’s hand gripped his base, pulling down his foreskin while Dean was already sheathed inside his mouth. Swallow, swallow. Castiel wasn’t sucking, he was working his throat around Dean’s head.

“Shit, Cas,” Dean whispered, unable to project his voice. He was weak; weak from his slack mouth to the tips of his curled toes, one hand shaking in Castiel’s hair. His other hand reached for Castiel’s shoulder, barely brushing him with fingertips before giving up. “Caaaaaas...! Mmhh... Cas. Cas.”

Castiel released Dean with a wet swish of his tongue, coming up puppy-mouthed, with shiny, curious eyes and pink cheeks. Dean breathed, unable to feel anything beyond overwhelming adoration and arousal. Castiel was gleaming around his mouth, his voice broken and impossibly deep as he asked, “Am I doing it right? Does this feel good, Dean?”

Dean nodded helplessly. Part of his brain speculated that there ought to have been a condom between him and Cas, but that part of him was too blitzed to function proactively. Cas was done
sucking now anyway; Dean shut his eyes and whined as Castiel began kissing his inner thigh, then biting him. Dean began to sob – it hurt, but it hurt good. Tears tickled the edges of his eyes, blurring what little he could see through half-open eyes.

“Mmm! Cas!” Dean grinned, then parted his soft lips, eyes half-shut, “Cah... Commander. Ouh. Oah, ouah, uhhhhgodyes, haaa...”

Dean’s exclamations gradually became shakier, more breathless, until all he could do was whine, tense all over. Castiel stopped biting when Dean could only breathe, thighs too tense. Contact had turned to pure pain now; Castiel sensed Dean wanted to stop. He began running his hands over the marks instead. Dean felt every bite, he felt the red lines on his sensitive skin. Castiel kissed what he’d left behind, soothing him, leaving Dean to pant and relax again, mind eased by the care Castiel took. Hard pressure erased even the last twinge of pain. Dean felt like he’d come undone before being stitched back together.

“You all right?” Castiel asked, kissing Dean’s pubic bone. “You need anything?”

Dean laughed, because Castiel’s breath against his fluffy hair freaking tickled. He shook his head, biting his lip as he grinned down at Cas. “Nuh-uh. ‘M good.” Still, he held out his hands, expecting a hug. Castiel struggled to climb from the footwell, but managed it, sliding into Dean’s embrace. He brought their chests together, easing them down until they lay lengthways on the seat.

Dean wrapped Castiel’s tie around his hand and smiled against Castiel’s neck, breathing his scent deeply. He smelled like sweat and unfinished sex, which provided an odd sense of comfort. Dean could physically feel endorphins riding through his bloodstream; every second he and Castiel lay together made his brain sing a note higher, fingers bright with unseen lights, stomach fluttering with joy. Dean kissed Castiel’s forehead. Cas nuzzled Dean’s hair, and Dean made a sound of happiness, a deep rumble, akin to a purr.

Castiel shifted, turning to lie on top of Dean, legs interlocking on the far side of the car. Kisses rained down on Dean’s chin, jaw, cheeks; he shut his eyes and enjoyed it, letting Castiel take his hand, spreading his fingers, slotting their palms together.

“Mh, love that,” Dean whispered, not caring if he sounded ridiculous. “Mmmmmh, yeah, kiss me.”

Castiel sucked on his throat, tongue softly lapping at stubble. Dean’s breath caught and released, lips parting to free a pleased breath.

Castiel’s firm hand caressed down Dean’s chest, over his sensitive nipple, past the pudge on his belly, then over the thick shape of his penis, which was stuck halfway out of his panties. Castiel’s fingers swirled through the mess Dean had made, dragging warmth against Dean’s slit. Fingertips then tracked raised veins, on his way to touch the satin. Dean gasped, raising his hips an inch from the tacky leather, feeling himself gripped by Castiel’s strong hand. One eager pull and Dean was already searing, eyes tight shut.

