PWP: Pie Without Plot

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Summary

he is in the kitchen with flour on his hands and an apron and there is flour on his forehead and cas leans across the counter and wipes it off with his thumb and dean says "thank you" and cas says "you’re welcome" very seriously and later dean makes apple turnovers and he only ruins them a little and sam realizes it’s not a real hunt like four days into it and he lets dean stay undercover for like a week and a half or longer maybe way longer because he is such a good everything

Notes

This is a fic without a plot. This is pie without plot.

On occasion, pie will be served with plot à la mode.

This fic will take place over the span of ??? time and in ??? location and will last ??? chapters and is ??? NOT VERY SERIOUS ????????????? Takes place some time after the end of Season 08.

Please enjoy this Pie Without Plot. This fic will get updated whenever it gets updated. Content warnings for food because long-term exposure could mean you need new pants.
We do not own the rights to these characters, setting, show, etc. No harm is intended.
Dean's pants don't fit.

"Okay," he says to himself, staring in the direction of his own knees. "We're good," he says. "This is fine." This is just a misunderstanding between him and some fabric. This is only a slight delay on Dean's Morning Train to Awesometown. He is going to be eating a cheese bagel fifteen minutes from now and laughing about this. He looks down at the waistband and tugs the zipper, then looks around at the floor, where he found them in the first place. Hey, they could be somebody else's pants: there could very well be an invisible dude that's slightly smaller than Dean, leaving his similar jeans in similar places. Stranger things have happened. Dean mulls over the possibility of an invisible pants bandit, then rejects it. He stands there for a second, boxers hanging out, hands dangling at his sides, and then pulls his jeans back down. He bends over to read the label, but it's too faded. He takes them off and holds them up, like seeing them in better light's going to help. And then he tries all over again, like maybe the first time was a fluke: he slides his legs in one at a time, tugs his jeans up, and pulls on the zipper. Nothing happens. Okay, something humiliating happens: the zipper won't budge. Dean stares at his stomach like his stomach knows something he doesn't, and is being a dick about it.

"What," says Dean, "the actual fuck."
Chapter Summary

A few days in.

Sam's at the corner table again, window at his back and to his left side, warm morning light humming in, sinking into his shoulders. It's the fourth day of this feeling and of sinking his teeth into rich danishes and sipping all day at divine, creamy coffees. He scrolls the front page of BuzzFeed again and then Al Jazeera because it's not like Dean's gonna check when he comes over with a cookie for Sam to try.

And he does. It's peanut butter. And it's fucking melt-in-your-mouth good. And it's 10 in the morning. And he doesn't give a fuck. Is done pretending to give a fuck.

Because this is delicious. So there's no hunt here and he can keep pretending to look for another hunt for a while because. Um. Well. Because.

And Cas looks so content, too, whenever Sam wanders in the back to lean against a counter and watch Cas's wiry fingers work through doughs and scoop dollops of heavy cream on top of luxuriant coffees. He doesn't go back into the kitchen much, though, because he burns himself just leaning against the oven and some dark muttering about him minding the register has started to increase in volume.

So he scrolls & scrolls & scrolls the Internet. He signs up for an Instagram just to start sharing the pastries he's shoving into his mouth and people in the comments are, apparently, "dying."

He tries to leave promptly after lunch. Around 12:30. Or maybe 1. Or maybe 2 because that's actually the hour after the lunch hour. He doesn't feel right stuffing his face for any longer than that. He's already easing into a long-legged sprawl under the table he commonly occupies. If he doesn't do some sit-ups soon, he's going to have to invest in some new jeans (like Dean has, which he doesn't point out that he's noticed for the sake of self-preservation).

The only real problem here is that, at the end of the week, Dean will have perfected his blueberry pie, will likely have finally given into the temptation to poke Castiel's tiny, slightly-expanding belly, and the bakery owner will still be dead with no (legitimate, legally-named, non-fake) next-of-kin to inherit the joint.

Sam gives up on the news. It's all bad anyway. And starts scrolling through his contacts for fabricating a legitimate bill of sale for the property.

Cas stumbles out of the kitchen a minute later, red-faced, laughing harder than Sam has ever seen. "The b-b-b-," and his speech totally collapses as he almost does, onto the floor in hystericis.

Dean comes out of the back, frowning, dumps a bowl of flour and sugar onto Cas's head as he sprawls, gasping for air on the ground. He only laughs harder.

(Sam hears later about how the button on Dean's pants had pinged off the stainless steel counter, ricocheted off the sink, and got stuck in the baguette dough Cas was rolling. Sam gets a surprise
antiquing for his laughter, too.)
three

Chapter Summary

Cas smells like vanilla extract. And Dean smells like almond paste. And Sam's getting to the point he just wears a white tee to the shop every day so he doesn't have to look down at the shameful bursts of powdered sugar dotting his chest.

Not a day goes by that Cas doesn't end up with a flour-dust hand print on each ass cheek. The first time it happened there was the natural, shocked jump. Just a hand smacking down on his left ass cheek and Dean swaggering away casually. Cas looked down and around as best he could and, yeah, Dean had had flour all over his hand and there's the evidence.

The next time was still shocking. An hour later it was a cornstarch spill and Cas knew his eyes went a little wide and he jumped a bit. The next day he jumped less and by the second hand-print he didn't jump at all. Dean is clearly trying to get a rise out of him but when he doesn't just dart off or saunter away, when he dares to make eye contact, Cas just raises an eyebrow reaaaally slowly. And the blush will build up on Dean's face until he shrugs a little and the smile fades to shy and he ducks out of the kitchen to see what the next customer wants.

Wearing white pants won't help. Dean has already proven he can spill an outrageous amount of cinnamon to leave a big, dusty trail down the front of Castiel's white apron. Cas had reciprocated by patting his hand down in the spill and clamping it to the chef's jacket Dean wore.

He left a big, red print. Right on his shoulder.

Dean looked down at it blankly. Then back up to Cas. Cas smiled.

Today Cas knows it's coming so he waits until Dean's up to his elbows in flour. He rounds the counter to place his pies in the oven and comes back around. With one hand, he drops the pot-holder he'd been carrying and, in his periphery, Cas can see the hand arcing out.

He grabs Dean's wrist before it makes contact and yanks him around, slamming him up against the island Cas is working at. "Sorry," Dean laughs, "sorry, sorry, Cas, I won't, I swear I won't!" he holds up the other hand in surrender.

Blank as anything, Cas only yanks him back around and takes hold of his entire right arm. Dean whomps against Cas's back, his nose knocking into the back of Castiel's skull, and Cas drags forward the tray of dough he'd had prepared in front of him. He grips Dean's fingers, pries them apart, and starts pressing Dean's fingers, individually, into each little mound of dough.

Dean protests at first and then he stops struggling and watches Cas work. Cas moves Dean's fingers into a bowl of flour, re-coats them and keeps on poking little dents into each dollop of dough.

It's a big, industrial baking sheet of stainless steel. Each of the cookie dough drops are small so it takes a while. And Dean is the tool. Cas dips his fingers in the flour again. Again. Again. Presses Dean's thumb and fingers in, forming little dough bowls.
Dean hooks his chin over Cas's shoulder and watches their progress. Cas smells like Christmas and Easter and Halloween all combined. Vanilla and chocolate and flaky pastry. He smells sweet.

Dean's left hand finds its way around Castiel's waist. He hooks his thumb in the apron tie that fit around his slim body almost twice. (It was twice last week, at the beginning of this whole thing. Dean has asked him to try everything before it heads out to the counter first. Cas is taste-tester number one. Sam is taste-tester number two. Dean doesn't trust his own judgment. He does trust Cas to tell him when he misjudged the timing. He does trust that when Sam says less sugar, it means more sugar.)

At the end of the tray, Cas kind of brushes Dean's fingers off. Then he pulls them down his chest to dust them off completely.

When he's let go, Dean is quiet and he stands there still at Cas's back as Cas returns to the fruity concoction he was working on before and stirs the lumps out of it. He starts spooning the fruit into the center of each fingerprint. He stops after a few and looks over his shoulder where Dean still stands. Just raises an eyebrow.

Oh.

Dean straightens and backs away and he thinks he hears the front bell chime, yeah, definitely, and he backs out of the kitchen and stands behind the counter, stunned, for a minute. He looks down at his fingers.

He definitely doesn't stuff two of their lop-sided cannolis in his face while he tries to shake off the feel of Castiel's hands around his wrist.
Chapter Summary

Time to go.

Dean comes out of the back and it's Sam. Normally their first customer of the day, but not lately. Lately people have been pouring in. This morning there were even three ladies waiting outside the door before he flipped the lights on. He could've sworn one of them was salivating when he handed over the first white mountain loaf of the day.

Sam waits at the little swinging door because he got banned after drinking all the coffee and not telling anyone the pot was empty. He had made the mistake of showing Dean his Yelp reviews the day before and Sam's coffee pilfering got him half a negative review. (The other half was glowing to say the least, and went like, *something something, the pie crust is as golden as the hair of the handsome young proprietor, something something.*)

"Permission to come aboard?" he asks.

"Donno. Women are bad luck on a ship," Dean says as he pulls the gate open.

Sam has his laptop again. But this time it looks like the jig is up.

Dean bites his tongue before he asks if that's a hunt he's working on. He really doesn't want to know. He really isn't ready to leave yet. He really hasn't perfected his *cheesecake.*

Sam follows into the sweltering kitchen. He generally begins to sweat even before they pass the register. It's a good thing he can't bake for shit or there would be three of them crammed in there, slipping all across the floor in Sam's puddles.

He nods to Cas and sets his laptop down next to a relatively clean space where little liquid sugar squiggles are cooling on a silicone mat.

"Guys," Sam says, voice bubbling over with bummer vibes, "it's time to go."

Dean doesn't say anything. Cas is quiet. After a moment he looks over to Dean and his face falls in sympathy.

Dean wavers for a minute between a bowl he was mixing and the opposite counter. Finally he turns and pulls a hand towel off a stack and methodically brushes each finger clear of a dusting of sugar.

At last, he nods.

Sam and Cas just watch him.

"I mean," Sam says into the quiet, "there's just no hunt here. And it's been fun. But. Uh. We've. We gotta--"

"Yeah. Yeah, I know," Dean says, nodding more firmly now. He starts to untie his apron. "Well. So," he points to the computer. "Where we heading next?"
"Oh." Sam is very still. "Um. I don't. Uh. I don't know?"

Now Dean and Cas are staring at Sam.

"You donno. You," Dean stops. "You were. You just. I."

Cas and Sam stare at Dean again. "I fucking knew it. You hate my pies and my eclairs and--and you think they taste like shit! You've been *humoring* me, you little shit!"

"NO, no-no, no way, Dean it's not that," Sam cuts right through him. "It's not that at all. Everything's great. I mean, the next batch is always better than the last! Cas, you, too! All your stuff is great it's tasty as hell. I mean. I've never eaten this well in my life. It's amazing. You're really good. The both of you. I wasn't lying!"

"Then what?" Dean challenges.

"It's just that. It's just that, you know. This place doesn't actually belong to you. And people are gonna start asking questions."

"People always ask questions! We have paperwork that looks good enough! We've got an information trail. Or we were *supposed to* have one. That *you* maintained. If you weren't looking for hunts and you weren't keeping up with our paperwork, what the fuck *were* you doing, Sam?!"

"No, no. You're not getting me, Dean. Uh. I mean. People are going to be asking. actual. questions. When they show up tomorrow. For. Um. For the interview."

"Interview?" Dean squints at him.

"With. Yeah." Sam sighs expansively, caught out. He slumps. "With the local paper."

"What." Cas finally chimes in.

"Well. See. I mean, you had to have noticed. A lot more people have been coming in lately. And you guys are really a buzz on the Internet."

"On Yelp?" Dean asks.

Sam gives this weird frown of guilt. "Uh. Yes. Yes, on Yelp. And, uh. Well. See. I might have started this account. Um. Called 'samstagrams.' It's. Well. It's on Instagram. And I was taking pictures of all your cakes and pies and breads and stuff. And well. People really like them. Like, they *really* like them. Remember that couple with the weird hair who came in and bought three whole cakes yesterday?"

Dean's quick to defend them. "Cherry chocolate and german chocolate and the third one was a french silk pie, Sammy."

"Yeah," Sam brushes it off. "Yeah, that. Well. They came here all the way from Maine."

Dean and Cas are quiet.

"They *drove here* from Maine," Sam seeks to clarify. "People are becoming obsessed. We, I mean. Guys. We can't have our pictures in the paper--"

"Uh, but clearly we can have them ONLINE," Dean shouts.

"I mean us, Dean. Pictures of us. And it's gonna be you, me, Cas, people are gonna wanna know.
You're already too busy to really man the register yourself. I mean. I'm. I'm gonna have to pitch in."

"Are you offering to work the register," Cas jumps all over that. Cas hates the fucking register.

Sam rolls his eyes. "Yeah. Yeah, I am-- NO. NO. I'm not offering to work the register! Look, guys, we gotta GO. It's been enough of this."

"Who the fuck is gonna be here to interview us?"

Sam shakes his head. "Some food columnist. Uh. Rodger. Rodger Humph- uh. I'm not sure, I have it written down. I took the call yesterday."

"I wonder what cake he'd like best," Dean frowns.

"I donno. I can pull up his Facebo-- LOOK. NO. NO. We're--"

"We need more of the large cookies," Cas motions and makes a circle with his hands as big as his head.

"Yeah, and, uh, what about those little chocolates you wanted to make? And which recipe did you like better for the brownies?" Dean asks Cas.

"GUYS," says Sam.
Chapter Summary

Internal clocks.

They go in at four and they close up at three. Three in the morning is a ridiculous, stupid, insane hour to get up. Dean gets up at three anyway. Worse: He gets up at three and he likes it.

WORSER: He gets up at three, showers, shaves, does completely human things at a monstrous hour, and when he knocks on the motel door next to theirs, Cas is up, performing his own fragile and shifting new human rituals. CAS gets up for this. And he hands Dean his room key because he can never keep track of his own and they climb into the Impala and head down the road to the bakery.

So they open at eight. They close after lunch. Three at the latest. Sam comes in and sticks around for a few hours, usually sometime after 10. Which means he's sleeping in and Dean is jealous but only in a completely showy way that's not at all for real.

They don't open on Saturdays and that's when Dean has attempted to sleep in, for two weeks in a row now.

Each week he has BOLTED AWAKE at opening. Today, the second Saturday, he jolts awake at 4:10 a.m. and he has remind himself he's not going in.

It takes a moment to walk off the shock. He goes into the bathroom, has a sip of tap water, takes a half-committed piss.

Back out in the main room, Sam is a stone, dead asleep in bed. Dean watches the rhythm of his chest and tries to match his breathing. It always used to put him to sleep. Even in the dangerous days when he was too afraid for Sam to want to sleep. Too afraid he'd wake and those matching breaths would be gone.

He pulls in and lets out a deep one and goes back to sit on his bed. He stops. Pulls aside the thin curtain to confirm what he thought he saw: There's an unusual glow reflecting off the car's windshield.

Dean pulls back in, grabs a boot and uses it to prop the door open behind him.

He walks next door and squeezes into the door frame with Cas. He can't wrap up all tight like him, though. (Can't manage to pull his legs that close to his chest, for sure. His belly is kinda in the way these days.) Instead of mirroring him, Dean sprawls out his legs in front of him, leans on his arms behind him.

They watch the trees and scrubby palmettos in the center of the lot sway a little in the night. They
hear night bugs and they hear heat. The a/c frosts their backs and their toes stay warm in front of them.

"I need meats," Cas says.

Dean blinks. "Well. We're on the strip club side of the street. I think the gay dance clubs are on the other side of the highway."

"And cheeses. With, I think, mustard. And. Other things."

Dean puts a hand to his chest. "If you're thinking what I think you're thinking I'm really flattered that you'd bless my breads with bologna."

"When Sam took me to the grocer in Lebanon there was a counter where a man sliced meat and Sam said that was the actual meat. He said that was the real meat and the ones in the yellow packages were made out of corn syrup. I don't want corn meat, I want real meat and I think people would like real meat if we served it on your real bread. And they would sit down in the dining area more often and after they had a sandwich they would have a piece of cake, too."

Dean thinks for a minute.

"I can make corn bread. And that's not like corn meat, that's like actual corn bread and you should try it, it's delicious."

"I think if we put ham on the croissants."

"There you go replacing all my chocolate and almond pastes with pork."

"And the baguettes with turkey and cheeses."

"You're gonna replace my pie fillings with chicken and peas next."

Cas clamps a hand down on his thigh and looks at him square. "I need you to stop being dismissive of my opinions when I tell you that I think your pastries are good, Dean."

Dean wants to have a comeback for that, but doesn't.

"Your... anemic opinion of your own skills -- in many things -- is both skewed and worrying. It concerns me when you say these things. You mean them, but you couch them in a humorous tone so we can hear what you're saying but you think Sam and I can't hear what you're saying."

"Might have to buy you a thesaurus, there, Mister--"

"And then you lash out when this tactic is brought to light. And it's gone beyond the point of covering for your true opinions. It poisons your view of yourself and what you're capable of. It makes you think you have to give up sometimes when you don't. And it hurts me that you would take my compliments and set them aside in favor of your own self-reproach."

Cas removes his hand and looks back away and curls in on himself again, back into the silence.

"Is there not a grocery store open at this hour?" Cas asks after a while.

"Only the Super Wally World. And all their meats are corn meats. We'll get you some real meat later and we can go in and experiment and you can inflic--" Dean swallows his words down. "Sunday we can see what the post-church crowd thinks of them."
"I like Sunday service the best so far," Cas says. It takes Dean a minute to untangle that because if Cas were a different kind of angel -- if Castiel were still an angel, that would mean something different.

Instead, what Dean thinks he's saying, is that, after their day off, Cas is pleased to go back to work on Sunday morning.

At the godless hour of 4 a.m.

To be stuffed in a kitchen with Dean for almost ten hours, sweating and making sweet things.

And that they're both up and in this doorway together because they both came awake at the hour they're normally flipping the lights on.

He wonders what all this is good for. It can't end well, can't possibly.

Things Dean gets attached to just don't end well.

And, in some wild alternate reality in which they file the appropriate (fake) paperwork to maintain ownership and they get an apartment nearby so they can escape this long-term motel dump and they keep living there and working there.

Well, in that fantasy, there's no great big hole where Sam fits right in. And there's the bunker, shut up and cold and containing a wealth of information that hasn't been passed on to the next generations of hunters yet.

Except that maybe that's where Sam, a true Man of Letters, belongs. And this is where--

Dean scrubs a hand down his face and forces a yawn until it becomes a real one.

He should tell Cas they're not gonna bother with cold-cuts because they're gonna give up the gig for a real job soon. He'll just relocate all his experimenting back into the bunker and bake whenever he has time. They'll hunt and he'll work off all this bread weight by running for his fool life and pumping shotguns and getting thrown around by shapeshifters.

Then he remembers how Cas just told him, not three minutes ago, that he doesn't like being lied to.
six

Dean is pulling a tray of potato rolls out of the oven when one of them starts rolling forward and he tips the sheet to balance it back out and over-corrects and almost loses the potholder and tries to keep his grip on it with his other, unprotected hand and FUCK SHIT burns his *whole entire* hand for the effort. He rescues it, slams the tray back into the oven and falls down to the tiled floor with half of the rolls and hisses and grips his wrist, hard, trying to put pressure there so the sting of pain will ebb away.

He curses loud and creatively and that's what draws Cas from the walk-in where he finds Dean in incredible pain with a searingly red right hand.

In a blink, Dean is off the ground and in the same position he'd been in last week: Pressed up against Castiel's back, his arm yanked forward, his wrist gripped tight. Only instead of using him as a tool for fingerprint cookies, Cas is carefully prying Dean's clawed hand open to rinse it over the sink.

Dean's instinctively resistant to the help. He tries to pull away as much as he really, really wants and needs the cool water against his skin. He curls into himself trying to get away from the pain and for fuck's sake. He didn't need to save them. They were fucking rolls. They could have been made again. He knew he should have dropped the whole thing in the same moment he knew he was gonna put his hand on that burning steel anyway.

As the sting of it eases he melts against Cas's back. He closes his eyes and rams his head between Castiel's shoulders, burrows there and breathes through his teeth.

"Sam!" Cas hollers after a minute. It's lunch and there's actually quite a few people out in the dining room, but Sam must have heard the explosion of f-bombs and been standing by the swinging door, at the ready.

He peeks around the corner. "Guys?"

"Is there a first aid kit? Somewhere?"

Dean hears Sam disappear and start digging through shelves in the hall. Cas keeps the water pressure low and steady on Dean's hand.

Dean lifts his head when Sam comes rattling back. The kit is ancient and mostly empty. Sam says he'll be right back and disappears again.

"You held on too long," Cas says.

"I know," Dean says like a moan.

"I can see the pattern of the underside of the sheet," Cas says with interest, tracing a couple fingers lightly.

Dean does moan then. "Please don't tell me that."