“Ouhhh, Cas... Ah— Oh— Oh—”

Castiel grinned, teeth sleek against Dean’s neck. One kiss, hand still pulling. Firm tugs, all the way to the tip, closing Dean’s foreskin over the slit. One thumb rubbed there, over and over on the most sensitive spot, moving faster, hand shaking rather than rubbing now. Dean’s eyes rolled back in his head, incomprehensible vocalisations escaping his mouth, whispered into Castiel’s ruffled hair.

Whenever Dean got close – muscles freezing, hips moving too eagerly – Castiel would tease him; he’d stop, he’d pull Dean’s panties back into place, making them soak up the pre-come. The fabric
was warm now, and wet – as Castiel had promised to make it – but Dean was desperate to get his release, yet was prevented from doing so by this grinning devil with blue eyes. Castiel chuckled, clearly enjoying the sounds Dean made.

“How urgent is it?” Castiel asked, a reckless note in his voice. He spoke thickly against Dean’s throat, tip of his tongue lapping once, “How badly do you want to come, Dean?”

“Wanna,” Dean rasped out, half-blind, body in that cruel stasis between riled-up and exhausted. He squeezed the back of Castiel’s neck. “Please. Cas. Wanna.” He tried touching himself, but Castiel slapped his hand. Dean grinned lazily, retracting his fingers.

“How long can you hold on, I wonder…”

“Plee-he-hease,” Dean begged, eyes tight shut, grinning. “Wanna come so bad, Cas. Gonna lose my mind. Fuck. Fuck, you’re going so slowly—” Indeed, Castiel had slowed his strokes on Dean’s erection to a maddening pace, dragging allll the way up, holding tight to the head as pre-come trickled into Dean’s foreskin, then allll the way down, making Dean’s emissions seep from under the loosened hood – warm, so warm.

Then again.

And again.

Dean tried breathing slowly, matching Castiel’s pace, but Castiel’s kisses went quick on his neck all of a sudden, and Dean started panting, frenzied in no time.

“Cas—” Dean was losing his patience now, and his frustration showed: he frowned, fingers clenching on Castiel’s shoulders.

“All right,” Castiel soothed, kissing Dean’s nose. “Roll over. You can touch yourself now.”

Dean flushed with renewed enthusiasm, struggling to free himself from under Castiel’s body. They were tangled up, and, being large people in a relatively small space, it took some wriggling on both their parts before Dean was finally able to kneel on his hands and knees, legs set apart just enough that he remained on the seat, hand inside his panties.

He jerked off, pulling the hanging weight all the way out of his underwear. His scrotum bounced against the wet fabric, and Dean huffed in exhilaration, head bent down, chin to his chest so he could watch his fist around his cock, jiggling between his legs.

Castiel maneuvered himself to Dean’s side, halfway off the seat. He gave Dean no warning before pulling down his panties and spitting between his ass cheeks. Dean’s skin prickled with shock as Castiel’s tongue met his hole, hot and shivery – oh fuck—

“Cas!” Dean’s eyebrows rose. His dominant hand ceased its movement, forced to use both hands to support his weight. Castiel lapped at Dean’s asshole slowly, teasingly, tongue tip swirling around the wrinkles. Dean screeched, mouth lowering to his fists. “Holy shit… What the fuck, what the fuck—”

Castiel bit Dean’s buttocks, kisses descending the mountains back to his valley, where he blew air against the crater. He did it again, and Dean laughed, tickled by air rushing between tiny hairs. Castiel did it a third time, but this time he pressed his lips down and blew a raspberry. He broke
away to laugh, and Dean guffawed, biting his lip as he started to jack off again. Castiel was still laughing, leaning against the front seats.

“Fuck,” Dean chuckled, eyes watering as he looked up. Snow had covered the windows; thank God, nobody could’ve seen in. A mask of white surrounded the car on all sides, keeping their laughter in a private bubble, their joke ridiculous and hilarious and totally embarrassing.

Dean felt Castiel put giggly little kisses down his neck, his back, gradually making his return to Dean’s ass. Dean slid one bare foot down onto the carpet, spreading his legs some more so Castiel’s tongue had extra space to move. The rim of the captain’s hat bumped Dean when Cas got too close.

This time Castiel licked a long stripe upward, starting from Dean’s perineum, mapping the ridge with the flat of his tongue. So hot. So wet. Again, starting lower. Dean felt his balls tightening, and Castiel no doubt felt it too; his head bobbed under Dean’s thighs, angled so he could lick Dean’s scrotum, tip of his tongue wriggling, squiggling, tickling Dean towards his climax.

Dean breathed Castiel’s name, and grins tumbled across his lips, some left over from his laughter, new ones blooming in his happiness. Castiel put kisses up Dean’s thighs, on Dean’s butt, on the small of his back, in the dips above his ass. Kisses speckled Dean with freckles – maybe Cas was counting existing freckles, maybe he was anointing Dean with more, being the angel that he was. Every kiss was devastating in its sweetness.

“Cas...” Dean bit his lip, his voice corrupting in his pleasure. “Mm. Yeah, like that. Like that.”

Castiel migrated his kisses up to Dean’s shoulders, mouthing over the rapidly-shifting muscles as Dean jacked his hand faster, faster, faster, racing to the finish. His head was full of nothing but stars and twinkling lights and the smell of Cas. Castiel gave groans of encouragement, hands massaging Dean’s shoulders, kisses descending upon him, paired with the scratch of stubble.

“So close,” Dean whimpered, hips rocking into his own hand. He felt Castiel move, arms wrapping all the way around Dean’s waist. Castiel took over from Dean, and Dean’s approaching peak suffered, as he first had to get used to Castiel’s hands before his orgasm started building again.

Soon Dean was crying out for Cas to finish him off, let his climax spill from him at last. Castiel didn’t tease this time; he kept going as Dean whispered, “Don’t stop, don’t stop,” and he granted him a dozen more kisses against his ears, then his neck. A little bite here and there.

Dean’s panting became a cry, shouting as his hands pushed against the car door. Oncoming orgasm lifted through him like a firework, igniting him with pleasure long before the forthcoming burst. Just as he expecting it to arrive, Castiel pushed Dean’s cock sideways, shoving it into the panties again. The fabric strained, pulling at the crease below Dean’s ass. Castiel’s erection pressed to Dean’s buttocks, hands tracing over the satin, keeping Dean on the brink of release.

“Please... pl...ease,” Dean trembled. That firework inside him reversed back down, only to be re-lit, erupting upward once more. Castiel’s thumb and forefinger gripped Dean’s cockhead through the panties, working over the bulge. Dean sobbed helplessly, reaching down to hold Castiel’s hand from behind. “Please.”

“Shh, it’s okay,” Castiel breathed, his voice destroyed by lust. “Come on, you’re almost there.”

Dean rocked back against Castiel’s cock, making him thrust against his already-sensitive hole. Dean’s eyebrows rose as his temperature rose, and finally – finally – he felt the heat escape him, ejaculating straight into the satin. Holy shit. He almost passed out there and then from how
forceful it was, overpowering him in a burst of colours and heat. semen absorbed and spread, seeping back against Dean’s foreskin when there was nowhere else for it to go. Dean grunted, hand clamping around Castiel’s. Castiel hushed him, kissed him, humped against him.

Dean at last felt his climax fading, still sizzling inside him in places. Castiel slipped his hand inside Dean’s panties, touching his ejaculate, smearing it around. Dean shuddered.

After a pause, Castiel took hold of Dean’s cock, and slowly began pulling again. Dean followed along with his hand around Castiel’s fist, as if Castiel was teaching him how to do it. Dean breathed deeply, feeling incredible relief as Castiel helped him squeeze out the last drops of his orgasm.

Their hands were slick now, and the heat of Dean’s fluid was cooling and growing tacky already. Dean’s thighs shook in exhaustion, and was therefore grateful that Castiel helped him lie down on his back, both shifting around until Dean was comfortable.

Castiel smooched Dean’s hands as he held them, gazing down with affection softening every sign of aging on his face. He was at peace, still wearing that silly hat. Dean grinned up tiredly, feeling each blink coming too slow, heavy with fatigue.

“Love you,” Dean uttered, feeling his eyes droop closed.