Sam comes back with the oozing spike of an aloe plant and some of their good bandages from the car. Even the aspirin in the bakery's first aid kit was expired.

Dean's back at his station an hour later, with Cas acting as his right hand for a while. Things come out slower and they decide to put up a handwritten sign to apologize for closing early.
Before they clean up and leave, though, Cas insists they make a tiny cake for the florist next door who let Sam run in and clip some of her aloe.

Two days later they're filling orders for chocolates to be sent out with bouquets.

Sam has to scramble to devise a joint ordering budget and when the florist shows Sam how many hits her online order form is getting, he almost has an aneurysm.
seven

Chapter Summary

Nature's candy in my hand or a can or a pie.

One morning, early in this misadventure, Dean comes into the kitchen and Cas turns around too fast with a guilty, wet face. Dean blinks about eight times before he connects the shiny smears of peach juice and pulp around Cas's mouth, with the pits in his hands. There is a brief, awkward silence.

"We're out of peaches," Cas says, eventually.

"Oh," says Dean.

"I'm making fruit tarts," says Cas, like this is somehow Dean's problem.

"Sure," says Dean. Cas rolls his eyes like Dean is a block of especially dense wood, and wanders back towards the walk-in, and Dean finally realizes they're going to have to make a grocery run. This is, of course, before they figure out how to deal with suppliers and wholesalers, back before Dean stopped sending Sam to the supermarket twice a day. So Dean grumbles and writes a list and underlines PEACHES?? twice and wonders why the hell Cas couldn't keep his sticky fingers off the fucking stock when he knew, he knew he'd need more. He stewed in that question while he kneads and mixes and ruins a batch of mini baguettes, and then he sits outside on the back stoop and chews sullenly on his shitty baguette and thinks about it some more. Cas comes to stand behind him. Dean turns around finally when the silence grows into a living thing that throbs between them.

"I didn't know," Cas says, after a minute. "Peaches are," he seems to falter for a word, uncharacteristically. "Delicious."

Dean feels like an ogre. An actual under-the-bridge ogre, with a knotted stick that he uses to club villagers.

"You never had a peach before?" he asks. Cas shrugs. "Like, ever?"

"They weren't in the briefing," Cas says, and yeah, there's a hint of a smirk there, Dean can't believe it. This guy who lost control and ate seven peaches this morning is now laughing at Dean and Dean's totally helpful impromptu seminar on So You're Human As Of Tuesday. That was weeks ago-longer, maybe, Dean's sort of forgetting what life was like before he had flour in every crevice- and it was one hundred percent out of the goodness of Dean's heart. And no, it did not cover fruits and vegetables. Dean scowls at Cas.

"Just for that," Dean says, "you can make the grocery run." Cas doesn't argue. But he does come back with peaches, plums, grapes, cantaloupe, and a carton of blueberries he started eating right in the car.

And Dean makes several really funny jokes about fruitarians, which nobody appreciates.
Sam is in the rosemary loaf again. It's one of the few things he doesn't have a decent picture of to post online because it's so fragrant and soft and warm and lovely that he tears right into it every time.

Dean is perfecting his sourdough and he has such a passion for it that he's just not getting frustrated at all. The deceased baker (who isn't haunting the joint) left behind a middling starter. He wasn't that great of a chef. The books hadn't exactly been in the black when he'd kicked. But all the equipment had hummed just fine. They'd burned sage in all the ovens and the proofer, checked all the lines just to be sure. So Dean feels keenly this opportunity to tweak and make things right. He enjoys making pies and experimenting with cakes and tarts but when the glass cases out on the floor are full, he concentrates on his sourdough.

Cas, meanwhile, is neck-deep in EVERYTHING. The sandwiches Dean had agreed to, but when Cas and Sam had ganged up on him about eggs for breakfast or pancakes or soup bread bowls for lunch, Dean thought about it briefly and then said a definitive, "no." He loved coming in to the bakery every day. All he had to do was envision himself making eggs to order, the smell of bacon infiltrating the sweet, fresh pores of a fluffy white bread, a cauldron of soup needing constant stirring and the temperature to be monitored. And he knew he would be working for a profit at that point. He wouldn't be working to make himself happy. He baked at his own pace back here. He didn't want to be running orders to the front.

Castiel was more disappointed than Sam. He liked the lunch sandwiches he'd introduced but he moved on to breakfast rapidly. He introduced and then perfected sticky cinnamon rolls in short order. Then he tried caramel buns. Vanilla rolls. He tried making them with fruit.

He developed a need for breads to toast. He made fluffy sandwich slices, then rye, then raisin bread. Then onto muffins. Blueberry, chocolate chip, double chocolate, then Dean's surprising favorite: Orange cranberry-walnut.

But he'd seem to stick with a theme and then dump it three days or a day later.

Dean thinks he might have come up with another flavor for the muffins but the next tray turns out to be cupcakes, instead. Dean finds a literal to-do list. Every conceivable flavor of cake and every wonky flavor combination of icing on the planet.

When Cas comes back from the front and goes looking for the list to move on to his next batch, Dean presents it. "Tell me you haven't been watching 'Cupcake Wars'."

It's like Crowley all over again. Cas's eyes grow resigned and simply... drift away.

"Not happening. I'm sorry, man, but if we turn into some kind of cupcake boutique, this place will turn into a set of chores really fast. We're not about to out-cake the professionals. Have fun with something else."

He was gonna crumple the list and make sure Cas didn't continue, but he looks so sad Dean can't bring himself to do it. He just hands the list back over and watches Cas fold it and put it in his apron pocket.

Cas stays with breakfast for a while. He asks for help figuring out english muffins and neither of them are happy with the results. Cas pouts but doesn't return to cupcakes. Instead, he turns to art.

He makes a large bread boule and attaches rolls to four sides of it, makes a larger one with a face,
and creates a rather cuddly-looking bread bear.

There's a grandmother who demands to meet the chef after she purchases a second bread bear and Cas gets hugged over the front counter to within an inch of his life. Every other day from then on they set aside a bear for her granddaughter.

Cas folds flaky pastries into elegant little pinwheels and purses, fills them with raspberry and orange jellies.

He folds dough out flat and rolls poppy seeds and other surprises into it so swirls of flavor emerge in each slice.

He twists elegant little knotted rolls with sesame seeds on top. He intricately braids some of Dean's herb breads into thick, beautiful loafs. Then he diligently cleans a space in the kitchen and prays over huge, braided Challah. (The Jewish grandmothers get hold of him next for that one.)

After he crafts some marble loafs, the artsy phase abruptly ends.

For a couple days he just fills orders and assists Dean and packs the glass cases out front. And finally, one day Dean goes to retrieve him from his motel room for their drive to work, and Cas stumbles sleepily to the door. He hadn't woken up at three. He wasn't ready for work. He was still sleeping, he didn't bolt awake, he didn't even look like he wanted to go.

"Cas?" Dean asks the mop of hair in front of his eyes.

Castiel only mumbles.

"Have a shower, dude. Wake up a little more. I'll be back, alright?"

Dean goes and gets coffee at the 7-11 for the first time in forever. Normally they wait until they get in to the bakery to brew their own for the day but he thinks maybe this will pep Cas up. Maybe he had another rough night, one like he had right after the fall.

But caffeine doesn't seem to be fixing it. They blink at an infomercial for a while as they sip. It's too early for the morning news. Dean understands that this isn't Castiel's paradise like it is Dean's. He followed Dean enthusiastically into the kitchen and has stuck to his side, but Dean always wonders if Cas is doing that out of habit or because that's where he wants to be. He doesn't know how to question it, now. It feels like a topic that lays just out of reach. He's made it clear that he's insulted by Dean questioning his professed appreciation. Cas is proud of him and happy for him and is genuinely pleased that Dean is pleased.

But is he finding anything he loves here?

Surely Sam's passion isn't in keeping their books or managing their frighteningly expansive online presence, but at least he seems to be enjoying himself.

Maybe it's time for this to end?

Or maybe if Cas is unhappy, he can learn how to tell Dean like a full grown human adult. All on his own.

He finally leans to the side and bumps Castiel's shoulder. "C'mon, man. Let's go. Time to make the doughnuts."

Cas sits upright. His spine goes straight. And then he looks at Dean strangely.
"Doughnuts?"

Dean rolls his eyes. "It's just a-- it's a phrase. It's from a commercial."

Cas nods, then gets up and retrieves his shoes. They head out.

It turns out that frying dough doesn't agree with Castiel. He finds he is inherently paranoid around hot oil.

The search continues.
Chapter Summary

*shakes fist at Tumblr*

Dean does it twice in a row. The first time he absent-mindedly scoops in four cups of baking soda instead of four cups of flour. Just looking at the two of them, the fine, pristine white of the baking soda in comparison to the fluffy, silky off-white of the flour, you'd be like. Um. HOW? But he did it. He really, really... managed... to do that.

The second time it was salt and sugar. Shit-you-not SALT. And SUGAR.

He officially has a screw loose.

It could be Sam's fault. He has been doing the supply orders and instead of leaving everything in its box or bag or original container, he set up all these samey-looking plastic tubs and made sure the scoops were attached on the outside to meet, like, the maximum standard of the local health code, which, what a dork. Of course he would.

He also filled Dean's sort of off-kilter corner of the kitchen with other bins and stacked the seasonings all in their proper places and has fresh herbs from the lady next door all drying upside down on these strings and things-- So, Dean just moved his stack of hand towels and his favorite knives and all to the center workstation, opposite Cas.

Where the REAL problem exists.

It's not the stupid bins. It's really not. It's the flour under Cas's fingernails, making them whiter. It's the flex of the tendons in his arms as he whips his knife across the top of a line of dough, repeatedly, scoring it. It's the economy of movement, each deliberate reach for materials. When Cas doesn't know what he's doing next, or his mind hasn't caught back up with the following step in the recipe, his hands don't bump across all the available materials. He doesn't pick things up only to put them down again. He pauses, puts his hands down, considers, and then moves again.

The front door dings.

"Not it."

"Cas, that's not how it works. They have to be at the counter first."

Cas ties off the end of a knotted loaf. There's the ding of the bell at the counter and AS IT DINGS Cas repeats, "Not it," because he's got some supernatural sense of when people want him to handle money and he's a little shit who hates washing his hands repeatedly.

On his way out front, Dean grabs one of the other ancient aprons off a peg on the wall. After he's boxed up six different slices of pie for one lady (woman after his own heart), he goes out to the floor and lobs the apron at Sam's head.

"Do something."
"I am doing something."

Usually Dean believes him because lately he's been listing exactly what he was doing. Printing up fake paperwork, comparing prices on chocolate pastilles, ordering shipping labels for the orders next door, blah blah blah blah.

But when your little brother insists he's doing something and can't prove it, you know he's fucking around on Tumblr again.

Dean gets closer under the guise of picking up some napkins from the floor, wiping down a table... and yeah. Sam's on Tumblr.

"Quit showing off," Dean barks unexpectedly in his ear, making him jump. "We've got enough fucking Facebook friends. Put chocolates in boxes or something. Man the goddamn fucking register. You know, ever since you taught Cas the 'not it' game I've handled every dime in that damn thing."

The only other patrons in the store are seemingly used to Dean's outbursts at his brother and continue to sip their coffees and make O-faces over their mint brownies, completely unperturbed. Or maybe they think he's some kind of pie-crust Gordon Ramsay and that culinary genius gets to say 'fuck' a lot. Anyway, he's got the best customers. They never bitch. Unlike some people he knows.

"You said I'm not allowed back there," Sam fires back.

"You've been back there all week fucking up my filing system and making me mix up the salt with the sugar, you dweeb. You can earn back the price of my screwed-up cake mix by, like, I donno, wrapping cookies in plastic and rotating the old tarts out. Do something."

Sam grumbles but he hears him close the laptop and head behind the counter as he walks back into the kitchen.

He walks back into the kitchen.
He walks back in. Into.
He walks. He walks back.

Cas is licking some of Dean's cake batter off of his finger. He's going. He's like, DEEP LICKING his finger and "mmm"-ing and nodding a little. Like. He's. Going down on his finger.

What the. Jesus. What the fuck.

"It was blue," he offers, before turning to wash his hands. "I wanted to see what was different about it."

It's just blue velvet. Dean had done red velvet but Sam showed him on Tumblr yesterday (goddamn that fucking website) that you could make purple velvet and black velvet and blue velvet and everything. He'd just never thought of this.

None of that comes out of his mouth, though, because apparently he's got some sort of problem with Cas sucking his fucking fingers. He could "mmm" and nod a little, himself, just having seen that.

Had Cas ever done that before? Had he ever made that face before or looked nearly so appreciative of any of the confections Dean had asked him to try before he sent them out to the floor? Is he missing something? HAS HE been missing something?

Cas turns, drying his hands, to see Dean still just standing there.
"I apologize. It was the color. It was very unusual. I just had to know."

Slowly, Dean smiles. "Nah," and his voice sounds rough, even to him. "No problem."

Dean finds a recipe for a rum cake. More of the key ingredient goes into him than the cake.
Their patrons are mostly retirees and the elderly. It turns out that they're just very near that kind of neighborhood. People who typically pick up a half-gallon of milk at the corner mart and stop in at the bakery for a single loaf of bread every other day. There are a few incredibly charming old couples who come in every day, at almost exactly the same time, for a coffee and sweet roll or something like that.

The husband always pulling out a chair for his tiny wife. It's more likely to induce diabetic coma than Cas's triple-chocolate muffins.

They don't experiment with all the varied and incredibly sugary offerings in the glass cases but they may draw in their adult children or their small grandchildren with them some days. The key to it all is that the people in the neighborhood were interested when the bakery opened back up. And when they found the coffee and croissants to their liking, they branched out to other items and brought along their friends.

After that, word spread on the Internet. It's never crazy busy, but they've had somewhat of a devoted kind of cult following from day one.

They also already have their first non-customer; a woman who came in for two weeks straight at the beginning of it all, only now she jogs by in her sweats every morning and visibly tries not to slow down to see what's in the cases each day.

Once, she came back as far as the door, as if mesmerized, and then, at the sweet burst of cool air and the scent of fresh bread, she bolted back guiltily from the door and went back to her jog.

There's a Starbucks in a Barnes & Noble nearby, so they don't get a lot of traffic from the textbooks-and-laptop crowd until tourist season kicks into high gear. Then the locals are avoiding the crowded bookstore and searching for something more hidden and precious. And they find the Winchesters.

Well, they find 449 Bakery. Literally the street address and the word "bakery" are what the place was called and they haven't changed it. They also haven't let on who they are, yet. So it's just "the bakery" to them and "449 Bakery" on the bills.

One of the girls with giant headphones and a laptop is addicted to lemon squares. She stays and buys bottled waters so she can sit there for a few hours and she and Sam don't talk about how many lemon squares she purchases separately after an almost visible battle with herself not to. She seems super shy, so they don't actually talk about anything. In fact, Sam counted out her change the first time she paid in cash and she never ever ever paid with anything but a card again, so she could swipe it, grab the plate from him, and turn around and get back to her headphones.

One day, before closing, she walks up and hands Sam a stack of cards without a word. Then she darts out the front door.

Each small card is sturdy, cream cardstock. On the front of each, in a steady, swooping, elegant calligraphy, is the name of an item. She hand-wrote a card for every single item on offer. Sam carefully posts them in the glass cases and in front of the breadbaskets, replacing his and Dean's artless sticky-note and receipt-tape labeling system.

Sam thinks it was pretty awesome of her. Cas thinks it was a lovely gesture. Dean is unexpectedly blown away.
She doesn't reappear for a few days. Dean insists on piling a plate with lemon squares and presenting them to her himself but Sam explains how he thinks there might be a touch of social anxiety involved and he doesn't want to freak her out. So, instead, Sam just waves away her credit card and slides the plate over with a smile. He nods towards the display cabinet and says, "Thanks."

She smiles a little and nods and goes to take her lemon squares and bottled water and--

Dean's hovering in the back hall and waving, grinning like a maniac.

She goes completely red and skitters off back to her laptop as fast as she can, sinking deep behind it. She doesn't stay long. But she does take all her lemon squares with her.

And the next time she comes she leaves **something else**: Two boxes of variety teas.

It takes some seriously gentle coaxing but Sam gets her to come behind the counter and show him how to properly brew some of it.

"My name's Sam, by the way," he prompts as he dries off two mugs.

And she says, "Tracy."

Tracy has this problem with going in the back to fill and heat the kettle. Her problem appears to be Dean.

He hasn't even thrown the heavy sexual innuendo at her yet. Not even a saucy wink as far as Sam can tell. Dean just lights up her face like a firework and her eyes slide away and she focuses on the shine of the kettle the whole time.

Sam does get out of her that she's a university student, home for the summer on break. But not much more than that. She hangs out behind the counter a while and mentions that they ought to have a menu, or something with the prices stated a little more clearly.

"How about this," Sam offers, "You man the counter for a few minutes," he holds up his hands, "I swear. Just a few. And I'll run over to the Office Depot for some posterboard."

She considers this for a moment, then eyes the register.

Sam moves around to her side. "It's simple. This POS is really new." He points to the big buttons on the screen. "Cash, Credit, Debit, and we don't have gift cards so... and no-sale opens the register if you screw up. See? And any amount, it tells you exactly what to get back. If anything else happens," Sam shrugs, "just call Dean out. Or Cas."

"How come you'd trust me with this?" Tracy finally asks.

"You're here every day. Look. Just five minutes. Four! I mean, you're totally right about the menu. And you did an awesome job with all the product labels. But. You know. Only if you wanna. And I mean, we can pay you for it?"

Tracy sighs, straightens, and lifts her head high. Sam gets her an apron and takes off his own so he can run to the opposite end of the shopping center.

Instead of posterboard, Sam gets markers and erasable white boards because he knows how random Cas has been with his creations lately. They've had all sorts of strange things in the refrigerated cases. But he also has Tracy draw up a double-sided sheet, a paper menu, and it's incredible the lovely, steady, small hand she writes it all in.
She comes in at opening the next day and hands it over. She minds the register while Sam makes copies. And two new teas have appeared.

Not only does she get paid generously for the work on the menu -- she keeps the apron.

And they kind of have their first employee.
eleven

There's the story of how Cas asked Sam to order in shredded coconut. And then, when Cas settled in with his recipe for coconut macaroons all memorized and his measuring spoons out and his station cleaned, he went to retrieve the ingredients. He found only one third of one bag of coconut. He found the bag hastily taped and re-taped up, powdery whorled fingerprints all over it.

He left the pantry and went to Dean where he was just taking some cookies out of the oven and he yanked the potholder off his hand and pulled his fingers up to inspect them closely. Not arches or loops but whorls. To the keen eye, at least a four point match right there on the spot.

When Dean finally tugged his hand back, Cas just looked at him.

And made German Chocolate Cake instead because that's all he could do with the dregs of this one remaining bag.

Next time he had Sam order actual coconuts. Sam double-checked. "You want... actual coconuts?"

Cas had squinted over to where Dean was still giving him the side-eye, like he might know what this was about and he might actually be the one guilty...

And Cas nodded back at Sam.

In the interest of freshness, Sam got the most untouched coconuts he could find, the husks still on. They were near enough to the tropics, so he could swing it.

Cas appreciates the effort.

It turns out that Dean does, too.

Instead of snacking on sweetened coconut with chemical preservatives, Dean gets an unexpected show. When the coconuts come in, Cas devotes his day to the renewed effort at the macaroons.

He brings in a machete from the car, cleans all the old particles of vamp blood off with holy water and a good scrub, and chops into each one, removing the green part and leaving the big brown nut. The chopping action is the most violence they've had since taking time off The Job and Dean damn near loses a mix to separation he's so distracted.

Cas's nimble fingers claw into the flesh of the thing until only stringy brown remains. Then comes out the hammer and screwdriver on loan from Marta next door. Cas sits and holds the coconut between his knees and Dean cringes as he seems to recklessly hammer two eyes out of the coconut. He drains it, then lets it bake for a while as he works on the next.

Then comes the cracking. After watching Cas's muscles work and shine with just a hint of sweat at the effort of originally peeling them, Dean is unsurprised that Cas simply sets the coconut down on the steel counter, angles himself just so, and simply hacks down into it like a fucking pro'.

**Blades** he can do.

Dean watches Cas poke holes in another coconut and thinks he would have just shot it.
After Cas has cracked pieces of coconut all laid out, he goes about shredding them with a vegetable peeler, becoming quicker and more efficient at it all the while.

Dean flat-out stops after he puts his stuff in the oven. He just leans back and watches a while. Watches Cas's concentration, his efficiency. When he wanders near and is very, very patient and very, incredibly hands-off, eventually Cas takes another hunk of coconut and rocks a large knife over it to pop off a portion of sweet, white flesh. He hands it over his shoulder wordlessly. Dean takes it. And it's fucking delicious. As long as he is quiet and patient, every so often Cas will pass back a piece of coconut.

They do not order pre-shredded coconut again.
And Dean finds a recipe for coconut cream pie.
And coconut cookies.
And piña colada cake.
Chapter Summary

The customer is not always right.

Sam's not up yet. He's back to sleeping in. So when Dean unlocks the door, as per usual, it's Tracy who sets up her laptop and pens on the counter behind the register. If she plays music on her laptop, she keeps it on low. Just so she can move around behind the cases and hear it. Just so the people sitting at the tables don't have to hear it. It's not like they asked her for a résumé, but she's got her shit together. She clearly knows how to treat customers. She might be quiet, might not have the toothiest smile, but the Winchesters have her there because they like her. Because she likes the bakery and she's been kind to them. And Dean wouldn't put up with big, plastic, corporate smiles or up-selling anyway. Whatever happens, it's all good. If she wanted to turn up the music, he wouldn't mind. Sometimes he's got Zeppelin blaring in the back and sometimes he's serenading Cas himself.

Cas doesn't seem to prefer one over the other.

But he's warmed to Tracy in a big way. Because she brings him tea and she handles that infernal computer with its dirty money. And she'll eat anything with lemon in it. Which gives Cas the idea for his pastry mission-of-the-day: Lemon pound cake.

Dean's experimenting with how to do that fancy patchwork across the tops of pies when they hear something they've never heard before.

Tracy calls for Dean.

Normally she interacts with him at a minimum, goes beet red and they don't know if she finds him completely offensive or she has a crush on him, but in the week she's been behind the counter, she's handled all the issues on the floor herself, or worked with Sam. She has yet to call Dean for help.

Dean pounds the flour off his fingers on his apron and heads up.

The moment the man in front of the counter sees Dean he asks, "What the hell is this?" in this uppity voice that Dean immediately dislikes.

"The hell is what?" Dean asks back.

The man pauses, steps back. "Excuse me?"

Bewildered, Dean just says, "What, dude?"

The guy 'tch'es in the back of his throat. "Dude? Who the hell are you? I wanted a manager."

Dean smirks. "I'm the owner. You don't get much more manager than that."

"Well. Some business you run. Rude to customers. Talking back to customers. And that," he motions at Tracy's set-up behind the counter. "Not even bothering to listen to customers. She might as well be on her cell phone back there. I came up for some service and she was completely rude to me. And then you," he just waves his hand at Dean.
Dean just kind of... looks at him.

"Did you buy something?" Dean finally asks.

The guy blinks. "Well, I didn't exactly get around to it. Your serving girl was kind of IGNORING me?!"

"Alright," Dean throws his hands up. "Okay. So uh. You. Ugh. Dude. I don't even know what your problem is. You think she was rude to you?"

The guy stares at Dean.

"Tracy, what did you say?"

Tracy's not red this time. She's composed and silent until she says, "Nothing."

"Exactly! She ignored me."

"Or she was quiet and you're like the loudest dick on the planet."

"EXCUSE. ME."

"Sure, if you want," Dean waves towards the door. "I don't wanna 'serve' you. Get lost."

The man is silent, quietly building rage up in himself.

"I don't give a shit," Dean cuts him off before the explosion happens. "Never shop here again, never spend money here, blah blah, who gives a fuck."

"Hear, hear," they hear from a table in the dining room, a lone gentleman behind his newspaper with a coffee and a muffin.

"Nobody asked you," the whiner shouts at him.

"Wow. Now you can get the fuck out," Dean says quietly, steadily, with a barely-there, dangerous smile.

Suddenly Cas is flanking Tracy holding the longest serrated bread knife she's ever seen.

"Is there a problem, Dean?" he asks quietly.

And they three just stand there and watch the man back out of the building, tripping over his feet.

Neither Dean nor Cas drop their intense stares until he's into his car and backing out of the lot, so Tracy gets a long look at the both of them and it's clear that that asshole just walked into the wrong bakery.

Dean touches her once, lightly, on the arm. "Good job, Trace," is all he says before disappearing into the back.

Cas waits a moment longer. He puts his hand on her back until she looks him in the eyes. He nods at her, once, gravely. "I have a pound cake you might like. I'm just working on the icing."

And he slips back into the kitchen, too.
Sam pops into the kitchen and asks, "Where'd all the salt go?"

Dean and Cas pause in their respective dough kneading to look up at him.

"In the big salt container that you emptied it out into."

"I mean the salt from the trunk."

Dean gives him a weird look.

"You used it to lay salt lines in the kitchen our first week and then I used the rest when I was--" Cas stops and looks slightly guilty.

Dean snaps his fingers. "The uh. The salted-caramel phase. You know when he made all those cookies with the salt on top," he points at Cas to clarify.

"Oh. Well, then I need that salt container."

"No, no. Take the boxes off the delivery pallet-- wait. Why are you taking salt? Did you find something?" It would happen that way, you know? Like a month or more into it the ghost they showed up for finally comes out of the woodwork.

"Uh. No. No, there's a. Well, there's what's pretty clearly a haunting in the next state over. I was just gonna go run out and take care of it. A day or two. Three max," Sam shrugs like it's no big deal.

"Woah woah. You're not going on a hunt by yourself," Dean crosses his arms, leaving white prints across his black tee.

Sam rolls his eyes and steps into the kitchen. He's layered, he's got the keys to the car he's been using, he's got his bag. He's all ready to go.

And from inside his jacket, he produces a newspaper folded so the Big Red Circle of Suspicion is on the outside. He presents it to Dean.

On a quick read, it really is cut-and-dried. One of those ten-year spirits making a reappearance on the anniversary of their death, playing chicken on a highway until it runs enough people off. Folded into the newspaper are printed sheets of research. Half of it's already done. It really will just be a matter of finding the remains and burning them out.

"Alright," Dean nods. "Well, Cas can hold down the fort. We can be back from this in two days. Not a--"

"Right. Yeah, uh. No, Dean," Sam says firmly.

Dean cocks an eyebrow. "Scuse me?"

"I've got it covered. There's a university nearby the haunting that I want to dig through, too. It'll be a solid day of dusty books and making copies. I can handle the dead guy and you'll only go nuts in the library. I'll be back in three days," Sam sweeps his hand through the air, nice and easy, "I'll call if I get into trouble. I'll call every night. There won't be a problem."

"Sam," Dean says, tensing and gearing up for an argument, but Sam cuts him off again.
"No, Dean. You're fucking *enjoying yourself* here, okay? You know what I need man?"

Dean shrugs, confused.

"I need you to enjoy this for as long as you'll let it last. I need to make copies of obscure lore books for a day and learn some geeky shit that I never knew before. That's what you need and that's what I need and while we're on our fucking vacation--"

-- Dean attempts to deny that but Sam runs over him --

"I'm gonna go do this. Because I know it will make me happy. Sourdough happy," he points at Dean. "Coffee cake happy," he points at Cas whose mission today is conquering the coffee cake.

Sam points at himself, his smile small and easy and genuine. "Happy. I'll be back really soon. I really, really promise."

Dean sighs and squints at him; his instinct is to distrust this.

"What about Cas? Cas can go with you. He could probably use a break fr--"

"Bagels, Dean. I have yet to perfect the crumble on my coffee cake and tomorrow I wanted to start working on bagels. There are so many toppings, I--"

"Cas is fine here," Sam says firmly. "You guys just keep doing what you're doing. Enjoy yourselves. Everything's ordered and paid for up through next Tuesday. The lady next door will come by with the tickets if she's got any online orders to fill. I mean, you even have Tracy here on the register."

"You can't leave that girl here alone!" Dean looks really worried now. "She's terrified of us!"

"Tracy can take care of herself. She's *quiet*, she's not *weak*. And she can handle your punk asses."

With that Sam takes the papers back and pushes past Dean, back into the stockroom.

Dean follows. "You'll call after the dead guy's dead and you'll call when you get to the university and you'll call at breakfast and you'll call after dinner."

"I'll call after the dead guy's dead and I'll call at breakfast and I promise I won't die in between," Sam says with finality. He finds a big blue box of salt and hefts it up into his other arm and starts heading out.

"See you later, Cas," he says as he passes, because he knows Dean's gonna follow him out to the car.

In the parking lot, Dean keeps starting sentences and stopping them. He keeps looking between Sam and the bakery and Sam knows he's more important but he's also been sitting in one spot for a long while. Winchesters weren't built to wander, but they grew a lusty taste for it. Sam feels like he thinks Dean feels when he's burning the Impala between states at 90 miles an hour. He's ready to be somewhere else for a while. And he always wants to know that his fighting instincts are good. He seriously doesn't begrudge Dean the pleasure he's found in running the bakery. Sincerely, he doesn't. He's just happy to see his brother so happy. But Sam hasn't found his own "bakery" yet. He's kind of like Cas in that way. Except he's always gotta taste new knowledge, read all he can on things, to feel like he's enjoying himself. This is Sam's coffee cake right now. Next week maybe finding them an apartment or something will be his sourdough. Or maybe he'll do bagels and he'll try to find them a nice property to set up a bakery in Kansas. He doesn't know. But he has to try.

Dean is looking small beside Sam's stolen car here in the parking lot. He's wrapped up close to
himself, arms still crossed, still looking unhappy and wanting to protest. But only half unhappy. And unable to come up with a protest that doesn't involve leaving the bakery AND saving the lives of the people who could potentially die thanks to this ghost.

After everything's in the car, Sam hands over his motel room key. "I don't wanna end up leaving it in another state. And, you know, so I'll come right by the bakery or the room as soon as I get back into town so I can get the key back and you'll know the exact moment I'm home."

He gives Dean a big manly slap on the shoulder and shakes him a little. "My cell's on. Call, alright? It's not a big deal. I'll be one state over."

One. He holds up one finger, points to the west. One.

The last big huffy breath falls out of Dean and he nods.

"Be careful, Sammy."

"I will," he promises. And gets in the car.
Dean grumbles a lot but doesn't really say anything. After Sam leaves to go on his hunt, Dean makes another gratuitous round of rum cakes. Then he just makes bread and bread and bread. He bakes simple loaves, thick and warm. It's nearly mechanical. He clearly just needs to turn off for a while. Put his hands in something he loves.

Cas is leaving him to it.

He's happy with his coffee cakes after a while. They're lovely, sweet and soft-crunchy, swirly and cinnamon. Yes, he's quite happy with them. But, for once, he knows tweaking and re-flavoring the cake isn't what's going to give him the most pleasure today.

He's really been looking forward to the bagels.

He cuts up the coffee cakes into healthy hunks and brings them up front to the floor.

Tracy is selling to a steady line of customers. The strawberry cheesecake is all out so Cas cleans out the tray and puts the new cakes onto it. He leaves a bright green post-it on the back of the shelf stating "cinnamon coffee cake" so Tracy can draw up a label and add it to the front of the display. Then he actually helps her fill boxes and plates with pastries for a while. He read over the ingredients and directions for bagels earlier and is capable of compiling a list of components, measurements, and steps before he starts anything. He moves the coffee cake process out of his head and starts thinking about poppy seeds, sesame seeds, raisins, blueberries,...

The kettle is empty. Cas wipes the name of the hourly tea off the white board and goes into the back to boil more water. Tracy will thank him for this simple gesture. He doesn't think she feels quite at home back in the kitchen.

Dean doesn't pay him any mind as the kettle boils. His muttering has stopped, but there's a traffic jam of full baking sheets on the surrounding counters. He brings them up front, and follows with the kettle after it whistles.

Tracy picks a rich vanilla tea to go with the new cakes Cas just put out. After she places the label for them, she helps Cas bag the loaves Dean left and occasionally she will stop to smell the bread and smile at him.

She has an appreciation of simple things.

When they're done, she has finally worked herself up to asking, "Do we have any spare olive oil?"

Castiel nods.

"Can I use some?"

She trails him into the storage pantry. They find EVOO and Tracy takes a pepper grinder, a salt grinder. As they pass back through the kitchen, she stops under the fresh hanging herbs and asks Cas which ones are basil and thyme. He plucks some down for her.

Back up front, she makes them a little dish of oil and salt and herbs and they break one of Dean's loaves of bread together. It's very pleasant.

"What kind of bagel do you like?" Cas asks idly.
"Everything," Tracy says.

Cas squints at her in that way he does and she understands Cas, somehow, <i>isn't from around here</i>, so she explains, "I like the ones with all the toppings -- poppy, sesame, salt, rye, onion. I don't mean I like <i>every</i> kind of bagel."

"Right, yes. Everything," Cas likes to convey that he understands that things have multiple meanings, but he honestly slips right through it all the time. English is... English.

"What's yours?" she asks after a while, after she's taken another long inhale of the bread they're pulling apart.

"I don't know yet."

"Okay," Tracy says. "Do we have cream cheese?"

Cas stops chewing. He meets new cheeses every day, it seems like.
Cas went through a couple standard bagels before the end of the day. He made regular bagels and egg bagels and he topped them with common ingredients and was mostly pleased with the outcome. Bagel dough is different. He likes bagels fresh and warm, but Tracy seems to think they ought to be toasted like some of the sandwich breads. He tries that. It's alright.

He hasn't found that one thing about bagels yet that he is excited to taste and accomplish and it's late in the day, so that will have to happen tomorrow. Perhaps, then, Dean will be up for assisting him with bagels.

For now, they clean up the last of what they've made, box up orders for next door, wipe everything down. And Tracy bags up the food donations, the stuff that's about to be too less-than-fresh to sell -- another one of the ideas she brought into the bakery herself. They end up donating a lot, but Dean never was concerned about profits vs. product.

(Then again, according to Sam, if he were concerned about profit, he'd be quite satisfied with their steadily increasing sales, even with Tracy now on payroll.)

Dean is blank of preference or emotion so he sweeps and cleans without a word, on autopilot. Doesn't complain. Doesn't want to hang out after close to stuff his face or create one last pastry experiment.

They drive back to the motel and Dean hands over his key so he can get into his room, then disappears into his own.

Something's wrong. The key Dean gave him isn't opening his room. On a hunch, he goes over to Dean's door and the key opens this one. Dean's key opened his own room fine, so this must be Sam's duplicate.

Cas checks that he's not gonna get shot for barging in and hears the rushing sound of the shower. He supposes he could practice breaking into his own room, but he is tired and wants a shower, too. It would be easier to find his key among Dean's things.

The car keys sit on the dresser. Dean's bags are flopped open in the closet. The detritus of them living here long term is piling up a little. He can't find the clothes Dean wore to work. All the stuff packed into his bag was folded, not rolled, meaning Sam did the wash before he left so Dean wouldn't have to do laundry while he was away.

The clothes must be in the bathroom with Dean. A closed bathroom door means privacy. He knows this.

Even though they don't have as many weapons at hand, since there hasn't been a hunt or any sign of danger nearby, they still haven't let maid service in but once per week. Pouring new salt lines is a waste. So is explaining why they leave fucking piles of salt everywhere in the first place.
Cas cleans up his own room in between service days, though, and clearly the Winchesters don't.

He travels around the room with the wastebasket sweeping up napkins and beer cans. He straightens stacks of books and crushes pizza boxes, takeout containers, and pie boxes from the bakery so they'll fit in the bin.

Sam left his side of things a little more in order than Dean. Dean doesn't treat the bunker like this, but he's used to treating motel rooms like this. "It's already a rat hole," he'd say.

Dean comes out of the bathroom suddenly, in a towel.

"Geeze. What the hell. Thought I heard someone banging around."

"You gave me the wrong key," Cas says.

Dean stands there for a minute, blank. Then shakes himself. "Right. Uh. Right," he ducks back into the bathroom, comes back out with Cas's key in hand. "Sorry about that. Forgot I had all three."

Cas only nods. And he looks at Dean very carefully.

Dean doesn't like the stare. "So, okay," he says, and closes the door in Cas's face (like, nearly on his nose) and Cas can hear the sink start up.

He heads back to his own room and takes a shower. But after that, he gathers his bags and heads to the front office and hands in his key, closes out his bill.

Then he uses Sam's key to get into Dean's room again.

"The hell," Dean says over the television, pulling on his socks.

"We don't need the extra room for three days," Cas points out and drops his things on Sam's bed.

"What, I can't have my own room for even a little while? You've been on your own the whole time we've been here."

"You have several fraudulent accounts to draw from. I'm trying to build actual credit," Cas says. "These rooms are expensive after so long. You won't be using this bed for three days. I'll use it."

Dean isn't happy. He's bothered and worried and a bunch of other things. And they have been here for a really long time. And Cas has been working the same as him and Sam, only Cas could use an actual paycheck. He's building a real identity while he can.

Dean's already taken them off the hunt, kept them away from home. They've been here at the bakery, so he hasn't allowed them either: Not a steady life in their house, not the old life on the road.

Maybe he should start detaching them from all this.

Dean eases back to lean on the bed and watch television. He sometimes can't find the most comfortable way to sit. This fucking bread gut, man.

Cas sits back on the other bed and opens a book and kinda sags back against the headboard. He hasn't gained as much as Dean, but he's got a belly on him, he's no longer in fighting shape, either.

"Hey," Dean says, and turns off the television. "When's the last time you, you know, sparred or anything? I can't even remember."
All Cas can recall was when he first turned up at the bunker after the fall. They gave him a little time to recover and then tested how useful he'd be on a hunt. His swordplay was unmatched, even in this breakable body. All he'd needed was a little more firearms training and they were good to keep hunting. Practice wasn't ever really required when they were running for their lives every day.

Cas only shakes his head, so Dean hops up and starts digging through his bag for running shoes and sweats. He smacks Cas's foot in passing. "C'mon. Let's go for a run. We're in shitty shape."

"I just showered," Cas likes being clean. "And we spent all day, in a room full of ovens, on our feet."

"You can shower again. Nothing like it after a good run. Come on. We're gonna work out. Can't have any monsters sneaking up on us, even if we're just makin' cakes. Right? And we'll be really exhausted after. You'll fall right asleep. You'll feel great in the morning."

"You'll feel great in the morning," Cas grumbles. From what he's experienced of sweat, he sees no reason to go out and make it happen intentionally. But Dean needs more distracting. He wants to do this, he wants to think about something other than Sam not being there. Cas can help his friend with this.

So they jog. Cas quickly learns his body is quite familiar with the form and pace of it. And the exertion does feel good. He can imagine that the shower, afterward, will be even better.

Dean needs to pause several more times than Cas does. Once, when they stop, Cas has to remove his shirt. He heat he can work with, the humidity is tougher. Dean looks like he would prefer to run without a shirt as well, but doesn't remove it.

It is, however, the first thing he does back in the motel room, catching his breath and cooling down.

"You're gonna get burnt from that," he points at the reddening already spreading across Castiel's shoulders.

Cas shrugs. He's a little less fair than Dean. And Cas still doesn't feel things as close to the skin.

"Aw, big man," Dean mocks. "Doesn't give a shit," He paces closer and kind of shoves Cas. Then puts his fists up, starts moving back and forth. "C'mon. Let's see how much you've really got in ya," he challenges.

Cas is very, veery unimpressed. Dean swings at him lightly and Cas just slaps the fist to the left, shoves into Dean's side, swings him around, kicks out his feet, and brings Dean down to the carpet in a headlock.

"Wow, okay," Dean gasps. "Guess I am outta practice."

Cas lets go. Because this isn't supposed to be about making Dean feel like shit any more than he already does.

"This is your room," Cas says. "You should have the shower first."

Dean catches his breath, nods. Then sweeps Cas's feet out from under him, pins him, bends his arm up tight and promptly loses his advantage when Cas tucks in, gets back to his knees and slams Dean down backwards with all the force in his own spine. He flips over Dean and has him kissing the carpet in one more blink.

The only injury Cas really sustains is from hitting his wrist on the nearest bedframe. Dean is held
down tight and coughing carpet fuzz.

"Okay. Uncle. For realsies," Dean says, muffled.

"Uh huh," Cas says, feeling every twitch in Dean's muscles, all the built-up resistance.

"Seriously. Lemme up."

Cas doesn't say anything. Rather, he nails his knee into Dean's back and holds him down tighter.

"You'll help me with my bagels tomorrow," Cas demands.


"When Sam calls later, you won't be bitchy about it. You'll thank him for calling to let you know he's okay and you'll believe him."

Dean stays quiet, then grunts and tries to throw Cas off balance. But Cas has spectacular balance.

Cas leans further down and gathers a handful of Dean's hair. He doesn't tug. He runs his hand through it until it's matted in a different direction. He does this until he can feel Dean calm down, until he doesn't feel Dean's heart pounding under his knee.

"Sam and I," Cas exhales and the breath washes over the back of Dean's neck, spiking his pulse for a second. "Sam and I want you to be happy. Sam wasn't asking you to feel guilty about not being elsewhere, about not doing and being something else while you've been baking. Sam wanted to go read books. He's still finding his sourdough. He said that."

"Yeah I get it," Dean grits out, angry. His shoulder makes an effort to force release. Cas stays where he is.

"And if what you want more than other things is to be in your bakery, we like that. We aren't lying to you. We wish to see you happy."

When Cas unexpectedly gets up, everything in Dean jolts, a coiled spring letting off at the wrong angle. He flops back on the floor and watches Cas walk away from him, disappear around the bed.

The shower he takes somehow isn't nearly as hot as those bands of sun-warmed skin, Cas's forearms at his back.
Waking up with Cas in the room is different.