He had a vague, post-orgasmic awareness that he’d never said that in an intimate context before, and it was kind of important – something tingled in his stomach, maybe anxiety – but Castiel kissed his fingers and nuzzled his inner wrist, and Dean heard him whisper, “I love you too, Dean,” so obviously it had been a welcome confession.

Now kisses appeared on Dean’s heart, Castiel applying more affections even while Dean settled in for a rest. Dean sighed in satisfaction, relaxing with one hand hooked behind Castiel’s neck.

Though Dean didn’t fall asleep, he was close enough to it that he felt the comfort of sleep, like a child travelling home after a long day, dozing in the backseat with his cheek against the safety belt. Dean smiled, enjoying the presence of Castiel atop him, still kissing him.

Castiel barely managed to give Dean’s lips a half-dozen kisses before he situated himself over Dean’s waist, slowly rocking his ass against Dean’s flaccid penis, moaning to himself. Dean felt him vibrating by the force of his masturbation. Cas was probably taking in the sight of Dean close to sleep, rushing with arousal. Maybe he thought it was sexy that Dean wasn’t responding; maybe he just found him cute, with his eyes closed and his sex-swollen lips parted, breathing slowly. Maybe it was all of that and more. It could’ve been anything, but Dean let him enjoy it. If Cas could accept Dean liked to scream in pain and wear pretty things while banging, then Dean could allow Castiel to jack off while he had a nap. Their kinks were just as bizarre as each other. Hey, the
“Dean – ugh, Dean,” Castiel gasped, over and over, voice dipping lower each time. “Mhmm, yeah. Fuck. Dean. OhmmmDean...”

Dean remained supine as Castiel climbed to his peak. The sound of him jacking off filled the car in an obscene kind of way, even louder than the faint sound of the crackling radio that Dean only now realised was still filtering through the speakers.

With only a flash of light as a warning, a dense roll of thunder drowned out all other noise for some time, rumbling under Dean’s back. The sound was dreadful; it could easily have heralded the end of the world. But it was only noise.

Once the thundercrack finally ceased its eerie growling, Castiel moaned, shifting with more force over Dean, either not caring if he woke him, assuming the thunder would’ve woken anyone, or not realising he was moving his hips to fuck his own hand. His breath shuddered, and he gave small cries on each exhale— “Yeah. Auhh. Hmmh.”

Dean heard Castiel smiling, somehow. He heard his name in there too, and Dean did his best to keep from smirking, in case he gave away that he wasn’t really asleep.

Castiel was perhaps seconds from orgasm when he unexpectedly sank down and kissed Dean, smothering his face in affectionate touches, lips and nose, eyelids, cheeks, jaw, and chin, bumping against Dean’s face. Castiel groaned one last time, then sat up, yanked down Dean’s panties and came on him.

Dean’s eyelids fluttered, body rushing with shock and excitement. Castiel had just made the effort to come inside his panties, and now breathed deeply and gruffly as he forced out the final spurt, making sure it smudged onto Dean’s skin. Dean didn’t know what to make of it, especially since Castiel pulled the panties back up afterwards, massaging the mess into the satin.

Castiel gave a sigh of satisfaction after that. He sat back on Dean’s waist, ass over the panties. His torso craned down, and Dean felt both hands cup his face. Now Castiel’s kisses were tender and loving, and soon reached Dean’s mouth: soft, tumbling presses, never breaking contact.

Dean let his eyes open slowly, cross-eyed to see Castiel before his face, eyes comfortably closed. Castiel’s cheeks were an attractive red, one bright inverted triangle on either side on his nose. His eyelashes fanned out, dark as ever. The hat had been lost somewhere. His hair was sweaty and drooped in one bedraggled lock over his forehead, and it trailed over Dean’s face as Castiel pulled back.

“Hello, Dean,” Castiel panted, noticing Dean’s eyes were open. He looked ashamed, but smug. “I came in your panties.”

“Congrats,” Dean said, inhaling deeply, eyes dipping to Castiel’s crotch. “You beautiful freak.” Castiel’s penis rested on Dean’s belly, wet around the tip, still a bit plump. Dean breathed out, smiling.