Dean's kind of unprepared for the amber curve of Cas's bare shoulders in the low lamp light. The different depth of tone he brings to the room from what Sam normally does. Years now in these little rooms with Sam changing the height of everything around him and bringing this kind of lightness. Not that Cas can't be bright and happy and shit. He's just not that by default.

(Or energetic and lithe like Lisa. Or bright and close like the stillness of his room back in the bunker. Or big as half the planet and dark and still like his father.)

Waking up across the room from Cas is just different.

Instead of yawning and stretching to wake, like Dean does, he stays there in the same position, just blinking for a while and then.

Then he.

He does this thing.

His nose scrunches up and he rubs his face in his pillow and squeezes his eyes and blinks back up. Quiet all the while. Then pulls the covers back up over his head and hides for another minute before rolling out of the opposite side of the bed.

Dean finds he's got this soft little smile on his face that he really can't help.

Cas's whole *everything* is just different. Not bad. Good, but different.

Brings a whole different flavor to the experience.

Dean watches him collect his things and when Cas pauses to consider the whole situation where there's two of them sharing one bathroom, Dean just sits there and waves until he catches Castiel's attention.

"Go ahead first," he says, and sweeps a hand graciously towards the door.

Cas nods and goes to shut himself up to get clean and dressed.

Dean checks his phone. No new texts from Sam. After they'd hung up last night, Sam had e-mailed the address of the motel he picked out. And Dean just has to be happy enough knowing that much.

He is. He's fine. Sam's a big (big big big big) boy. And it's one ghost and a library run. Smart money's on Sam tracking down the ghost by sunrise so he can spend the next two whole days in the stacks breathing in the heady perfume of binding glue and dedicated silence.

Meanwhile, Dean has a bakery of his own. He has a BAKERY. He gets to hop in his car and go fold dough through his fingers and smell it rise and taste it, essential and rich and perfect, warm right out of the oven. He'll snag one of those coffee cakes he saw only in passing yesterday. He'll have a cup'a mud with it. Spend a little while trying to convince Cas to make dessert bagels just to see what he comes up with. And when Tracy gets in he'll ask if typefaces are her main thing or if she can draw up some kind of logo they can get printed on the pie boxes.
And he thinks **pie**. Key lime maybe today, because key lime has its critics and people are most opinionated about it, about what it should look like, how strong it should be, whether it looks right when it's green or not.

He'll see what he can do.

Dean still feels worn and fresh from yesterday. The exercise did him good and the shower after it.

And, in between, the sudden stretches. The shocks sent through his body at getting thrown around by Cas, like he no longer expected from him since he went mortal.

The aches feel alright. They feel like they ought to be there.

So as soon as he simply brushes his teeth, they hit the road.

The bagels are the sudden and unexpected hit of the morning. A guy comes in for a coffee and a muffin before work, but tries one of Cas's marbled bagels instead and he makes such noises from his table, Tracy actually goes around the counter to check on him.

He takes a box of all they've got fresh from that morning to bring into the office with him. And Dean spends the rest of the day bouncing between the phone and his pies either giving directions to the bakery or having Tracy package and set aside orders.

Until she steps in front of the phone at about the twentieth ring. Dean gives her a look like, *you sure?* And her chin ticks up. If she's faking confidence, she does it well. She handles the orders from there on out.

Dean fits in a lemon meringue for her before he fusses further with the key lime pies.

Cas makes small batches of each unique pastry or flavor he runs through. He just tests and tests until one makes him happy and he either makes a ton of them, or he quits and moves on to the next thing. He's wrapping up the attempt at a cinnamon sugar bagel (he doesn't quite like it) and finally asks, "Are there any I missed?"

"Donno. Think you covered the basics. Except, I donno. Did you try cheese yet?"

"We have cream cheese at the front, Tracy already told me about that."

"No, no. I mean have you tried making a cheese bagel? You know, with like, asiago. It's good. Especially because the cheese tends to get all crusty at the edges. Man. It's awesome. Try cheese bagels."

So Cas does. They have a small variety of cheeses for the lunch sandwiches and he finds some cheddar and asiago among them. Cas ends up liking the savory bagels much more than the sweet.

But there's nothing really gripping about any of the bagel flavors. Just like every pastry that came before them. So he spends the last hour of the day trying to help Dean catch up with orders and fill the front case.

One of their enthusiastic callers from this morning shows up around close and asks from whence these baked miracles came from. Tracy calls Cas up as the lady's stuffing one of the cheese bagels in her mouth between actual moans.

She wipes off her hand and extends it. "Sorry," she says after a mouthful. "Just, from what I've tried here so far! And everything! God. Everything looks delicious. You manage all this yourself?"
"No," Cas says and motions towards the back. "There's two of us. I'm... pleased you like everything."

"UGH. Everything," she laughs, "I'm about to take home one of each of everything in this case," she points towards cookies. "But this," she holds up the remains of her bagel, "this I need like air for breakfast tomorrow."

"Well, popular items stay on the menu. So, if you come in to," he shrugs, "inhale your choice of bagel every day, we'll try to have them available."

"Yes. Yes. I can do that. By the by," she motions with the bagel again, keeps trying to put it in her mouth but seems to remember that she's talking, "these put me in mind of a spectacular focaccia our grocery store used to carry but they haven't in ages. Any chance of something like that popping up on the menu here?" She gives in to the urge to eat up the rest of the bread in her hand so Cas has to wait for her to chew again before she can answer his question.

"Focaccia? This is a... um. Could you tell me about it?"

She can. With an excess of superlatives.
seventeen

Chapter Summary

(Oh, no, it's more PLOT. How did that happen?!)

Sam calls while they're locking up to say he burnt the bones and he'll be holed up in the university library until they kick him out. Since Dean and Cas go to bed early to wake up early, he's bidding them goodnight and assuring Dean that he's fine. That's he's just doing his thing.

After talking shop about the sudden rush of orders today, Dean lets him hang up easily. He seems to be alright with everything. He gains a certain degree of lightness now that he knows Sam faced down the bad guy without needing help.

They stop at a grocery store to pick up a few of the individual ingredients they didn't get on their last order. Cas goes kind of crazy in the dairy case with all the cheeses and Dean has to reel him in. Then he goes after the fucking sandwich toppings again and he wants peppers and olives and shit and Dean reminds him they'll have too much if he completely fills the damn cart. It won't all fit in the motel fridge because Cas got rid of the other room.

"Then we can drop it back off in the walk-in," Cas says, and takes back the jalapeños Dean made him put down.

"You gonna pay for all of this, Cas? I thought you maxed out your card on the motel room," he challenges.

"I didn't max it out. I have some money left."

"But lemme guess, not enough for all this?"

Cas squints and shakes his head. But doesn't deny it.

Dean eyes him and yanks the baggie of peppers back out of the cart. Cas mad-dogs him right back, because he's basically a professional at it.

Then his head dips. His shoulders fall. He dumps some of the cheeses off in the nearest cooler and he pushes up towards the front of the store.

Dean slumps, watching him go.

"Goddamnit."

He keeps the peppers. He grabs some others. Picks the cheeses back up. The olives. And the spinach and things that they never got around to bickering over.

Thankfully nobody's in line behind Cas yet, so he's not skipping over them like a dick.

He comes up beside and dumps the extra armful of stuff on the conveyor belt. Cas almost has to run after the jar of sun-dried tomatoes as it topples and rolls opposite the moving belt. When he corrects everything he looks back up at Dean with his stupid little confused-sad face.
"I know you've got a zillion things you can do, but you've made a lot of things people like, Cas. We've already gotta put in a lot of work to keep all those random samplings of stuff in there for the regulars and it's just that you keep adding different shit every day. The menu's getting a little unmanageable. Like Cheesecake Factory unmanageable."

Cas frowns. "I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry. Don't. Just. You also can't run through every food in the world. It's a bakery, Cas. I donno what all this is about, but, like I said, I don't wanna start doing soups, salads, dinner and shit. This whole situation is kinda outta control as it is. Let's just keep it mostly bread-based, okay?"

Cas nods.

They're waiting behind some kind of fucked-up coupon situation and Castiel isn't letting the tension ease at all. When Dean snaps at Cas, Cas tends to carry it until he feels like he's made up for it or Dean is only gonna get more mad at him.

Dean doesn't want to put everything back in the cart to find another line, so he just accepts the cashier's apology and they keep waiting.

He stares at the gum, the M&Ms, and the tabloids for a while. Then he's just kind of staring down at the tension in Cas's neck. He crosses his arms, stands there and shifts while he remembers yesterday, after their run, when Cas had his fingers scrubbing all rough through Dean's hair, one stroke at a time.

Cas falls to a lean against the cash wrap and doesn't move when Dean eases into his space. He jolts when Dean's fingers contact the back of his neck, but then his eyes close and his chin meets his chest, exposing the whole length of his neck. Dean thumbs the muscles there for half a minute until the manager comes up to the end of the register and fixes whatever the hold-up was.

While Cas is still sagging there, blinking back to his surroundings, Dean has already pulled out his wallet and is hauling the bags back into the cart as they're filled.

The great thing about it is that it's shaken the cautious wariness right out of Cas. Instead of spending the rest of the day trying not to annoy each other, everything gets reset. Cas asks questions about humans, like he sometimes needs to. Today, he wonders what people learn in grade school. Through Dean's explanations, he doesn't think they learn anything especially important. Books exist, after all, and he somehow expected that humans spent their time in class learning interpersonal skills rather than established facts. It makes more sense to him that people should learn how to communicate through body language, implication, and TV show references, like Dean does, than that every child should be required to memorize the nuances of physics. He doesn't think school teaches the right things. But it's a comfort to know that, even with his social ineptitude, he didn't miss anything by not having gone.

Dean ends up just shaking his head because he kind of thinks that one went wild on him and he has no idea how to explain to Cas what school really is.

"Most of life doesn't consist of those things," Cas goes on. "The specific angles of geometry? The anatomy of frogs? Look at your life, instead. Strength of character, loyalty and devotion, the parsing out of right and wrong, the dissemination and limits of love. Cooking. Driving. Taking off your socks before you get in a swimming pool. Those seem like things people ought to be taught. Most of the deeper academic readings of the books Sam was assigned in school are severely handicapped in their credibility by the fact that the authors weren't actually trying to convey that much underlying meaning. Most of them were just drunk."
Dean can't really argue with that.

They jog again, and when they get back, they haul out and clean all the guns. Cas is getting more practiced at it.

They brought buns back with them when they dropped off the groceries at the bakery. Dean makes them burgers in the kitchenette.

Cas powers through nearly two burgers with everything on them, but stops just before the last bite.

"They ought to teach you how to not eat until you're in pain."

"That's not gonna happen," Dean says. "They're too busy raising kids fat so they can sell 'em diet pills. Don't throw up on your bed," he warns.

Cas shakes his head and falls to lay back, instead, hand rubbing over his stomach.

Dean gets up to dump his plate in the sink. He asks Cas to bring his over, too, but gets no response. When he glances back, he sees that he's passed out already, plate still perched on the corner of the bed, hand rising and falling steadily over his belly.

Dean grumbles, but goes to grab the plate himself. When he returns to turn off the lamp on Cas's side of the room, he pauses, and finally gives in again.

His fingers touch down lightly and this time they run through Cas's hair, spike it up and messy it in slow, light claws and cards.

Cas turns his head into the hand and Dean backs off, goes to settle down for bed himself.

He checks his phone. Sends a text to Sam, telling the nerd not to forget to sleep. Sets the alarm.

The room smells more like the bakery since Cas moved into it. They both have ingredients pounded into their very fingerprints by now. The dust of flours and sugars in their clothes. Dean had what felt like a shoe full of sand the other day and, of course, it had turned out to be brown sugar. He's always slapping ghostly palm prints onto Cas throughout the day. Cas is always enthusiastically whipping through some fruit concoction or other. Spots of it will fly out and cling to his arms and he won't notice he's sticky until he leans against the fridge at home or his bedsheets stick to his elbow.

It's awesome. It really is.

The fucking facts are that he knows where Sam is, even if he's a ways away right now. He has access to all the pie he could possibly eat. And when he wakes up at 3 a.m. to go to work, his best friend is gonna be beside him. They're gonna feed people. They're gonna share the center workstation and Cas is gonna make lovely-smelling pastries and ask him funny questions. He's gonna shove some new piecrust in Cas's face until he leans forward to mouth it off the fork. And, apparently, Cas is down for casual, stress-abating, intimate touches.

While Dean's the one who isn't completely ready for the reality of all of that, the idea that it's available is setting off shivers in his gut. It's all right there, at the beginning of every day. It's happening right now and it's all good. If his life had never spiraled into the wars between religions and their subjects, this is the kind of life that might have landed in Dean's lap once upon a time. And if it had, he wouldn't have been feeling guilt over not tracking down monsters, not seeking people to save. This would have been good enough.

He's made peace with the fact that this won't last forever. Because that wasn't his life to begin with.
And maybe he'll never be able to shut out all the hellfire and heavenly manipulation that came before.

So, can he at least let himself live in every inch of this joy until it drops out from under him?

He looks at Cas and he really wants to.
He turns off the lamp, and in the dark he's still Dean Winchester.

The grip of the pistol under his pillow and the fact that Cas's hair smelled like cinnamon raisin doesn't have to be mutually exclusive. It's dangerous that they're both these things at the same time, paying the bills on the bakery and keeping fresh devils traps under the ergonomic floor mats in the kitchen. But it's what they've got.
There's the story of how Marta is the only florist who sends everything except chocolates out with her bouquets.

They'd tried, they really had, but melting and reforming chocolate and just making it pretty had not interested Dean all that much. He tried it, they both did. And after an entire afternoon of gourmet chocolate crafting, Sam hadn't shown up at all the next day. The smell of chlorine in the motel that night said he spent the whole day at a gym and disappeared to go eat salad while Dean and Cas ordered Chinese in.

So Dean had filled the first few orders and then drew the line. He requested that online orders be limited to their wide selection of tarts and cookies. They were still entirely portable, would melt less than plain chocolates, would hold up upon delivery, and they could be just as sinful, gooey, and delicious.

Cas didn't stop, though. And Dean left him to it. Chocolate-tux strawberries ended up in the front case for a few days. Chocolate truffles, rich and cocoa-dusted. Big, cracked hunks of toffee. Then Cas learned about Ferrero Rocher and covered hazelnuts in chocolate and experimented with Nutella.

Later that evening, when they were back at the motel, Sam and Dean became aware of the sound of plumbing over the television, as if a toilet were continuously flushing or a pipe broke.

Dean muted the tv.

Sam squinted off to the side and then got up to take a peek in their bathroom. It wasn't their sink or anything. Sam came back into the room, ready to rock-paper-scissors over who was gonna go check to see if Cas had backed up his toilet.

Dean rolled his eyes and waved him off. "Fuck it. I'll go. I know how you get the vapors around a plunger."

He not only knocked but shouted through the door until Cas came up to open it, red-faced, hunched over, and miserable.

"Dude," Dean said cautiously. "What happened?"

Cas only weaved back towards the bathroom and heaved.

It wasn't yesterday's Chinese or Dean would have been puking, too. And as far as he knew, he'd checked everything Cas had produced that day. (Okay, he KNEW he'd tried all the chocolates Cas had. Sam, too, despite his whining and his girlish figure.)

Dean called Sam over to Cas's room for a consult. Sam kept quiet, searching for product recalls out of their order numbers until he stopped suddenly and excused himself back outside. He didn't have
the number for Jimmy Novak's wife, so he called the only mom he really knew.

Jody Mills.

She confirmed what Sam's Googling had lead him to. She'd seen the same thing happen to her kid when he ate peanuts.

They doped Cas up with Benadryls to confirm and when the red receded and the puking stopped, they had their culprit.

Cas had a hazelnut intolerance.

He was, of course, automatically turned off chocolatiering after that. And they made sure to remain a hazelnut-free bakery.

When Tracy eventually recommended they branch out a little and carry flavorings for their coffee, you know, vanilla, mocha, hazelnut, caramel--

Cas had shuddered and cast a haunted look at Dean. Then sort of wafted away into the back.

"Yeah, sorry, Trace, but no," Dean said.

She was confused until a couple days later when Sam -- big, sweet, soft, doofy, Sam -- spent ten minutes on the phone chewing out one of their suppliers for sending them pecans without labeling for cross-contamination and allergen information. After he'd calmed down, Cas came out with a tray of Madeleines and Sam almost automatically shoved one in his mouth and told Cas how good they were.

Cas looked at Sam strangely, but Tracy wasn't fooled.
There's the story about the hunt that brought them here.

Dean actually caught wind of the case in late April, just as he was getting fed up with the cold. He was looking for signs of haunting or possession specifically in the south because he wasn't willing to wait for the summer to come to them.

So he finds that there's a not-new-but-new-ish shopping center where weird shit keeps happening and the events are starting to creep out into the surrounding suburbs.

"Flipped over? Like completely over?"

Dean holds a hand up in the air and takes Sam's cell phone off the table. He 'drives' it across the curves of the book that's open in front of him and says, "meep meep."

Then he pauses Sam's cell phone and backs it up between the spine of a book and a pencil like he's parking the car. Then he simply flips the cell phone over into the next 'parking space.'

"Like, flipped over," Dean confirms.

Sam sits back and appreciates the destruction of it.

"How many?" he asks.

"Seven in the shopping center parking lot. There have been two other cars flipped by they-donno-what in the neighborhoods near by. What's your first guess?"

Sam sighs. "Haunting. Something doesn't want these people parking there. Maybe the shopping center is an old burial ground? You know, some people don't like to be parked on top of."

"CAS!" Dean shouts suddenly, making Sam jump.

"I'm right here," Cas says from the floor behind one of the plush leather chairs, making Dean jump. Cas has an unsettling habit of sitting on the floor to read books next to places where you're actually supposed to sit.

"Right. Right, I knew that. Get up here."

He hands Cas the article and Sam slides over his laptop. "Find out if anybody's kicked it in that town recently. Or otherwise."

Sam sits by to assist Cas with the research but they like to have Cas take the lead with it as much as possible. Mostly Sam just helps Cas phrase search queries. They are basically training him in the mundanity of searching for hunts to prove to him that he isn't just a tool of destruction. He's really a part of the team.
Cas finds that there is a controversy surrounding the actual boundaries of a Civil War-era cemetery but it doesn't seem like it's close enough to matter.

"But the car-flippings are spreading out," Sam reminds him. Dean hands over the printouts of the police reports and they plot out where the car-flippings occurred. They creep in the direction of the old cemetery.

"Wouldn't that be backwards, though?" Cas asks. "Wouldn't they have started nearer the cemetery and headed towards the shopping center?"

Sam starts to agree and Dean starts to object, then Sam deliberately turns to Cas and says, "This is the part where we ignore Dean because he has a deep, dark desire to watch lesser cars get Truckzillaed."

And so they pointedly ignore Dean and talk over every word he says while they continue their research.

Dean gets disgusted and goes to pack a bag anyway, 'cause one way or another, they're heading south, out of the cold.

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Sam and Cas find a few local deaths that interest them, including one particularly vicious crash in which the driver of one car was suspected of having died on impact while the other survived the vehicle flipping over the median and into oncoming traffic.

The accident occurred in the middle of the scatter of points on the map.

So, off they go.

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It occurs to Dean as they cross the state border. "Woah, wait."

Sam looks over.

"I can't take Baby there. What if she gets flipped? I mean, holy shit, it was a complete bitch trying to punch the roof back out whe-- when, last time. Uh. You know." He pointedly tries not to eye Cas in the rear-view.

Sam gets the point. "Alright. So, we stop in a couple towns, pick up another car, drop her off--"

"NO. No. Uh. The next town over. That outta be good enough right?"

Sam shrugs. "I'm not the one who always ends up fixing her."

They stop a few towns before they reach their destination. Sam picks out a car and covers Cas while he talks him through breaking in and starting it. It's raining and Cas is a little fumbly, works on it too slowly, but they manage to get in and meet Dean at a storage lot where he buys a parking space for a week.

As soon as they get into town, the buzz is about another one of those "damn pranks" and they've got another car-flipping to add to their map.

The locals seem to be under the impression that it's some kind of next-level cow tipping going on. The Winchesters, however, find the link between the victims rather quickly.
"449 Bakery. Here it is. So the guy owned it himself, no wife, no kids. I guess they're trying to decide who it goes to. The woman next door owns and operates Flores de Funza. She reported it when the first car got flipped over and she reported a break-in just this Monday."

Rather than putting on their Fed suits, Dean and Cas opt to look into the bakery while Sam goes next door to 'get flowers for his girlfriend' and ask the florist if she heard about the crazy 'prank' that got pulled late last night.

"Oh, I heard about it," the woman, Marta, says, unamused. She crooks her finger at him, "You c'mere, you think it's so funny."

Curious, Sam follows her towards the back of the shop. It's obvious that a path of destruction has been swept up recently. The small window on the back door has been covered with duct tape and cardboard. Glass shards still glitter in the crack between the tile floor and the door. Marta points to a door to her left. The door jamb has been cracked and splintered all to hell, the lock destroyed. The door hangs open slightly. Someone really went to town on the damn thing. He can see it's just a darkened supply closet.

"She was looking for a way into the bakery next door."

"What makes you say that?" Sam asks.

"I'm a veteran, an MP. I've investigated break-ins before. I came in, y mira qué pasó! A woman's shoe-prints in the dirt! All over the place! Tiny little women's feet! I tell this to the police. You know what they say to me? They tell me I donno what I'm talking about. Coño, I 'donno what I'm talking about.' Six years, it's how I got my citizenship! So I said, fine. But that woman breaks in here again, she gonna regret it. I got a new camera in the back, I got a new alarm system. And I got my service revolver in case she show her face around here!"

Sam blinks. Besides trying not to get really inappropriately turned on by a Latina woman rolling her 'r's through a ferocious rant, he's now picturing this little hellion holding her pistol at the ready, safety off, in fucking uniform.

Still, he manages to almost-casually ask who she's accusing of breaking in.

Turns out the man who owned the bakery had a long-time girlfriend. Had, past-tense, because apparently she loved booze more than she loved him.

After venting to somebody who seems to believe her, Marta calms considerably and proceeds to help Sam with his order.

"Your girlfriend, you said it was for?"

"N-n-no. My mom. Uh. Flowers for my mom. I don't have a girlfriend," stutter, awkward smile. "At the moment."

He tries to look seriously casual.

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Carla Simmons, it turns out, not only has a new boyfriend, but her boyfriend has a business, and it's not a bakery. It's an independent tow truck.

In her stoned, drunk paranoia and depression, she decided several people were responsible for the baker's death and for keeping her away from his property. Even though they'd been apart for weeks
before his regular, run-of-the-mill, early-onset coronary, she thought that, in surviving him, she stood to inherit all he owned.

She was, of course, wrong.

Allan Baxter (and Baxter the Baker, Dean can't get enough of that shit) had no will -- or rather, he had a will written up under the direction and consent of a lawyer who, it turned out, had faked his Bar certification with the state. So it was all under dispute.

Meanwhile, Simmons accused Marta of protecting Baxter's property from her, having an affair with her lover, and of generally standing in the way of getting her hands on what little money was left in the register after his death.

Hence the first car. She asked her boyfriend to flip it one night when Marta was busy closing up by herself. By the time she'd grabbed her firearm and gone outside, the truck was unhooked, and gone. And the police never did believe Marta's story about the break-in until Sam and Dean showed up in their Fed gear to put the situation to rest.

The other victims were owners of other shops Baxter had frequented or who refused to help Simmons in trying to get into the bakery. The cars getting flipped in the neighborhood belonged to the fake lawyer's wife, the high-school kid who used to run the counter at the bakery, and a Denny's waitress Simmons thought Baxter had been "too friendly with."

Simmons drunkenly called in the fourth one. She had her boyfriend flip another car -- that of one of the Denny's line cooks -- and for some reason she stayed on the scene to rant about how his omelettes had given Baxter a heart attack.

Dean has one question for her at the police station before they take their leave.

"You had an entire tow truck. Why didn't you just bust in through the front door?"

Carla looks at him blankly. "That's the first thing we tried," she slurs. "It wouldn't budge."

Back at the bakery, Sam, Dean, and Cas all stand out front, leaning against their stolen car.

Cas plays with the little picks and things Dean gave him. Dean just crosses his arms and contemplates the great glass panels that make up the front of the bakery. Sam leafs through a folder.

"Yeah. Here it is. Cremated. He's been cremated. So he's not protecting the place unless there's something left of him, probably nearby or inside." Sam closes the folder. "I mean it would have to be inside, right? His house is across town, that's too far."

"So waddaya say?" Dean asks. "We burn the building to the ground, too?"

"Woah. No," Sam points to Flores de Funza. The florist's shop is the only one attached to the bakery, but Marta is so, so... awesome. And cute. And fiery. They can't do that to her.

Dean nods. He doesn't have to be convinced; Marta is an innocent. If they have to dig through the bakery for the rest of the week to turn up what Baxter is attached to, that's just what they'll have to do.
But first.

Dean points between Cas and the door. "Go ahead."

It's dark still, early morning. If the ghost wanted to show himself, now would be the time.

Cas does as he was instructed. He's still new to breaking into places and picking locks. Now is the perfect time for more practice.

And he does it. In better time than the last. Dean comes up and pats him on the back. Cas smiles and hands the picks back.

They enter without any problem. They do a full sweep of the bakery again and, still, nothing pops out to tear their faces off.

When Sam finally drops his gun to his side, he asks, "So, what? You wanna say this all started before Baxter was cremated? Maybe he was able to secure the bakery against the truck when they tried the first time?"

"Yeah, or maybe those fucking drunks rammed into the front of the building at the blistering speed of four miles an hour," Dean says. "Well. Whatever. Wanna call this one?"

Sam shrugs. "I guess?"

Dean nods. "Alright. Well. Hey. How about this: I'll stick around, look for any loose souvenirs he might have left, hang out 'til sun-up, make sure he still doesn't wanna tussle. You head back upstate and get the car. We'll check out and head home when you've got 'er." Dean pulls the keys out of his pocket and tosses them to Sam.

"You sure?"

"Yeah. In fact, have Cas drive you up there. Give him some practice."

Sam hands Cas the keys to their stolen sedan and Cas looks about as excited about it as he ever gets.

Dean waves them off.

And when the coast is clear.

He turns on an oven.

«»

Cas pulls up behind the Impala looking positively spooked.

Cas sticks his head out the window to start shouting at Sam before he can even unlock the door and fall out of the car.

"You drove entirely too fast! How was I supposed to keep up with that? You said to follow! And then! Then you were speeding!"

Sam laughs at him. Cas followed back in the stolen car to get more practice driving. Sam's about to tell him how much more trouble he would have been in if he'd been following Dean when he sees something out of the corner of his eye. The sun is rising, so morning light is getting thrown all across the glass windows of the store. But inside, there's also a strange glowing. And no sign of Dean.
Sam just sticks his hand out to silence Cas's bewildered rant. Then they both draw their guns and go inside.

On the front counter, next to the register, there are candles.

Candles.
In a cake.

Sam approaches the counter, totally thrown off, his gun falling to his side.

"Sam?" Cas hisses.

"Wha--"

Dean emerges from the back, throwing a cloth apron over his shoulder. "Sam! What do you think, huh?" He grins.

Sam just looks at him.

"What? Did you forget, dude? It's May second!" Dean motions to the perfectly rounded, lovely little cake with a whole bunch of candles jammed into the top and sputtering.

"Holy shit," he finally says.

"Uh, you're welcome," Dean says, raising an eyebrow.

"Oh, my god, no, I mean, thank-- I mean. Dean. Holy shit. Thank you."

Cas puts his gun away and comes up beside Sam. He looks at the cake and then smiles up to Sam.

"Happy birthday, Sam," he offers.

Sam has the goofiest smile on. He tucks his gun away and pats Cas on the back, smiles at his brother, then, he pulls back his ridiculous hair to lean over and blow out the candles.

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They're folding up a box to put the rest of the cake in when another car finally pulls into the parking lot.

It's nearly business hours and they'd just been sitting around, eating birthday cake for breakfast through the sunrise. Occasionally Cas would wander to fiddle with the appliances. Dean looked almost giddy and had certainly had the most sugar out of the three of them. Sam had just turned on the coffeemaker.

"Oh!" they hear, before they collectively turn to see her. "I knew it! I thought that was your car and I seen you sneaking around. You bought this place, didn't you?"

Marta invites herself in. She's holding her purse and the keys to her shop and smiling brightly. She looks fresh and she's beaming at them.

It's all just such an awesome moment, Dean so happy, Marta so kind, the morning so promising.

It's Sam's birthday.

He doesn't know what to do but shrug and say, "actually, yeah," and offer a piece of the cake to her.
Cas emerges from the hallway to the kitchen with a cookbook and a curious look.

While Sam and Marta chat, Dean loops the apron over Cas's head and wraps him up in it, all the while explaining what a proofer is for.
Just as Dean's opening the door for Tracy and their first early-rising customers of the day, they also get their first phone call. It's Sam.

Dean brings the phone with him into the hall, out of earshot of both their patrons and the noise of the kitchen.

"Alright, slow down, dude. Say this again?"

Sam stutters something about how much coffee he's had and then repeats himself.

"I think I've found something that works in opposition to the Metatron's spell. Look, I mean, I can't. I don't have the," Dean can almost hear Sam shaking the nonsense out of himself on the other end. He pauses for a moment then starts again. "I don't have all the words right now. I mean, Bobby had a full, like, dictionary sorta translator thing and I have it in the books there but I didn't bring it with me."

"Alright," Dean says, "so bring that book back with you and we'll work on it here. Or maybe Cas can translate it for you."

"No, no. Look. Okay. Number one? I can't take the book. I got special permission to come into this part of their archives and I can make a really limited number of copies and this manuscript is so old I don't know if the light in the machine will damage it anyway. So, you know, it's like so fragile and rare there's no way they'd let me take it out of here."

Dean laughs, "Steal it. Seriously, Sam."

"I'm not gonna steal it!" Sam squeaks, nearly scandalized.

"Well, so take pictures and lemme see if Cas recogn--"

"No. I don't wanna do that to him."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean." Sam takes a deep breath. "Dean. I think this can restore Cas's grace. According to him, that's what Metatron used for the spell. But I only think it can restore his grace. I don't know if it can, well. Help his brothers and sisters grow their feathers back? And at any rate, I don't want all this to, you know, give him false hope or something." Sam whispers, really, honestly pained at the prospect.

"Cas is a big boy. He can handle it," Dean says; though even so, he turns away from the kitchen and drops his voice.

"Look. We'll decide on that later, if this doesn't work. First, I have another idea."
Sam proposes that Dean go and get the other book and his laptop and bring them back to the bakery. In the tiny office they hardly ever use is an old desktop computer with a printer/fax/scanner combo. Dean just needs to scan the pages in so Sam can work on the translation right where he is.

Dean thinks about it for a moment, then agrees. "I'll call you when I get back to the motel. Which bag am I looking in?"

"At the bottom of the gray one. If it's not in there, I left it at the bunker and we've got a different problem."

Castiel is surprised to see Dean entering the kitchen, removing his apron. His first question is, "Is Sam okay?"

"Fine, yeah. He's okay. He just left a book here and now he needs me to e-mail him the pages or something. So, hey, finish the orders for next door. What's in the oven right now are the last of the full loaves we'll really sell today. And then you can move on to your experiment *du jour*, alright? And help Tracy if she calls you."

Cas nods and still looks a little concerned.

"Seriously, dude, I'll be right back. I'm gonna go get the book and then I'll set up in that little cubby-hole office. I'd tell you if it was an emergency."

Cas visibly relaxes.

Dean pounds the steel table under his hand once and nods, then heads out. He tells Tracy he'll be right back and, bless her, even she asks if Sam's alright.

Cas only has three orders of cookies to box up for next door. He brings a big mixing bowl with him to make the delivery.

Marta is the lady who owns the flower shop next door to them and Marta loves them. They've brought more local traffic to their end of the shopping center and her profits are climbing along with the bakery's popularity. The first time Sam Instagrammed some of her arrangements she got two giant back-to-back orders for weddings. Dean and Cas also bake like crazy so they're prepared to box up almost anything at a moment's notice to send out with a bouquet.

Marta is also batshit about Dean's bear claws. So Cas came armed to the teeth.

She's all sunshine and smiles and greets Cas in her heavy Colombian accent. He answers (in Spanish because it always tickles her), and slides over both the cookie orders and a pie box stuffed with four bear claws.

"Dios mio, you deeeedn't."

"I did. I was wondering if--"

Marta only points to the back and begins tearing open her box. "Use the shears, cut from the--"

"I remember," Cas assures her. "But I was wondering if it was alright to take much more than last time?"

"Honey, you do what you gotta do."
He is effectively dismissed.

Out back there is a greenhouse, beautiful, colorful, and overflowing. Weeks back, Marta brought some herbs from her main growhouse to her storefront and let the Winchesters know that, as long as they had their arrangement with online orders, they could come get fresh herbs from her any time. She only hinted that they might bring along a slice of pie or plate of muffins on occasion in exchange. It sounded more than fair to them.

Today, Cas fills his mixing bowl with all the herbs it will carry. He has grand plans.
Back in the bakery, Cas sets to work on more common restaurant fare. He slices onions and tomatoes, picks clean sprigs of rosemary out of the bunches he got from Marta, presses garlic, and halves olives.

There are so many options, so many different kinds of focaccia, but he's been leaning away from making lists. He's done so much better just feeling out the experience, like with the coffee cake and the bagels. It was nice to just try the coffee cake and be happy with it and decide to move on. It was nice to take recommendations on bagels from whoever happened to be around. And Dean throwing out the idea for cheese bagels led him to the customer who led him here.

The recipe reminds him of the bread he shared with Tracy. Olive oil, herbs, and salt to flavor a good, honest bread. By the time Dean has returned with his laptop and Sam's book, Cas has decided to start off simple and slow. Salt, pepper, and rosemary to start, just like the flavor he recalls. If he likes this loaf, he'll add onion, perhaps, next.

Dean doesn't shut the door to the office all the way. Cas can hear him throwing a fit over the phone with Sam about cords, plugs, switches, and computers.

After a while he begs off the phone for a break and comes out to the kitchen.

Cas hears him, feels him hovering before he sees him. "Wash your hands and take the tarts out. They're cool by now."

Dean huffs a laugh but does as he's told. He disappears out front.

When he returns he's relaxing back into the kitchen again after his frustrations with technology.

"Did you send Sam what he needed?" Cas asks, spreading the dough out in the pan.

"The first part of it is uploading or whatever. The files are all huge so it's taking forever, but Sam will take what I fucking give him. I don't know how to fix whatever he was talking about."

"Okay," Cas says. "Are your hands still clean?"

Dean washes his hands and comes back around. "Whatcha need?"

"Digitus secundus," Cas says.

"What now?"

Cas reaches across and grabs Dean's right hand and starts using him to dent the top of the dough.

Dean eases into position around him and doesn't say anything. Just watches them work. Hooks his chin over Cas's shoulder. This time he puts his other hand on Cas's hip and, when it's over, moves back to his side. Then the phone rings again. He slumps back down and knocks his head into Cas's arm.

"Go help Sam."

Dean breathes into Castiel's sleeve and then does as he's told.

That scanner is a son of a bitch. He fights with it until almost the last hour of the goddamn day.
Dean didn't spend nearly as much time on his feet today, but that only makes the fatigue worse. It's more a mental exhaustion than anything. He's pretty bummed he didn't get to spend as much time in the kitchen. Instead, he spent it online trying to get all the scans of what turned out to be one of Bobby's journals to Sam.

Then they spent a while trying to make sense of some of his damn handwriting.

He was happy to hang up, at last, and leave Sam to it. He couldn't say for sure when he'd be back in town. Now that he'd found something useful, he didn't want to let it go until he had done a full translation. They agreed that if it looked at all hopeful, at that point they'd present an image of the original and Sam's attempted translation to Cas to see if he could make any sense of it.

Dean didn't want to keep it under wraps for too long. They've all been doing pretty well not lying to each other lately and Dean wants to keep it that way. But he's also too busy holding it all in to badger Cas about going for a run or doing any exercise today.

(After all, if the spell works out, Cas will be supernaturally fit. And gone, probably.)

They take their separate showers and settle in to different tasks. For his part, Cas doesn't seem to be digging into the cookbooks anymore. He's got some lore in his lap and that better be a pencil he's scribbling in the margins with or Bobby's ghost might rise again to kick his ass.

Dean picks up some of the threads of Sam's research himself and looks online for some links that might help him translate faster or something. Anything.

It feels weird sitting up by the pillows, leaning on the headboard, because he's still in Castiel's presence. They spend all day working across from each other and, besides 'helping' with the dough earlier, Dean feels like he hasn't seen him all day.

And he feels like they're suddenly speeding towards a bit of spellwork that might make him disappear entirely. He becomes aware of the fact that he keeps staring over when Cas eventually looks up from turning a page and smiles at him, small and warm. Then turns back to the book.

And he's not seriously hungry. Maybe slightly. He didn't put away quite so much bread as usual today. But he can smell something fantastic. Something delicious still in the air, still following them home from the bakery. It's a little different, not just doughs or spices but something richer, well-cooked onions and the earthy smell of herbs. It gets so distracting that he closes the laptop and leaves it on the bed, then gets up to follow his nose.

"You didn't bring food home," he says, only kind-of asking. He can't see boxes anywhere, Cas is pretty careful about cleaning up. He can't remember if Cas had a container of anything in his lap on the drive back.

Cas looks up and shakes his head.

"What the fuck smells so good?"

Cas closes his book. "What does it smell like?"

"Like, I donno. There's bread but there's... What were you making today?"
Cas rises from his own bed and joins Dean by the kitchenette, sniffing. "Focaccia," he finally says.

Dean turns back to him. "With what on it?"

"Rosemary at first, then-"

"-onions. Rosemary and onions."

"I didn't bring any back."

"Oh, man, how come? I mean. Hey," he grabs at Cas's left hand and brings it up to smell it.

Rosemary, there it is. The overwhelming scent of pure herbs and well-browned onions, crusty, oiled bread, clinging to his wrist like cologne. Jesus fuck.

This is serious. Cas is showered and clean and still he smells fucking edible.

So, he suddenly has to cop to the fact that he's standing in the middle of their motel room sniffing his friend’s palm and jealous of the things he puts in his mouth and holy fuck.

He ate some. Cas had to have sampled the goods. He always does. And it would be really weird to stick his tongue in Cas's mouth to see how his focaccia turned out today.

Or taste his fingers.

Cas keeps using his fingers to punch doughs. Dean remembers being tucked up behind him before Sam called back this morning.

And Cas just has this darkly amused expression on and maybe, yeah, no, absolutely.

Dean just pushes forward and kisses him.

It takes this thrilling, panic-y second for Cas to get into it where Dean's pretty sure he's gonna end up headlocked on the floor again until there it is, right there.

Cas tilts just so and tastes just right.

Oh fuck. Fucking focaccia of all things.

He comes up for air when they hit a wall and Dean just pulls up Cas's fragrant fingers between them and straight-up sucks two of them into his mouth. He watches Cas's head hit the wall and a great gusting breath flow through him. He watches Cas watch him.

Until, seemingly, he's had enough and pulls his fingers out of Dean's mouth and pushes them spit-slick onto the back of Dean's neck and reels him in to kiss again.

Dean's hands practically flow over Cas's skin, under his t-shirt, circling over all the flesh he can touch, then pulling down at the back and sinking over his jeans to grip his ass. Cas takes this as some sort of signal to brace himself against the wall and hook his legs over Dean's hips; rise up and cling to him with arms and knees.

"Fuck," he hisses on the end of a bite to Cas's lip. Fuck. The way they're pressed right now. The way--

Yeah, he can do this. He even hauls Cas over to the far bed, his bed, so he doesn't have to have awkward thoughts about how they screwed around in the one that Sam used to sleep on.
Then, when he puts him down, lays him out, Dean accidentally konks Cas's head on the forgotten laptop.

"Shit. Fuck. Sorry," he scrambles to pull Cas back up into his arms and grabs the computer and moves it to the nightstand where it clatters down on top of the TV remote and Dean's wallet. "Sorry, sorry. Dammit." He cringes and runs his hand over the back of Cas's head.

Cas is laughing into his shoulder a little so it can't be that bad.

Dean has to kiss that, though, suck and lip the sound right out of him. Then he needs -- needs -- to press Cas down into the sheets and fit their hips together again.

Cas's hands finally start to wander and it's a slight mimic of Dean's own, before. He pushes his hands up under Dean's shirt and moves it up and out of the way. He arcs his hands over Dean's broad back and down to his jeans. Only the ass grab, this time, has them rubbing together on a grind.

Yeah, that's it.

Dean pulls up to whip off his shirt then pulls Cas's tee off, too.

God, he's been waiting to do this. He feels like he's been waiting so long, a whole lifetime, that if Cas wanted to drop it and pick it back up after dinner, it would be like, what? Why not? You waited this long already...

But he's not waiting. He's got Cas's pants open and he's shoving his hands down under Cas's ass to bring them down, to strip them to skin, to -- fuck -- finally get their cocks touching. Because, let's face it: He's been too comfortable with the idea of Cas for too long to care what vessel he had to keep. If he was being honest with himself, the idea of getting in his face and putting a shine on his lips has dated back to, shit, when? Sometime pre-apocalypse when Dean didn't exactly know how to like someone that much without wanting to have them naked. Didn't know why his only friend wasn't a real human but the shape fit and *pow* there came the occasional dream. There turned into the occasional fantasy. Even when things got bad. Then it was the sights and sounds of makeup sex. How they'd fit. How he'd sound. If he'd kiss the same reckless messy way Dean wanted to. Or press apologies and love into the inside of his elbow, against his face, inside his palm. What secret thing, what place to press his tongue to make Cas lose that careful, controlled rumble in his voice. For nonsense to fall out of his mouth.