“We’re snowed in,” Castiel pointed out, observing the white case they’d trapped themselves in. “Guess we’ll have to stay here for a while. What a shame.” He lay down alongside Dean, wrapping him in a long-awaited cuddle. He placed one more kiss on Dean’s lips, and they snuggled up, still gazing into each other’s eyes while Castiel caught his breath. Dean smiled, feeling entirely at ease in Castiel’s arms.
Very faintly, Dean could hear the lyrics to *I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas*. Though it was a day late, it was nonetheless true. Dean and Castiel kissed their way through the song, moving slowly now.

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Now the sun had actually set, visibility outside was down to zero. The snowstorm wasn’t breaking. Even after Dean got out of the car (fully clothed, obviously) to scrape the snow off the windshield, he could make the confident assumption that the highway would have jammed to a halt, since he could barely see two feet in front of him, let alone five feet to see the sparkling rainbow tree.

He got back in the car, took off his snowy clothes, and snuggled up with Cas again in the front seat. If they were going to be stuck here overnight, there was no sense in keeping their distance. Dean distinctly recalled mumbling something like, “If we’re going to huddle for warmth, we might as well make out, right?”

So they’d been casually making out for the past hour. As... friends.

Well, they weren’t fake-engaged any more, were they? Sam and Mary weren’t around, so there was nobody to lie to. Except themselves.

Dean honestly had no idea what their relationship status was. Definitively, if his phone had wi-fi signal, he’d have announced ‘it’s complicated’ on Facebook. And his MatchBook account would be gone already.

Dean didn’t want to think about it for a while. He counted his blessings: they had a car with space to sleep, a fancy cushion to use as a pillow, Castiel’s trenchcoat for a blanket, a trunk full of leftover Christmas food, including the world’s best cranberry sauce. They’d have one more night in this safe harbour, where actions and words wouldn’t be judged quite the same way as they would back home. Everything carried more meaning here, but was somehow easier to express.

Eventually Dean groaned, supple body giving a lazy stretch as he licked his aching lips. The car reeked of sex and snow, and Dean liked the combination. Castiel’s hands were no longer wary of touching Dean; he held onto Dean’s waist as Dean settled back, hands pushing through his own messed-up hair.

“Want to play I-Spy instead?” Castiel asked, smiling.

Dean grinned. “I spy with my little eye, something beginning with ‘S’.”

“Snow.”

“Ahhhh.” Dean squinted one eye, turning his head. “Let me guess, you’ve played this before.”

Castiel laughed easily, flopping his head down against Dean’s shoulder. “My turn. Hmm. I spy with my little eye,” he started, then paused. “Pen and paper.”

Dean snorted into Castiel’s hair. “You’re meant to say the first letter only. I take it back, you never played this before, have you?”

Castiel lifted his head. “No, I—” He smiled, taking the pen and notepad from the car’s dashboard. “I just had an idea.”

“Hangman?”
“No...” Castiel flipped through the first used pages, skipping the notes Dean had made while he’d been trying to chart the car’s fuel consumption for budgeting purposes. Castiel found a blank page, then began chewing his lip in concentration.

“What?” Dean urged.

“Shh,” Castiel said. “It’s a surprise. Go watch the snow.”

“I would if I could see shit past the window,” Dean said, hands spread towards the windshield in exasperation. Even with the wipers on, he only caught a glimpse of coloured lights before they were blocked by a white flurry. He dared not turn the wipers off, in case the screen froze over. He’d been running the engine every so often to keep it warm, but he prayed the car’s battery would hold out until it stopped snowing and they could leave.

Dean folded his arms. Without Cas’ arms around him, being topless wasn’t as comfortable. So Dean reached for his t-shirt and put it on, then buttoned up the fly of his jeans. He still felt tingly, excited by even the thought that he and his penis-owning best bud were comfortable feeling each other up. Dean wondered – hoped – that after tonight, they’d still be the kind of buddies who could sneak into each other’s beds and have sex, then make each other breakfast in the morning. Who could wrestle violently on the floor and suck each other off afterwards. And who’d kiss sometimes, and stay up late to cuddle while watching movies. Dean wanted him and Cas to be the kind of friends who’d be mistaken for a couple whenever they went into coffee shops together, who’d go to baseball games wearing matching shirts and caps, and who’d be given joint Christmas gifts (as well as personal ones, duh). Dean wanted to have pets who were neither ‘mine’, nor ‘his’, only known as the ferret, or our ferret...