He knows where he can start. He can aim for hearing his name. Easy enough. It used to be half Cas's vocabulary

So Dean detaches his lips and moves down, as if to kiss his way down Cas's throat and down to his chest and instead of full kisses he skims with lips and breath. He gets all the way down his chest, to the center of him, between his ribs when Cas finally lets loose a shocked, "Dean," and Dean can hit replay on the staggering breath and jumping muscles, can bring Cas's hands down firmer on the back of his head as he tastes the skin along those bones.

Then down. And to the soft belly Cas is growing from being fed so well. From being so well taken care of.

Dean's own thoughts are setting him off at this point and he has to surge up again to take Cas's mouth. To take care of him. To finish stripping off their shorts and show Cas exactly what can happen here.

Dean pulls his hands down Cas's legs, rubs his thumbs over the knees, kneads his fingers into the
backs of his calves. He's fully aware of where he is, what he's doing, when he comes up between his thighs and breathes on them, hot and dragging his bottom lip over the soft skin and hair. He kisses the inside bend of his knee and Cas says, "Dean," like a command and he's breathing like he's been running.

"Sssh," Dean says. "Gonna take care of you."

"Take care of me?" Cas repeats in a quiet voice. And he has no idea how much just saying those words digs into Dean. It's all he wants in the world, for that to be accepted. For the people he loves to ask him to take care of them. He wants everything he does, every effort he makes, to be some form of taking care of them. To the point that Cas's breathy question itself is a turn-on.

So he crawls up to eye level with Cas. "You want me to? Take care of you?" he asks. Doesn't care how it's interpreted, dirty or otherwise, just wants the answer to be--

"Yes," Cas nods and closes his eyes and just puts his arms over Dean's shoulders, handing him the power.

Over the next long while, he must cover Cas's whole neck in kisses. His fingers must skim everywhere, even between Cas's own. Or at least it feels that way. It feels like he covers Cas, closes him in to share breaths and coax out thoughtless moans. He holds his open mouth over the pulse in Cas's neck for a while, tasting him where he's the most fragrant. Pulls Castiel's palms to his nose and inhales. He smells of them, he smells like warm bread and herbs, he smells of sex and sweat and he smells himself on Cas.

He takes care of Cas first because it's what he wants to do. He just wants to see Cas fall apart under his hands, jacks him slow and tense and long and delicious until Cas tips over that edge and comes for him. Then he slides between Cas's legs and drives himself into the stickiness and sweat and heat of him and comes only when Cas stops twitching from the sensitivity and grips him tighter, bringing up his legs and opening for him, a promise of what can come, of what will happen when they do this again. And again, again is what he thinks as everything that isn't Cas shorts out electrically around him.
To escape the bed, Dean has to slip out of Cas's arms under the pretense of kissing down to his toes. And Cas's fingers still reach for him and he still bolts upright as Dean pulls away to head into the bathroom.

"Dean."

"Two seconds."

"What can be done in two seconds?"

Dean ignores him and starts the faucet, trying to get the water in the sink warm. He towels himself off fine with the cold but he's not bringing that back to mop up Cas. He waits for the hot water and hears the bed-springs.

"Stay there," he says.

Cas comes to the door anyway, starting to pull a sheet around himself.

"Nuh-uh," Dean yanks the sheet so it doesn't get all filthy and just pulls Cas into the bathroom.

Cas yawns.

"See, you're tired. I was gonna clean you off. Go back to the bed," and starts kissing him so he can't.

He eventually wipes Cas down, between mouthing at his shoulders, and drags him back into the room.

"Sleep with me?" Dean asks. And Cas gives him this curious blink, but nods.

Though they've been here a long while, there's still protocol to sleeping in these half-skeevy long-term joints: Don't go to bed totally naked. You never know.

So he holds out Cas's boxers for him to step back into, then he tucks Cas down into the sheets first. He pulls his own shorts on, tosses the laptop on the other bed and sets the alarm. He crosses the room to turn off the lamps. On the bed, next to the laptop, is Cas's discarded book.

Dean grabs the corner to see and-- Yeah.

That's a sprig of rosemary Cas was using to keep his place.

So. Makes sense.

He feels Castiel's eyes follow him around the room. Cas doesn't truly uncoil until Dean is climbing under the covers with him. Cas is one of those coffin sleepers. Middle of the bed, hands folded over his chest, legs straight out. So Dean edges in around him. Curls an arm around his head and lays on the pillow next to him.

Cas's ear is kissing distance; Dean's nose presses into his hair.

Cas's hands come up to his arm and cling. Everywhere the scent of herbs. And of them, in the sheets. Cas says his name a couple times, either like it's just to hear it said or because he's drifting off and just had sex with his best friend.
It makes the thought of fixing him, of somehow getting his wings reattached, giving him back his grace -- it makes that wonderful possibility hurt. Maybe they can somehow kick Metatron's ass and send all the angels back to heaven and Dean will willingly watch Cas leave him again and instead of letting the thought rest until the morning, Dean pokes it like a sore tooth. He faces it and makes acquaintance with it. He sees it in the distance and knows one day it will likely happen. And it will hurt more, when it does, than it ever has before. Even though the last times it was fucking unbearable. Even though drink didn't drown it out and he couldn't fuck or fight it away.

He has to think that the possibility of fixing Cas, of giving him back what he needs to be whole, is what's important. What will show Cas--

"Dean," he says again.

"Mm," Dean hums again.

"You took care of me."

If Cas had shoved a fucking fish hook through Dean's chest, he couldn't have pulled Dean on top of him faster. They fall asleep naked after all.
twenty-four

Dean wakes up early. Early has a new definition, now that they're keeping bakery hours. It's still dark outside and the parking lot lights are vivid around the curtains, thin lines of orange that blur together as he blinks and tries to focus. He is conscious of the slightly itchy sheets against his skin, and of one bare foot that's crept out of the covers. And he is conscious, more than anything, of Cas. He is curled around Cas's side like a question mark; Cas's elbow rests against his stomach and Cas's neck is bared, close, against Dean's face. Cas's face is turned away slightly, slack and loose and silent, breathing with his mouth open. His hair is a wreck, flattened on one side and sticking up on the other like he's been casually putting his fingers into electrical sockets. He has the beginnings of a spectacular hickey just under his collarbone. He is beautiful to Dean in the way that bread is beautiful; like unfinished statues, unpolished stones. Hey, it's early, hallucinogenically so: Dean can think shit like this right now if he wants to. Dean wonders at the texture of him, the stubble and sweat, the small hairs on the backs of his arms and the pores he can see, up close. He is a miniature landscape, a microcosm, a whole world. Dean feels absurdly like a naturalist on an uncharted island, a man walking on the surface of the moon. He feels the desire to map and catalogue. But more than that: he feels the awe. Is it like this for everyone, at some point? He doesn't know.

Dean thinks that this is supposed to be a moment- some kind of Moment, maybe, the kind that people have in books and old movies. But he's not sure what it would look like as it passed him. Dean watches Cas breathe slow and deep, faint in the dark with only the streetlights to see by, and waits to understand. Maybe there is a fundamental truth here, some revelation, that woke him from his cloudy dreams. He hopes so. But plenty of people have probably woken up in the middle of the night and stared at someone they- at their person, their best friend, and felt the way Dean feels right now. Like he is standing far above himself, wondering, in the unreal space between yesterday and tomorrow. He can't decide whether he wants to go back to sleep, or to pause the universe in this moment, and try to figure himself the fuck out.

Cas stirs a little and snores once before sliding his arm up onto his belly and twitching, like he's trying to scratch an itch. He smiles faintly at whatever he sees behind his eyelids. Unguarded, lax. Utterly human.

Dean holds his breath in the dark, and watches.
twenty-five

Chapter Summary

Time for less high-fructose plot in your diet.

There's the story about how Dean's authority is undermined by the competition.

The first hint: There's a sudden run on bread boules.

They suddenly get, like, Cronut popular to the point that, at six, the line starts outside. Not everybody gets the same things, but the pattern isn't hard to detect. Two danishes and a large loaf. Four bagels and a large loaf. A croissant, a coffee, and a large loaf (and a piece of the blueberry pie to go, please).

Lately they run out of all the large loaves first thing in the morning. So, Dean guesses there's something incredibly good about them. He sets aside other work in favor of making more large boules for the afternoon crowd.

It's like somebody texts or Tweets or Instagrams it or something because, as soon as everything's out on the counter or in the baskets or on the shelves, it's gone.

Tracy's the one who figures it out. There's a lull before they close one day and she's done cleaning the cases and whatnot and she actually enters the kitchen to report what she'd heard.

She looks a bit at a loss there, kinda hovering back near the hallway until Dean offers her his most tame smile and shakes the flour off of a sheet of paper. He comes over and hands it to her. It's a recipe for lemon scones. She smiles and doesn't go quite as red and hands the sheet back.

"I just thought you should know a lady came in asking about discounts on the large loaves."

Dean frowns. "You think the price is too high?" They aren't working cheap, here, but they also aren't charging people an arm and a leg for anything. Sam keeps the books so he decides most the prices and tries to make them reasonable.

Tracy wavers a bit. "I don't think so, personally, but she said she thinks the 'whole deal' is a bit expensive. Well, I asked her what she meant by that -- the 'whole deal' -- and she said the deal with Mario's."

Dean's eyebrows shoot up. "What the hell?"

"I donno! So, I was gonna ask. What if I ran over? Did a little recon? I mean. At this point -- I don't know about you guys -- but I really want to know what it's about."

Dean's eyes narrow. "Gimme your damn apron and gimme your cell phone."

"«»

Tracy comes back with a recording of the exchange on her mobile. Dean, Cas, and Tracy crowd around her iPhone.
The waiter or whoever explains that if you bring in a bread boule they make it into a bread bowl for you and fill it with any one of several soups: Tomato basil, Italian wedding, minestrone, Sicilian sausage, bean and sausage...

The guy explains that people have to bring in their own bread -- they don't provide it -- but he does recommend a bakery nearby for the freshest loaves. And then he goes on about the pricing scheme. It's disgustingly high for a service they only provide half of and, oh, then, there's the soup & salad lunch combo with a glass of wine and one of their cannolis and....

After the recording ends, Dean is the first to speak.
Kind of.

"I." He pauses. Shakes himself. "I. I just. I don't."

He's silent. Cas and Tracy watch him process everything with a mixed bag of often conflicting expressions rolling over his face.

"I," he tries again. "I don't know? If I'm mad?"

They're quiet for a minute.

Then Tracy rolls her eyes and blows out a breath. "Of course you're mad! They didn't even ask!"

"Well," Dean puts a hand out, motions vaguely to the front, "it sells the bread."

"Oh my god. The bread would get sold anyway. It's good bread. The point is, they didn't ask you. You don't even know what kind of soup goes into what kind of bread! Have you even been to Mario's? You don't even know if their soup is any good!"

This is incredibly true. When they don't cook in the motel kitchenette, they lean pretty heavily on their old diet of pizza and tacos and takeout. Dean has a thing about mom-and-pop places that aren't greasy diners. Deep fried goodness at least comes up to a certain temperature when you cook it. And it's hard to fuck up a burger. But they've, well, "cosplayed" as health inspectors one too many times and he knows what goes on in some kitchens when there's no bare minimum of big corporate standards for sanitation and food handling.

And that fucking Mario is shifty as hell. He doesn't trust that fucker as far as he can throw him. He drives a goddamn windowless white van. Who does that who isn't abducting people in their spare time?

"Not only that," Tracy points out, "but that lady was kinda right, you know? We're basically inadvertently double-charging your customers for your bread. If they had asked, you could have worked out a deal with them but instead they just decided people would have to pay through the nose for the bread," she ticks off on her fingers, "the soup, the service, and the experience. And who knows how they handle your bread when they get it."

"Wouldn't they just cut a hole in it?" Cas asks.

"Yeah," Tracy agrees, "but what do they do with the bread when they cut that big, gaping hole out of the center of it? Do they let our customers keep their bread -- their delicious bread -- to eat it? Or do they keep it to cut down on the cost of their breadcrumbs for their damn meatballs?! You're probably breading their Chicken Parmesan and you don't even know it."

Tracy looks honestly upset about it. That, more than anything, gets Dean on board with the anti-Mario's campaign.
They could stop making large loaves and stick to baguettes, longer loaves, and rolls. But Dean doesn't really want someone else's actions to dictate what he makes, or, more specifically, is restricted from making, in his bakery.

Cas helpfully points out that he had this idea for bread bowls weeks ago.

Dean tries not to look hurt about that. He had vetoed the idea, but he hadn't anticipated that someone else would be putting their grubby hands on his product to provide the service instead. He just wanted bread, damnit! Uncomplicated, wholesome, eat-it-'till-you're-bloated bread.

"How do we beat them at their own game?" Dean asks. "I still don't wanna sit here and have to hover over a fucking cauldron all day."

Someone shouts from the front and Tracy bolts up and blinks. "Oh. Sorry. I'll--" she points and goes to head to the register.

"Your turn, Cas," Dean decides. He comes around Castiel and starts untying his apron, swats at the sleeves of Cas's t-shirt until he looks a little less powder-caked.

Cas holds up his arms and then ducks a little so Dean can pull the apron off him.

"My turn for what?"

"So, you're gonna go in there with your weird vibe and you're gonna freak 'em right out, okay? Give me full levels of angelic intensity. Stare at everybody, make them really uncomfortable. I want any intel you can get. Just whip out your phone and start taking pictures of the menu and then order whatever desserts you can get your hands on. What did that guy say? They had, like, tiramisu? And cannolis and zeppoli? Get some of their shit and we'll try it against some of our shit and I wanna find out whose is better."

"What is zeppoli?" Cas asks, intrigued.

"It's fried dough, I'll show you later."

Cas shudders. "No."

"Alright," Dean goes to where his jacket is hanging and digs some cash out of his wallet. He hands it over and makes sure Cas has his phone at the ready. "Research, Cas. You know how this works."

"I don't have a badge."

"You don't need one. You're a customer. A really creepy customer. Go be creepy."

There are only a couple people left in the dining room. People don't usually push it; they know the bakery closes mid-afternoon or so. So Dean decides to gather some objective opinions.

He pulls out some comparable products of theirs and when Cas shows up with little boxes of desserts, he cuts a slice of everything for everybody.

There's this computer nerd looking guy with a laptop and a cherry pie habit and a lady who normally comes in with her kids, but it looks like she got the afternoon off and she's relaxing. Dean asks if they want to help him with something. And he mentions that it involves free food.

They don't do it super scientific. Dean just doesn't tell them that the takeaway boxes are from the
Italian joint in the shopping strip behind theirs.

The soccer mom introduces herself as Sheri and the nerd calls himself Eliot.

Dean, Cas, Tracy, Sheri, and Eliot each take a forkful of the tiramisu from Mario's and the first thing Sheri says is, "That's from a box." She clicks her fingers, trying to remember and then does: It's a frozen tiramisu from Costco.

"Ugh," Dean says, disgusted. "You're kidding me."

"No, I remember it looked just like this. Cut into the middle, see if it's still frozen."

Cas goes to retrieve a chef's knife and cuts it straight down the center. There's little frost particles on the inside layers.

Tracy actually throws up her hands and walks away for a second.

When she returns she simply eyes Dean, and motions at the plate, like, see?

Dean just thinks they're lucky she's on their team, 'cause she's got a spark of rage in her.

They each try a mini zeppole and Eliot nails it in one.

"Uh. Is this from Mario's?"

"How'd you know?" Dean asks.

"Because I really hate their pizza," he says, shaking the remains of the pastry off his fingers and back into the napkin.

"At least they weren't frozen," Sheri offers.

The cannoli's really perfect-looking, but also store-bought, as are the cookies, the pizzelle, and the panforte.

"These aren't very good," Tracy finally says.

"They look nice," Sheri says, "but they're so. So."

"They're not this," Eliot points to the cakes in the cold case. And Sheri seems to agree.

Dean has them try out his and Cas's stuff next. They don't have cookies as pretty as store-bought or anything, but he kind of hopes he'll hear them say--

"It's so fresh, gaaawd." Sheri's eyes kind of roll up and she thumbs some of the cannoli cream off the corner of her lip.

"So you think we can compete? With Mario's shit?"

"Yes," Cas says before their guests can answer. He is especially offended by the frozen cake which he's been smooching around the plate with a fork.

"Yeah, I think so," Eliot says. "Even their garlic bread sucks."

Dean nods. "I can do garlic bread."

"What about pasta?" Sheri perks up. "Do you guys think you'll be doing that? Maybe branching
out?"

Dean denies it apologetically. He explains the situation with the bread bowls and Eliot and Sheri seem to agree that it's kinda fucked up.

Dean sends Eliot away with another piece of his pie. Sheri shoulders her purse and takes a couple cookies home for her kids, on the house.

"Thanks," she says, "that was fun. Hey. You know, just so you know, they're not entitled to grow their customer base on your work. They don't get to pretend they have better food than they offer just to please people. Just to get money. Don't let them step on you."

"We won't," Tracy assures her, when Dean doesn't speak up.

Dean locks up and flips the front sign to 'closed' so they can clean up.

But Tracy and Cas thumb through the photos he took at Mario's.

Cas didn't see anybody with a soup-bread bowl sitting around so he didn't see if they got to keep the majority of their bread or not. But he suspected the authenticity of the croutons he saw on their Cesar salads. Tracy simply sticks by her theory that their bread has been stolen and corrupted.

"You know," she says, "there's really no reason why you guys can't get into the pasta game."

Dean sighs. "Trace, that's really not what I wanna be doing here."

"But making pasta is a lot like making bread," she objects. "Eggs and flour and rolling out dough. There's no reason you can't play their game. Just make super awesome pasta, dry it, bag it, and attach little recipe cards."

Castiel actually runs into the back to find an exact recipe for pasta.

"Oh, that's nice," Dean says wryly. "Now he's on another mission."

"Do not mock my mission," Cas pops back up behind Dean unexpectedly enough to shock him. "Their business model is a corruption of our good intentions and hard work. And look, Dean," Cas takes his phone back from Tracy and moves pictures until there's a good shot of the sparsely-populated dining room. "Notice anything?"

Dean takes the phone and looks closely. "No."

"Exactly. It's not what's there, Dean. It's what's missing."

Luckily Tracy doesn't ask what the significance is when they both intone at the same time, Dean in shock and Cas in revelation:

"Salt shakers."
Before the bakery, before the hunt that wasn't- before the frankly spectacular sex- there is the story of the briefing.

"Shut the fuck up," Dean says, reflexively. "It's not a briefing. That makes me sound like some kind of corporate dick. There's not going to be spreadsheets, Sam, it's just- it's a," he starts, and struggles, and stops. "It's more like a-

"A briefing," Sam says.

"Motherfucker," says Dean, and stalks out of the library. He stews in his own room for a while, pretending to clean it, but really just looking through his own short stack of novels and operator's manuals and wondering if he can find anything useful in there. Maybe he ought to loan Cas a book? Books are probably better than Dean about talking someone through the human experience. But Dean flips through his collection- *Cat's Cradle, Mother Night, White Noise, Catch-22* - and thinks maybe that's a terrible idea. Handing a new human a novel about postmodern anguish is probably the literary equivalent of handing a toddler a box of cookies that's actually full of dirty newspapers. It's a cruel trick. He sits cross-legged on the floor in disgust for a while, and then paws through the stuff again. He finds an owner's manual for their generator and comm equipment and, after a second, puts it in a new pile. The "maybe" pile. Cas is the kind of person who likes useful things, so. Maybe. Maybe what they should get Cas is a library card. Oh God, fake ID. All the fake IDs. Somebody is going to have to take Cas's picture against a neutral backdrop, pronto.

Dean does not allow himself to think this thought more than once: *I'm in way over my head*. He thinks it once and only once, and then dismisses it. He's a great dog-paddler. No such thing as waters too deep as long as you tread the surface.

Right.

He thinks maybe he should write some kind of list. Like, important shit. That's what he'll write at the top of the page. Important Shit. Necessary, vital, life-saving shit. Also helpful shit, stuff that makes life more bearable. Dean finds a notebook under his bed and flips to a fresh page, uncaps a pen. He starts to write **IMPORTANT SHIT** across the top and then feels like a five-year-old. Oh, well. Whatever. He numbers a few lines down the side.

1. **hunter stuff**

Okay, there is absolutely nothing Dean can teach Cas about handling a knife or a blade of any kind. Cas is lethal with anything sharp. Dean's seen him throw a knife perfectly into a demon's spine from halfway across a room. Recently, Dean has even caught him watching Food Network (God bless you, Men of Letters, and your equipment for interrupting and capturing satellite feeds) and staring with inscrutable intent at other people's knife skills. Cas has been skillfully murdering lemons in their kitchen lately, and onions and cucumbers, and the odd cantaloupe. He still does not really have a grasp on what constitutes a "salad," and it is freaking Sam out. Dean thinks it's hilarious. But pretty
soon Sam is going to have the food pyramid talk with Cas, he guesses, and that particular fun's going to end. Where was he? Oh yeah, hunter stuff. Good thing about Cas is, you really only have to show him once. Dean already taught him how to take apart and clean every gun they have, he's got no worries about that. Cas is precise and methodical and unlike Dean, his attention doesn't zoom into space and circle Neptune when you try to teach him something boring. Like how to talk to witnesses like a relatively normal human being; how to get the most out of your visit to the local public library, how to get access to newspaper archives. Maximizing your internet search capability- okay, Sam's going to have to show him that. Or like how to get blood out of clothes. Cas is going to have to know how to do that. Dean thinks hard about that for a second and then writes,

2. laundry (all kinds of cleaning)

The first week that Cas was here, they took him to the Goodwill and the army-navy surplus and got him an armload of clothes not that different from their own; and that had been okay, but Cas had been kind of- passive about the whole experience, muted, like somebody who'd just had a flash-bang grenade go off in their vicinity. He'd picked out clothes with a weird expression, part curiosity and part distaste and part disbelief. Maybe, Dean thinks, it was like one of those surreal lucid dreams, where everybody has the wrong face, but they keep talking to you like they know you, and you just have to play along. Dean did the laundry that week, washed all of the new clothes and dried them and put them in Cas's makeshift room in neat piles. It made him feel better until he caught Cas staring at the piles of clothes, of stuff, with that same weird face, and then Dean felt like a jackass, like he'd just contributed to the problem somehow, buried Cas under a mountain of things. But Cas wore the shirts and jeans and didn't complain, and now things are different, somehow, Dean can feel it. They were his clothes, in a way they hadn't been when they started. Cas rolled up the sleeves or cuffed the jeans or wore some kind of bright ugly fabric belt whenever he felt like it. It makes Dean's heart seize up sometimes, but he's not going to be telling anybody anything about that. But anyway: laundry. Dean caught him washing his socks in the sink using shampoo last week. Dean had kind of freaked out and Cas had looked at him like he was the fucking alien here.

"It's a soap product," Cas had said, perfectly reasonable, holding wet socks that smelled like Sam's herbal nutrient moisture-rich bullshit shampoo. His eyes had narrowed down to tiny, murderous slits. "Are you saying my hair's not clean, either?"

"No, your hair's totally good," Dean had blurted. Jackass. "But shampoo's only for hair. That's why there are all those other bottles in the shower." Cas had stared at him some more. "You are," Dean had started, nervously, "using the other stuff in the shower, right?" There is a weighted, guilty silence. "Are you washing- are you washing your- your everything, with shampoo?"

"It smells good," Cas said. And then: "Stop laughing. You're unhelpful."

Of course it all backfires when Dean realizes a.) that he actually misses the faint smell of lavender that had been following Cas around for the last couple of weeks, and b.) what the actual fuck, lavender, Jesus Winchester, pull yourself together. Dean thinks about the shampoo incident for a while and then abruptly makes himself stop thinking about the shampoo incident, and then writes,

3. pop culture

There's nothing really wrong with the fact that Cas can't identify most of the quotes or characters Dean comes up with on a day-to-day basis. It's not Cas's fault that he wasn't raised in a series of shitty motel rooms with a talking box for a babysitter. Dean meets lots of people that don't get his jokes. But it kind of hurts when Cas doesn't. Dean can't explain that. So some kind of master class on television and movies is something Dean can provide. He knows what episodes to skip and which prequels to avoid (huh, all of 'em). Cas already likes television, so there's no hard sell there. Problem
is, he'll watch literally anything. Infomercials, cartoons, weather reports, bad sitcoms that he stoically refuses to laugh at.

"They're not funny," he'd said. He'd turned to Dean with a serious, sort of judgmental expression, like, human beings, what a bunch of jerkoffs. "The invisible laughter doesn't entice me to laugh along. Does that usually work on people?" Dean thought about that.

"Actually, no."

"Then why do they keep adding it in?"

"Habit."

"Hmm." Cas had accepted this, and sunk back into the couch cushions. "The default explanation for everything."

So, television was easy, but the tough part is to get him to stop watching old people shit like NCIS or that show with the mental guy, or that detective show on USA where the dude has a million phobias and wipes his hands all the time. Okay, that one is kind of funny, but whatever. Sam has told Dean to back off, that Cas can watch whatever he wants. But Dean wants Cas to have taste. So he keeps carefully selecting movies for them to watch after dinner, or between hunts, and Cas keeps missing the fucking point of every single thing that Dean picks out. He shows Cas Cool Hand Luke and gets a two-hour lecture on the interpretation of the film's messianic imagery. Cas even asks Dean if Star Wars is a veiled political allegory for the second world war, which means that Dean has to go lie down in a dark room for a couple of hours.

Thankfully- speaking of lying in a dark room for hours- Dean doesn't have to cover any of the biological basics, like sleeping, or eating when you're hungry, or Other Stuff that seems like it would be none of Dean's fucking business anyway. Dean had tried to broach the subject of toilet paper use and hand-washing and Cas had whirled on him like he still had angel juice and was going to immediately fry Dean’s brain inside his skull. "I do not," he'd hissed, "need that talk." He'd muttered something about bonobos and shit and shit for brains and watching someone do something for millennia, and frankly, Dean had been thrilled to get the fuck out of there. He had asked for help when the toilet clogged last week, but Dean had just explained the mechanics of the plunger from a safe distance, and nothing more would hopefully ever be said on the subject. Dean's mind sometimes wanders into another unrelated biological category, but he is literally the last person on the planet who is ever going to talk to fucking Castiel Ex-Angel of the actual Lord about cleaning the pipes. Or worse, someone else's pipes. If Cas ever- Sam can handle that shit. There is no way on earth Dean is ever going to give Cas instructions on how to fuck somebody else. That is not within Dean's power to endure. Okay, yeah, sure, he tried that once. But things were really different.

This whole train of thought has made Dean kind of miserable and he stares up at his ceiling for a bit, from where he is lying on his back on the mattress. And then he thinks, fuck it, it's sandwich o'clock, and pads down the hall towards the kitchen. Sam is in there, pulling bowls of chopped vegetables out of the fridge and grimacing.

"We got any- whoa," says Dean. "Is that a bowl of-"

"Lemons and cabbages," Sam says. He sounds queasy, like the whole room is suddenly at sea. "I've got to talk to him."

Dean makes a sandwich and eats it kind of automatically, and then pads back to his room, but the door is open and Cas is in there, sitting cross-legged on Dean's bed. Dean stops short and stares through the doorway for a second, thinking absurd thoughts about backing slowly down the hallway.
and out the door and, you know, down the street, into the woods. He wonders if Cas has found the list, and then sees it in Cas's hand.

"Hey," Dean says. It's super weak. "Whatcha got there?" This is a new low. Cas looks up at him, and at least he's not laughing already.

"I think I know what this is," Cas says.

"Don't take it the wrong way," Dean says, coming to sit on the opposite end of the bed. He looks at Cas, and then can't. His knees are okay, so he looks at them. What's up, knees. You guys are cool. You definitely do not think I am an idiot, because you're just knees.

"The wrong way?" Cas's eyebrows slide up.

"Well," says Dean. "There's not anything wrong with you. With the way that you are. I just want you to have all the information. You can do what you want with it. I just don't want you to, not," he trails off. "Have it. Information." Cas is silent. "Humans do a lot of bizarre shit. For bizarre reasons. It's not always straightforward, that's all."

"I've gathered," Cas says, dry as a bone. He settles back against the headboard, hands on his thighs. "Well, go ahead."

"Huh?"

"Go ahead," he repeats. He gestures between them. "Get started. Tell me what I need to know." Dean blanks.

"Uh," he says. And tries to pull it together. "Okay. We've covered shampoo," he says, and Cas's eyes narrow down again. "Just saying. I'll show you how to load the washing machine and set the dryer. I know you've been washing stuff in the bathtub."

"It works."

"Hey, let me tell you, you have a washing machine, you don't take that shit for granted," Dean says, suddenly vehement. He is surprised that he has feelings about this at all, but apparently he does, and apparently, they're pretty strong. "I'm tired of washing stuff in sinks," he admits. "We don't have to, right now."

"Okay," says Cas, easily. "Show me later."

"Pop culture, I guess that's going to take care of itself," Dean says. "We get the newspaper, we've got internet. You'll catch up. You'll have all the Kardashians memorized in no time."

"How exciting for me," Cas says.

"I just don't know," Dean says, and flops backwards to lie flat. "I don't know. There's so much stuff. It's not important stuff, until it is. Like, you should know, every shower is different. Every single goddamn one." Cas's look is five hundred percent skeptical. "Trust me," says Dean. "A life on the road teaches you a lot about weird showers." They talk- mostly Dean talks, and Cas listens, and asks questions- for a couple of hours. It's mostly silly crap, strange things Dean's encountered, diner names that are actually bad puns, regional terms for soda and why Super Wal-Mart is the devil but Dean can't help shopping there sometimes anyway, what the "relaxed fit" label on jeans actually means and why cotton shrinks sometimes in the dryer. They talk about the phenomenon of jogging strollers and why there are so many kinds of sunscreen. About movie theater etiquette, and how to get the most butter into the popcorn bag. ("Get a second bag," Dean tells him, "and put half in that,
butter on both, and then shake 'em back together." They talk so long Dean doesn't notice the time passing, until the sunlight from the hallway has started to fade. Cas yawns. "Oh, am I boring you?"
Dean asks. Cas looks at him strangely.

"No," he says. "This body just," he says, and stops. "I," he says, carefully, "need something to eat." He smiles at Dean. "But we can keep talking." Dean smiles back. It's like being in some kind of weird feedback loop, looking at Cas and Cas looking back, feeling like things are okay right this second, like something good is happening. "I can make dinner," Cas suggests, then. "I've gotten some ideas from the television."

Dean remembers the lemons.

"About that," Dean says, thoughtfully. Cas perks up. "I think Sam would like a salad."

Hey, Dean's trying to be a good teacher, not a saint. Maybe, Dean thinks, the only way you can really learn to be human, is by making a few mistakes. He's not worried. He knows there are tater tots in the freezer.
Chapter Summary

Your everyday morning-after-the-night-before, now with pie & cake.

The skim of fingers, almost a tickle, wakes him again, later, and the nighttime glows from outside show him Castiel's face, studying him. This isn't the first time he's come awake to the sight of Cas staring, but it might be the first time a smile has curled out of Cas's lips as he blinks to awareness.

"Get some more sleep," he whispers and tries to pull Cas's fingers away from that touchy area on his side.

Cas's smile goes a little wry. Eight more seconds of silence and then the alarm clock is blaring behind him.

Dean reaches back and clicks it off and Cas sinks down on top of his stretched-out body, hides his face between Dean's arm and his side, and pulls the covers up over his head.

Dean gives it a minute for Cas to play out his little waking ritual. Reaches under the blanket and finds the back of his head. Scrubs fingers through his hair a few times and yawns.

Eventually, Cas crawls out over him and clicks on a lamp and blinks down at his own nude body. Dean barely, just barely thinks about telling him to go first, but then the fact that he's his own boss resurfaces and if they get tangled up in the shower for an extra ten minutes this morning, no one will be the wiser.

So he gets up and pushes at Cas's hips until they're in the bathroom. He starts up the water and brings it to hot before he steps over the side and doesn't let go of Castiel's hand until he's in, too.

"Let me?" He asks. And he pulls Cas's back against his front.

Cas looks over his shoulder at him and waits for eye contact before he nods. Then they're under the spray and Dean sinks his hands over Cas's hip bones, reaches down, following the creases, to Cas's thighs and scrubs back up again, rinsing him off. He grabs the soap and washes Cas as if it were his own body in front of him, washing away the sex and sweat, touching him all over. He flatly takes advantage of the fact that Cas probably can't know intimate interpersonal touches from intimate personal touches.

He's nearly a clean slate.

And so he complains of no embarrassment when Dean cleans his genitals and ass, under his arms and down the backs of his thighs. And after he cleans Cas's feet, he gets himself pinned to the shower wall, kissed, devastatingly. Dean smiles into the kiss until it can't be a kiss anymore and Cas pulls back to think over him for a minute before he grabs his shampoo from the corner of the tub. He considers Dean again, then hands it over.

Because Dean wants to wash him.

Rinsing conditioner out of his hair turns into him kissing down Dean's chest and kneeling to kiss
more of him and then to his hand around Dean's cock. He tries several times to get a grip that isn't awkward until Dean finally covers his hand with his own and fuck is it good.

Even better: He gets the chance to wash Cas's face off again.

Cas's whole human technique has been in a constant state of flux since the night the Metatron claimed heaven for himself. Cas had been 'human' a couple of times before then but those experiences and hanging out with the Winchesters taught him the only surety there was in life was that things changed. Before the bakery, he'd followed them from the bunker and out on cases and back again. And nothing was ever the same. Not the motels, not the drives, never the hunts, not even their collective behavior when they got back home.

So he changes things all the time. He both rolls with the punches and fights back. Every motel room has different pillows. After trying every pillow from the couches to the cots in the bunker, Cas finally invested in one for himself, paid cash money for a firm, semi-expensive pillow at a department store, and he's the only hunter Dean knows who carries his own pillow in his duffel. He still hasn't settled on a fucking toothpaste flavor. Sam has admitted to a sneaking suspicion that Cas is working through every brand of deodorant, both men's and women's, alphabetically. Other things are simply good enough. He borrowed a pair of Dean's jeans at the beginning and ever since, he's only ever bought the one brand in the one size and style. Chicken bores him. When any possibility for protein presents itself, he'll pick the first form of beef on offer.

That's clearly carried over into his baking. He scrabbles at the edges of things until he's got enough of a handle to pull himself up. Sometimes he needs to try everything to find out if he likes anything.

Dean suspects, then, that Cas has no problem with Dean caring for him because it has to have exhausted him by now. He lets Dean towel him dry. Dean helps him step into a fresh pair of boxers again. Then on his way up, he kisses the bottom of Cas's chin and leaves him to sort out the rest of his clothes.

He's glad Cas has no frame of reference for how fucked up and possessive Dean's actions are. He hopes Cas will just stay this way, will just let Dean care for him and hand over the control. He's very patient, so there's a good possibility he won't get annoyed about it. But if he clues in eventually, Dean can only hope that, by then, he's aware enough of his body, of the strength of his sexuality, to hold it over Dean like a reward.

Dean's toothbrush literally drops from his mouth into the sink and he stares at himself in the mirror as if every domineering, covetous thought that just ran commentary over him washing his best friend suddenly caught up with him.

He's, like, seriously already fantasizing about how Cas is gonna torture him sexually when he clues in to what a freakshow Dean is some indeterminate time down the road.

It's been ONE NIGHT. Like, it hasn't been twelve hours.

Cas joins him at the sink and takes in his stillness, his shocked-wide eyes. He picks Dean's toothbrush up and rinses it under hot water, wipes it off really well in the burning heat, and hands it back to him. He proceeds to stand there and blink at Dean until Dean comes back to himself, reapply toothpaste, and continues brushing his teeth.

Cas does the same with this week's sparkly cinnamon toothpaste.

They're very quiet on the drive to the bakery and through the opening procedures, starting coffee and heating up the ovens and picking food out of the cases for breakfast.
After his single piece of breakfast carrot cake, Cas takes the third plate of pie and the fork out of Dean's hands and backs him up against the counter until Dean looks at him. He puts his hands on Dean's face and makes sure Dean isn't still drifting off wherever he goes when he's horrified with his own thoughts.

"Hi," Dean says numbly.

Cas nods. "Did you get a text from Sam? Did he call you?"

"Uh. No?"

Cas nods again. "So this is about the sex?"

"Uh."

"I liked it, by the way. If you cared for my opinion at all."

That shakes Dean and he gets a little pissed. "Of course I care what you thought of it. Fuck. Seri--"

"All of it," Cas clarifies. "Everything."

Dean is carefully quiet.

"If there were something about it I objected to, I would have told you. And I will tell you, in future," his voice drops impossibly further, "if it is you I wish to take care of."

Dean should have tugged away by now. But he's made so many mistakes before by not listening to Cas, to everything he has to say. He stays right where he is.

"You don't know how much I've learned from you. You forget that I have watched you," Cas looks at his lips when he says, "You forget that I know how you love. I have watched your love set the world on fire and kept it from burning both." He kisses Dean. Says, "I am prepared for it."

Cas lets him go and all Dean can think is that one victorious day will come when he and Sam can save the world again, save Cas's whole fallen species and send them home. And how he is not prepared for that. He is not ready to make plans around Cas when Cas may not be there.

So he has to make sure Cas wants to stay.

Cas has to know he is in this family. That they already move around him and know him and need him. That he is not just wanted. He's vital.

This isn't going to end. Dean is going to keep Cas, starting now. And Cas knows he fights for everything. He knows he'll understand this. So he says:

"Sam found something at the university library. Some kind of spell, he thinks. It might do the opposite of what the Metatron's spell did."

Dean takes his hand and they leave their dirty plates and go to the back office where Dean left Bobby's book and the e-mails he printed from Sam and he explains everything they know.
twenty-eight

Cas was quiet over the few e-mail print-outs that Dean handed over, revealing the research Sam was doing. If it was awe or worry or concentration, Dean didn't know. His instinct was to push Cas to reveal what it meant to him but Sam hadn't yet provided the entire document. Cas might not know anything at all. Instead, he thought he might let Cas absorb it. He didn't think they'd kept it away from him long enough to make him mad. It was less than a day since Sam had called. So, Dean backed off for a while.

He had to make the morning loaves for the old ladies and the other regulars. The dough he could read, the ancient texts he could not.

After a while Cas comes out of the back office. He's quiet, and it's clear this new puzzle is occupying space in his mind. But Cas starts pulling out pans and ingredients and placing them in an array around his workspace according to his own mental map.

His movements start out slow, but increase in speed and efficiency as the ingredients come together. A fresh batch of muffins, it looks like.

An hour goes by and Dean doesn't want it to be bothering Cas like it is. He wants to reach across the wide steel surface to Cas's space and still his hands for a moment, or come around the side and pull him in by his hip and kiss his hair, just for a little while, just until Cas loses the ghost of this thought that's haunting him.

But he lets it be. Cas works through the breakfast items that stay in demand regularly. One after the other. Until he's got a few things stacked in an oven and a few others cooling and suddenly he disappears back into the office again.

Dean's phone beeps in his pocket as he's heading back out front for a refill of coffee.

Sam's text reads, **Y did cas just ask me if there r specific sigils on the spell pgs?**

Dean sighs, texts back, **Showed him all we have so far. Had to tell him.**

Dean pours his coffee and hangs out, watching the sun rise through the front windows.

After a minute the next texts come, rapid-fire.

**DEEEEEEEEEEEEEAN**

**Dammit**
**Seriously**
**Ur an ass.**

Dean rolls his eyes.

**I worked on it all nite i don't think it is what i thought it was**
**Now i have to explain that to cas.**
**So THANKS.**

**Well then what do you think it is for?** Dean asks.

**I DON'T KNOW but bobby's translation fits it makes sense it's just not what I thought it was**
Fuck this. Dean calls him.

"Hey, it's me."

"Yeah," Sam says. "I donno what to tell you, Dean. It just looks more myth-and-legend than instruction manual."

"Well, that's what the Metatron was into right? Stories and shit? I mean, why not make it into a story to--"

"The better question is, why bother to make it into a story at all? Why bother to plant the seeds to undo his own spell? If the dude really read every book we had available, I doubt he'd pull a supervillain move and monologue in an ancient text about how, 'And the only way to unravel my nefarious plot is to insert tab A into slot B and say six Hail Marys!'"

Dean snorts. He has to give him that one.

Sam sighs down the line. "You think he's gonna be bummed about it?"

"We keep trying," Dean says. "We keep looking. We'll work on it."

Dean hears Sam shuffling, a creak of a door or a bed. "Can I ask when, Dean?"

"Whaddaya mean?"

Sam's quiet for a long moment. "We've been away from the bunker for a few months now. And that's not a criticism because, you know, I see how Cas is. He's enjoying himself. He's absorbed. He's interested in what he's doing. He's as happy as you are. And." Sam pauses again. "I want us to do this for a while longer. To be this way. It won't stick anyway. Trust me."

Dean breathes harsh, like, yeah, I know.

"Something always happens. But we wait for it to happen and in the mean time we. I donno. Recover. We try to be as whole as we can. The bad guys are dumb. When they think we have something, they try to track us down to prevent us from using what we've got whether we're on the right track -- or even paying attention -- or not. There'll be like this nervous preemptive strike, like when a shifter or a demon hears we're in town and we get attacked before we even close in on him. Trouble will come to us, I know it will. In the mean time, we can give Cas something that interests him and makes him happy. Which just so happens to be your... pet project? Or whatever. The thing you're doing right now."

Dean doesn't thank him for telling him his little hobby is cute and all but it's in the way or it's not really real. But he does continue:

"I also think this is good practice. You know. For when it's the real thing. You know how to do this now. You can do something you love and make money off of it and when the time is right and you find some girl and--"

"Alright. Well, no. But thanks."