Yeah. That was the kind of friendship Dean wanted. The idea made him... happy. He could look forward to the future, if the future would be anything like that.

Dean sucked on his lips, eyes drifting to watch the dark spaces between the snowflakes.

Did he really want to be friends, though? The term ‘friends’ generally precluded the idea that they’d share a sexual relationship, or even a romantic one. Dean had grown up thinking people could be ‘friends’, and then they could be ‘more than friends’. There was a divide between the two concepts. But Cas was Dean’s closest friend. Bela had been ‘more’ than a friend. Yet, in every way, Dean could only view Cas as being ‘more’. He was kinder, greater, sexier, more fun to be around, and by God, he could make Dean the happiest man on Earth sometimes, often when he wasn’t even trying.

Could it be that... maybe friendship was, in itself, the best and highest order someone could award another person? Everything else came secondary. Now Dean couldn’t ever see himself being romantic with someone without being their friend first. Not after Cas.

For that matter, he didn’t see anyone in his future but Cas.

Castiel.

Castiel Winchester.

Damn. That was a good, strong name if Dean ever heard one.

Dean peered over at his friend, a fond smile on his lips, love in his eyes and in his heart. Dean adored Castiel in every way it was possible to adore another person. He was the friend. Sure, Dean had a scattering of other bro-buddies and gal-pals out there in the world, but none so important to
him as Cas.

“Hey... Cas?”

Castiel looked up, meeting Dean’s eyes.


Castiel smiled back, eyes bright and twinkling. “I know,” he said sweetly. “Give me a minute, I think you’ll like this.” He bit the end of the pen, looking down at the notebook again.

Dean frowned, worrying Cas hadn’t understood.

“I’m in love with you,” Dean amended, flushing hot. “Like— Like, I m-might wanna marry you, or something. Someday,”

Castiel gazed at him. “I know,” he said again. “Don’t look so frightened, Dean, it’s okay.”

Dean gulped, quickly looking down at his fidgeting hands. “How come you’re so chilled out? I just— I just spilled my heart out here.” He glanced out the window, searching for comfort in the snow.

Castiel touched Dean’s arm gently. Dean looked back at him. But Castiel just smiled secretively, kissed Dean’s cheek, then returned to his notebook.

After suffering through a moment of disbelief, Dean huffed and looked away again. If Cas was going to be like that, fine. His loss. Dean had practically just proposed and Cas was acting like it wasn’t a big deal. What an asshole.

Now Cas was ripping bits of paper out of the notebook. On top of everything, now he was destroying Dean’s property. Great.

“You know, I was really starting to believe you were the one for me,” Dean said bitterly, glaring at Castiel. “I thought after everything we went through this week, everything we shared, I thought— Dammit, Cas, I thought it meant something. I didn’t realise you were making it all up for Sam and Mom, or – what? – to get some action? I thought there was at least some truth in it. Fuck.” Dean rubbed his forehead with his fingers. “You played me. You really had me going, too.”

“Dean,” Castiel said, first sounding apologetic, then stern: “With all due respect, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“What?”

“What?” Castiel repeated, eyebrows up. His eyes sparkled, kindness and amusement settling on Dean like a weird hug. Castiel sighed affectionately, shaking his head. “Here,” he said, showing Dean his open palm, stacked with a line of rolled-up papers. They looked like miniature cigarettes. Much like the rolls of paper Dean had given Cas for Christmas. A Selection of Promises.

Dean stared blankly.

“Take one!” Castiel said, offering his hand. “Start with the one near my fingertips.”

Gingerly, Dean did as he was told. He pinched the first scroll, with a funny feeling that he was about to have his ass handed to him in the most pleasant way possible.
With his tongue pressed to the roof of his mouth in anticipation, Dean unrolled the first bit of paper.

“*Space to sleep in the bed,*” Dean read quietly. “*Not the couch,*” he added, reading the part that was written in parentheses.

“You don’t have to use it,” Castiel said, shrugging. “It’s like a ticket. Get it punched if you like.”

“Hey, I ain’t turning an offer down,” Dean smiled. “I never wanted to sleep on your couch. That thing’s got a spring coming up right in the middle.”

“Which you promised you’d fix.”

“Which I promised I’d fix,” Dean echoed with a sigh. It was true. He had promised that, about a year ago.

Castiel offered his hand again, and Dean took the second scroll.

“*Cuddles and breakfast in the morning,*” Dean read, breathless. He tried to smile but ended up with trembling lips. He sucked his lower lip underneath his top lip, stomach sailing on a tide of emotion.

“That one would probably follow the last one,” Castiel said.

“Yeah,” Dean uttered. “Yeah, I figured.”

Castiel moved his prostrate hand closer. Dean took the third scroll.

Dean raised his eyebrows. He had to read Castiel’s calligraphy twice to be sure... “*Therapy session plus one?*”

Castiel smiled at his lap. “I thought, maybe if you wanted to sort through some of your problems... it would help if you weren’t alone.”

“You think I need therapy?”

Castiel chuckled. “Dean. Please.”

“That’s your response? ‘Dean, please?’” Dean huffed at him in mild astonishment. “You’re a dick, you know that?”

“Yes.” Castiel moved close to kiss Dean’s cheek. “I want you to be the happiest and healthiest you could possibly be. If that makes me a dick... Hm. Good thing you like dick, no?”

Dean laughed, brushing his hot cheek with his knuckles, looking around, as if to check anyone else had heard that obscenity. Of course, no-one had.

Castiel smugly offered his hand again. Dean took the next two pieces of paper and unrolled them consecutively.

“*Cuddles (infinite uses),” Dean read. “Kisses (infinite uses).*”

Castiel tilted his head. “Again, up to you if you want to use them.”

Dean lowered his eyes, bashful. The butterflies in his tummy were doing backflips.

The next scroll simply read ‘*Sex*.’
“No infinite uses?” Dean asked, showing Castiel the paper.

Castiel lifted a shoulder. “Um. I... I wasn’t sure if...” He averted his eyes, free hand tugging on his mis-buttoned shirt. “This whole Christmas you’ve been adamant that we remain ‘best buds’ after we get home. Personally, I don’t have much of a sex drive. I’m sure your needs would be better satisfied elsewhere.” He fidgeted. “You’ve said you like to see other people. That— That’s a compromise I suppose I’m willing to make. But if you ever want me again, I’m here.”

Dean could see straight off the bat that Castiel wasn’t comfortable with an open relationship, despite what he said aloud. Dean reached over, taking Castiel’s hand, holding tight to his curled fist. “Cas...” Dean wet his lips. “Man, I— I don’t know how to say this, but,” he cleared his throat, “I kinda don’t really wanna be with anyone else. Ever.”

“Oh?” Castiel said. He held Dean’s eyes, reading his expression. Then Castiel said, “Oh.” He sounded sad now. His hand slipped from Dean’s, and his other hand closed around the scrolls of paper Dean hadn’t looked at yet. “That’s okay. It... it doesn’t matter then.”

Dean almost laughed. “Wow. If you and me are ever gonna be together, Cas, first order of business? We gotta fix this communication problem. Both of us, we’re just assuming things and making ourselves miserable. You got it wrong – I meant I don’t wanna be with anyone except you.”

“Well, you should’ve said that then!”

“I thought I did!” Dean chuckled, rolling his eyes. “Christ. What a hellish ride this is going to be.”

Before Castiel dared reply, Dean wrestled the next scroll from between his fingers. “Best friend forever,” Dean read. His heart sank. Quickly he remembered not to assume things, and his eyes rose to Castiel’s, questioning.

Stony-faced, Castiel handed Dean the next scroll without a word. This one was bright pink, which filled Dean with intrigue.

YES, I WANT FREE FERRET!!!!

Dean coughed in surprise. A phone number was printed below the bold text. And below that, Castiel had written in his fancy calligraphic writing: Parenting plus one.

“This one I’m checking right now,” Dean said, handing it back to Castiel. “As soon as Sam calls about the litter box or whatever, you and me, we’re going to get you your weird fur baby. Before then, even. The minute this storm breaks, you call these people and claim your ferret, okay?”

Castiel practically glowed with happiness. “Okay. Two ferrets, though, so they won’t get lonely.”

“Oh.” Dean kissed Castiel’s lips, smiling as he drew back. It made him ecstatic to see Castiel so pleased.

“Okay.” Dean asked, seeing a final scroll in Castiel’s hand. He lifted it from him, and found it was warm and soft from Castiel’s sweat. It smushed a little as Dean unrolled it.

There was a tiny drawing on the paper, two swans on a pond, facing each other. Their bills and breasts were touching, necks curved so their bodies made a heart. Below the drawing, Castiel had written two words.

Marry me?
Dean’s lips parted and his heart began to pound. “Oh.”

Castiel took a breath, then let it fly free. “Aa-a-aall I want foooor Christmaaas, is yoo-o-oou,” he sang, monotone, before smiling awkwardly.

Dean could only grin. Then he laughed, and nodded as he kissed Castiel full on the mouth. “Hell fuckin’ yeah, Cas,” he mumbled, before kissing Castiel deeper, dropping all the scrolls and taking his face in his hands.

Castiel relaxed into Dean’s mouth, one hand reaching to caress his hair, then down to his neck, where it held him secure.

“It doesn’t all have to end once we get home,” Castiel breathed, breaking their kiss with a smile. “Whatever you’re afraid will happen if we’re together, we’ll work through it. We’ll get through it. That’s the point, Dean. That’s the point of a relationship. We support each other, through thick or thin.”

“Mostly thick, though,” Dean joked, taking Castiel’s hand and placing it on his stomach. “If I marry you there’s no chance I’ll ever be thin again. Stress eating is one thing, but happy eating? C’mon. Always. Everything you make tastes too damn good.”

Castiel laughed, kissing Dean’s nose, then his cheek, then his jaw. “All the better for cuddling.”

Dean tipped his head back and laughed again. “You’re obsessed with cuddles. What were you, a cat in a past life?”

“I’m a cat in this life,” Castiel retorted, headbutting Dean, as if to prove it. “Meow.”

“Fuckin’ nerd.”

“I’m your nerd.” Castiel smooched Dean one more time, holding his chin between his thumb and fingers. “And don’t you forget it.”

Dean’s gaze softened in his fondness, and his smile settled on his face like it was never going to leave. “I won’t,” Dean promised. “Not on my watch, Cas.”

And with that, he took Castiel by the waist and hugged him tight, smiling into his shoulder. After all the worrying and the back-and-forth between them, now things were certain. They were best friends. And lovers. And engaged to be married – for real this time. Somehow, all the struggling and lies and confusion made the final result all the sweeter.

This was the best Christmas present Dean could ever have asked for, since Cas was exactly the kind of gift who kept on giving; he was full of kindness and generosity and love. At that exact moment, Dean promised both himself and Cas that whatever Cas gave him, Dean would offer the same in return. He’d provide the same support, the same respect and understanding, the same unyielding passion for Castiel and any of his worldly loves.

Forever and always. Like swan buddies.

Starting tonight, then tomorrow, when they’d drive out of this snow-smothered parking lot and finally make it to their shared home, henceforth until forever, they would think of themselves as Dean and Castiel Winchester.

... * ...

❄

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THE END

(Although forever never really ends, does it?)

Chapter End Notes

Merry Christmas, friends! ♥♥♥ I hope your 2017 is happy and bright! (Or, at the very least, better than your 2016. The bar is pretty low on that one tbh.) Let me know in the comments how your year went, I'd love to know ♥

Now, I've said it once before when I wrote Snow Place Like Home (But My Home Is With You), but♫ aaaaall I want fooooor Christmaaaaas iiis... kuuuudos...~♫ (Ugh, give me one last good, pure thing to appreciate from this dreadful year, please.)

Works inspired by this one

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