"Yeah. Yeah, I know you don't want to hear it, but I'm serious, Dean."

Dean looks at the hall behind him. Empty. He can't hear Cas moving around in the kitchen.
"I already know how that'll work out, Sam."

"It won't be like before, Dean. I can make it work, that's what I'm heading for. Cas will make it work one day, too, maybe if here's where he has to stay. Or wants to stay. And you can make it work I know you ca--"

"Cas's plan isn't gonna be any different from mine. I go where he goes," Dean pronounces out of nowhere.

It's very sudden and completely emphatic and Sam's sense of awareness of his brother perks. He doesn't have to be there in person to see Dean's body language back up this declaration. He doesn't have to see the exact shape of it to know what just ran into him.

"Dean," he says, like, what are you doing?

And Dean says, "Yeah?" Quiet. Like a challenge.

"Is there... something I oughta know?"

Dean is quiet. But then he decides, "Yeah. There is. That Cas is just as important as you or me. And that he's a part of this family. And that we're gonna do whatever it is he wants. If he wants to start looking to reverse that spell or if he wants to stay or if he wants to bring the whole fucking thing down. Whatever. That's where we go. That's what we do."

"Yeeeah, Dean. Yeah. I know."

Dean squeezes his eyes shut and presses his fingers into his brow.

"And?" Sam prompts.

"And I love him. And I want him to stick around." Dean doesn't even sound like it's being beaten out of him. He sounds just short of astonished.

Sam lets that settle in the air for a minute. Not entirely, not wholly unexpected. But a fucking game-changer for sure.

"Dean," he starts. "You know. This can't. I mean. This doesn't mean that if we find something we can keep it from him so he stays."

"I know that," Dean jumps in. "I do. I know that. And that's why I told him about the spell this morning."

"It also doesn't mean we're gonna let him walk away," Sam interrupts. Then corrects himself. "Fly away. Whatever. He has to know how much he means to us."

Dean's quiet.

"He's gonna have to make that hard decision. And he's gonna know, before he does, that if he hurts you, I might have to kill him."

"Thanks, mom."

"It's not a joke. It's a fucking whole new dynamic." Dean knows without seeing that Sam's gesticulating like he could goddamn strangle one or both of them. "Because if Cas goes away again after this? And I end up watching you drink yourself to death?"
"Hey!"

"SERIOUS. Completely serious, here. It's been bad enough with you as besties and if you're husbands now--"

"I don't--"

"--it's gonna be, like, desperately bad if Cas poofs off again and you're not even pretending to not pine for him. You'll be completely insufferable and gruff and unhappy and swimming in booze and man-pain and you'll probably kill your way through an entire species of freak before you so much as call him."

"Son of a bitch, Sam, why are you breaking us up already?! I haven't even asked him if this is a real thing yet!"

Sam goes silent.

"What?" Dean barks into the phone, uneasy.

"Wa-uh. You. Haven't. Uh. Asked him? To, um." Sam is silent again. "I mean. I'm asking, you haven't done anything yet and you haven't asked him about it or, you haven't, like, asked him the big question yet?"

"OH MY FUCK, not THE-QUESTION-the-question. It's new. IT'S NEW! It happened one time! I haven't even asked him if it's a, like.... uh. A regular. Thing. I haven't asked if it was like--"

"Like a friends-with-benefits thing?"

"Exactly! Or another. You know. Thing."

"You.... Dean, you do know friends with benefits don't exist, right? I mean, I know you never had to go through the bad-idea-good-idea college hookup thing but, I mean. Jesus. You know Cas loves you, right?"

"Shut the fuck up!"

"That's--" exasperated sigh. "Dean. Look. You're the one who brought it up. I'm just laying it out perfectly clear to you." Sam says the next sentence in staccato, every word clear as a bell so it will sink into Dean's thick skull. "Cas. doesn't. look. at. any. one. else. the. way. he. looks. at. you."

He lets that sit for a few seconds.

"And you calling me telling me that you busted some secret out-- shit, Dean. There have been times you haven't let me in on a secret for years. Like I need any more convincing than you straight-up telling me you consider someone as important as you consider me."

And that really is it. The end-all-be-all of love declarations in the Winchester tongue: 'As important as Sammy.' Dean can count on his fingers the things that have ever earned that kind of placement.

"I gotta go talk to-- Did you tell him what he wanted to know about the sigils on the pages?"

"No, I didn't get to."

"Hold on," Dean turns away from the growing light outside. "I'll go hand the phone ove--"

From the stunned silence on the other end, Sam guesses, "He's right behind you, isn't he."
"Yeah," Dean says. "Uh. Here's Cas."

Cas steps out of the shadow of the hall and takes Dean's phone out of his hand. He eyes Dean calmly for a moment before he puts the phone to his ear. Then he steps around Dean to refill his own coffee mug and Dean retreats to the kitchen to convince himself that whatever Cas heard wasn't bad.

Or he would be doing that. If he wasn't blanking on everything he'd just said.

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Cas hangs up with Sam as a bunch of the little timers are going off and the magnets are somehow all tripping right off the metal and out of Dean's hands as he's trying to silence them and he's already stepped on two of the damn things and they don't have many left and Dean's juggling trays and everything's hot and Cas just tosses the phone down to go deal with him. To, like, save him from himself at this point.

Once they get everything safely out and onto the cooling racks, Cas hands the phone back.

"Sam tell you what you need?"

Cas frowns. "Yes. I don't think what he's found is as significant as he was hoping. He said he'll be on his way back in the afternoon. He has images and copies. I should be able to verify what it is when I can see the full document."

"What about the sigils?"

"There were none of significance that he could see. It doesn't sound promising."

"Oh," Dean nods. "Okay. Well. We'll see."

"Mm."

They nod together for a drawn-out moment.

"I informed Sam that when he returns he should check in to another room."

"O--okay. So. You're--"

"Staying, yes. You had a question for me?"

"Ah. Well."

"I heard you talking about it."

"Yeah."

"Sam encouraged me to persist in asking. He said that if I made it awkward enough, you would eventually break down and answer in some way, no matter how incomprehensible."

Dean blows out a big, whooshing breath. It should not be that easy to get his number, but honestly? Cas is one half of this thing. There's not much of a secret to keep.

"Uh. Yeah. So." Dean decides he will not look down at his feet for this. "You're staying," he addresses Cas definitively, looking for confirmation.

Cas nods once; solid, affirmative. "Ask, Dean."
He can do this. He wants to do this. He asked heavy questions before, need-to-know questions, when they were naked. This is an extension of that. This is for clarity's sake. This is what he really wants to know.

"Will you stay with me?" He asks.

"Yes."

"Will you--" Dean steps forward and crowds Cas against their workstation. "Will you let me touch you?"

"Yes," Cas says.

Dean puts his hands on Cas's sides and sweeps them down to his hips. Cas puts his hands on Dean's arms and pulls him nearer.

"Will you tell me before you leave?" Dean asks, close to him. "Will you tell me before you're unhappy so I have time to fix it?"

"I'm not leaving."

"Not yet."

"Not."

"Not until we fix you."

"Will you please stop qualifying it for me?" Cas angles his head in that little way that used to look intensely fucking dangerous, backed up by the trench coat and maybe a single smear of blood on his lip and the entire wrath of God behind his eyes. "I am not leaving."

"What if we find you a way back to heaven?"

"Even with power, I would stay. As it is my choice to stay."

"With me and Sam."

Cas brings his hands up to touch the sides of Dean's face. "For you," he clarifies.

Dean breathes, ragged. "Can I kiss you?"

"Yes." He pulls Dean forward.

Cas works on him for a little while. He doesn't let Dean get far, draws him back in to kiss again when he pulls away. He kisses Dean until he's smiling. Until he looks as happy as he does when he's pulled a new pie out of the oven.

Castiel lets Dean escape at last when there's a rapping at the front door. Tracy, here early to set up the front, pull down the chairs, set up her laptop, start the tea, have her breakfast. Cas moves back to the counter to pull the muffins out of their pans. Dean pauses to look back at him in the orange light of the hallway, sunrise on the softer curves of his features, reddening the scruff on his face, making him golden. Cas's smile in response is slow and promising.

He knows there is a human saying, "made with love." If this were a children's tale, a story, he thinks, every cake and tart they made would taste sweeter, every bread more fragrant.
As far as fragrant, well. He didn't get very far into the focaccia toppings yesterday. Today perhaps tomato, oregano, parmesan.
Man, Castiel thinks, cannot live by bread alone. Nor should he, when the fruit of the vine and the
tree is so abundant. Not to mention chicken wings, salmon, ricotta cheese. And Sam has informed
him that he also ought to take a multivitamin.

"Those are for joggers," Dean says, disdainfully, in the health aisle at the supermarket. "Look at me,
I don't use that crap." Cas looks at him, up and down, and then puts the bottle in the basket. "Hey,"
says Dean. Dean scowls and stomps down the aisle until he stops, suddenly, by a cardboard display.
"Look," he says, wonderingly. "Gummy vitamins. Wow." He holds up an oversized plastic jar.
"They look like candy."

"If we pretend they are candy," Cas asks, "will you take them?"

"Shut up," says Dean, but he doesn't put them down. Cas takes them out of his hands and drops
them in the basket.

Most of what they eat, right now, comes from the bakery: sweets and breads and sandwiches.
Leftover fruit and vegetables, cut up into salad, or eaten raw in between shifts. But sometimes they
come here when they're tired of their own cooking, to buy things that Dean calls comfort food, and
Sam calls junk. Cas understands. This body craves sugars and fats now, complex carbohydrates, salt,
something called Dr. Pepper. It's a recent development that Dean turns his nose up at bread that
comes in plastic bags- he likes to stand in front of the supermarket bakery and poke at the crusts and
shake his head slowly, sadly, somehow this entertains him- but his eyes still light up at Fritos, like a
child's. Cas supposes that is the result of many years spent eating out of gas station racks, motel
vending machines. Human attachment to food consumed in childhood- no matter how shitty- is
easily observed. He doesn't have the same attachments. Except maybe to cheeseburgers.

The supermarket has long since stopped being overwhelming to him, except in isolated moments,
like when he can't seem to find the mustard, in a fucking endless sea of jars and squeeze bottles and
spreads and dips. There are aspects of consumer choice which still elude him, modern American
capitalism is a wilderness, but then, he has survived wilderness. He has been wilderness; wild. Lost.
He is not lost now, in aisle five, with the canned goods. Dean is beside him, complaining about the
price of artichoke hearts. He leans into Cas- warm, solid, smelling like the good olive oil they
brushed onto rolls this morning- and says, "Can you believe this?"

Sometimes, he can't.

He remembers emmer in Egypt- acres of it, cut through with irrigation ditches, rustling in the wind.
He remembers harvests and women singing; people pounded grain between stones, and wore down
their teeth with grit and meal. When he looked for God he looked in wheat fields, golden places,
running his vessel's fingers through the stalks, waiting for a sign, a sense, an answer. There was
never anything but wheat there. And sky. He wonders if he could buy emmer now, through some
sort of health food supplier, and makes a mental note to ask Sam. He should get barley, too. He
could experiment with the leavening process; use grain steeped in wine, as men once did. He could
make sourdough from beer. Dean might appreciate being part of that process. Then he watches Dean
try to choose between two flavors of pretzels, and thinks, I could make better pretzels than that.
Pretzels that Dean would infinitely prefer. He says so. "Pretzels?" Dean asks, looking thoughtful.
"Do bakeries make pretzels?"

"Technically, they are a baked good."
"Yeah, but," Dean says, sort of nonsensically. "Are they really our thing?"

"I don’t know," Cas says. Dean looks at him.

"Okay, sure," he says, and puts back both bags. "Cool."

The first few batches are a dismal failure. Apparently, watching a youtube video on how to twist them correctly was not the equivalent of learning from a professional. But eventually they come out of the oven fat and golden, crisp on the outside and chewy on the inside, tender, salty, crusted and perfect. Dean burns his fingers and his tongue on them, walks around all day with a stub of pretzel stuck into the corner of his mouth, munching on it casually, like a chipmunk. He's lavish with his praise. "Holy crap," Dean says. "I'm never buying a store pretzel again."

Cas watches him and feels a satisfaction that's almost like fullness, like a good meal has settled somewhere under his heart. It's a covetous satisfaction, possessive, aching: but also somehow the purest feeling he's had in months. With honey out of the rock should I have satisfied thee, the Book says.

He wonders if he can learn to make Fritos.
One morning, about a month into this misadventure, Dean gets weird. At least, that's Sam's description. It's the only thing that fits. Dean ignores him and keeps spraying the range top and wiping it down until it's sparkling and then standing on the short stepladder to wipe the tops of the shelving units, the parts nobody can reach. After, Dean holds the rag at arm's length and makes pained faces at it.

"Look at this," he goes. "Gross." He stares up at the ceiling, into the corners, and his face twists up a little more. "Cas," he says. "Get me the broom." Cas hands it to him, looking curious, and Dean starts to brush the top corners of the kitchen, batting at the invisible cobwebs that apparently only he can see.

"Sweeping the ceiling," Cas says, thoughtfully. He turns to Sam. "This is normal?"

"Nothing Dean does is normal," says Sam. Dean swings the broom in his direction. "Hey, watch it!" He slaps the broom away and Dean goes back to the corners. After a minute, Dean hops down, leans the broom against the counter, and beams broadly at Sam and Cas. Sam and Cas stare back, suspiciously. Sam thinks about saying *christo*.

"I've been thinking," says Dean, and Sam says-

"Not it." It's immediate, automatic. This is courtesy of years of close quarters and unsavory task lists getting split up. He's already got one finger against his nose, for good measure. Dean scowls at him, and then looks at Cas. Cas looks back and then turns a narrow glare on Sam. His eyes go squinty and dangerous. It's actually kind of frightening.

"Am I being volunteered for something?" he asks. "Sam?"

"Uh," says Sam.

"This place needs a deep cleaning," says Dean. "The works."

"Our sanitation standards are exemplary," Cas protests. Dean gives him a blank face, so Cas turns back to Sam again. "Is there an issue?"

Yeah, Sam thinks. There's an *issue*.

"It'll be fun!" Dean says. Wow, Sam wonders; he's either become an incredible liar since yesterday, or he really believes the thing he just said.

"Fun," Cas repeats, grimly. He looks at Dean, at Dean's eager face, and then something changes in his expression. It gets- Sam would call it *kinder*. "Okay," Cas says.

"Awesome," says Dean. He starts pointing at the dry goods bins and the racks against the wall. "Tomorrow we can tackle the big stuff. I want to move all the shelves and scrub under them. We can do the walk-in, and then you and I-

Sam walks out somewhere between Dean saying *de-greaser* and talking confidentially about how he's pretty sure there's still, and Sam quotes, "dead guy fingerprints all over everything from the last owner." Sam does not have the heart to remind him that in all their years of hunting, contamination via dead guy fingerprints was never an actual concern. But Cas seems intent on listening, on leaning closer when Dean shows him the greasy dust on the underside of the shelves, the tiny traces of dirt in
the nonskid mats, acting like Dean is not a mutant for wanting to autoclave and Lysol every piece of equipment they own.

It's strange to watch, from the outside. Sam wonders sometimes if Dean can read the large-print writing hovering over Cas's head, or if Dean is still playing that game with himself where he ignores reality until reality chews off one of his limbs. Honestly, Sam's never sure what's really going on with either of them. Sometimes there used to be this angry silence that came off both of them in waves, and sometimes now there's still this quiet tension, when they are all sitting in the room together but only Dean and Cas are really there. Sam knows Dean's not great with friendship- not from lack of trying, but from, well, a lack of people living- but somehow this thing with Cas always snaps back into place, rubber-band style, in between the horror shows. Sam likes Cas, likes him a lot. He's honestly glad they've added a third wheel onto the tottering bicycle that used to be Team Winchester, because it might be new and strange, but for now it feels steadier. It feels good. Dean talks to Cas differently than he talks to Sam, maybe because he never had to babysit him or lie to him about the tooth fairy. Who knows. And Sam can talk to Cas about things Dean cares zero percent about, like variations in Assyrian magical signs, or the history of the Dewey Decimal system. Sam likes it. Sam just doesn't know how long it will last. From the kitchen, he hears a burst of laughter.

He hopes it lasts a while.

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The next morning Sam gets up for a run and takes the long way back, stopping in a public park to sit for a while and watch the sun come up across the pond. He likes this town, likes this neighborhood, even if he still kind of feels like an imposter among the nice folks here. People recognize him and wave when he passes them, more and more often; outside of the bakery, he gets introduced to people's daughters and sisters and sometimes grandsons. He appreciates the attention and the kindness. There's just no polite way to tell people from the Rotary Club or Saint Pete's that you used to sleep with demons. That you've been killing things and putting the bodies in your trunk for a frigging decade. That you think about hell sometimes, and not abstractly. That you're, you know. Kind of- wrong. Sam watches the ducks at the pond's edge bob around and waddle out and preen themselves, nibbling at their fluffy under-feathers, quacking in irritation at each other. After a while, he goes back to the motel and takes a shower. Dean and Cas are already up and gone by then, probably off on Dean's crusade to clear the world of dead guy fingerprints. Sam sits and reads the newspaper and checks his email and finally sighs and shuts the laptop and thinks, shit. And goes to the bakery.

He lets himself in by the back door, quietly, just in case Dean still plans to corner him and make him scrub each individual coil on the back of the refrigerators. But it wouldn't have mattered: Sam could have come in banging pots and pans together, blowing a kazoo, and nobody would have heard him. Dean's got the radio up so loud it's vibrating the racks.

_Dancing days are here again, as the summer evenings grow._ Sam can hear Robert Plant crooning over the guitars, but it takes him a second to realize Dean is singing along. Kind of tunelessly, but loudly and emphatically, from somewhere in the walk-in. Sam stands against the doorframe and listens for a second, amused, but also really- he doesn't exactly know. It kind of hurts, in a good way, to hear Dean singing. Even if he sounds like crap. He used to wail along with everything when he was a teenager, to piss Sam off, and then sometimes he used to sing along with the radio in the car, sort of unconsciously, just to pass the time. But he hasn't done it in a long time. Sam stands there a minute too long and feels another presence in the hall behind him. He turns and it's Cas, silent and still, hands balanced on top of his broom. He smiles sort of distantly at Sam, eyes sliding across the room to land on the door to the walk-in.
"He's not a skilled singer," Cas says.

"Nice to hear it, though," Sam says, surprised at his own honesty. Cas nods at him.

"Good," says Cas, at last. "It's good." He stands there for a second longer and then picks up his dustpan and goes back to sweeping the edges of the hallway, carefully, slowly, like he can pick up every atom of dirt that way. He turns the corner, heading for the dining room, and disappears from sight. Good, Sam thinks. Like the good word, the good news, maybe. Like what the Bible calls God. Not for the first time, Sam wonders if they will ever know what is really going on in Cas's head.

Sam starts to take some of the bins down and wipe them off, and after a little bit he ties an apron on and scrubs down the workstations, and that's where Dean finds him. Dean looks so absurdly delighted to see him that Sam feels like a fool for trying to shut this down in the first place.

"Hey!" Dean says. "Joining the party?" He's tied a bandana around his head and there's a streak of grease along one side of his face; his sleeves are rolled up and he's wearing one of the old aprons they found under the cash register, with an embroidered daisy over the pocket. He looks like the world's biggest dork. Sam loves him. Not that Sam is going to say that out loud right now. Instead:

"You look like an idiot," Sam says.

"Your face looks like an idiot," says Dean. He grins and swoops away, looking for another pack of sponges.

It takes most of the day for Dean to finally put an arm around each of their shoulders and say, "Good job," and throw his wrecked apron over the back of a dining-room chair. Exhausted, they follow him out to the back dock, where he has apparently already dragged out a cooler and filled it with a couple of six-packs and a chunk of the ice they took from their defrosted second freezer. The three of them sit on the stoop or on the ground, drinking their first beers too quick and then lingering over the second, watching the sun start to consider tipping down behind the trees. Dean and Cas are discussing the finer points of some awful Sy Fy channel monster movie they must've watched together ("Dinocroc is a misnomer," Cas says. "Technically, a crocodile is already an archosaur descended from-" okay, Sam just can't keep up with this crap) and Sam is drifting away in the feeling of honest hard labor and the pleasant sensation of a third beer. And somewhere in his reverie Dean elbows him and says, "You going to do something about that, or what?" Sam's head swivels around.

"What?" It takes him a second, but then he sees it: halfway across the employee lot, there's a single car and a woman struggling to get two enormous boxes out of the back of it, while also holding onto a full tote bag. It takes him another second to realize the woman is Marta. "Oh," says Sam, feeling sort of surprised. He doesn't get up right away. He is suddenly conscious of his dirty shirt and dirtier jeans, the wreck of his hair tied up into a kind of ponytail.

"Well?" says Dean. "You gonna help the lady, or what?" Dean gives Cas a sly look over his shoulder. "Koo-koo ka chaw," Dean says, and Cas's face splits into a grin, and that's it, Sam knows now that he should never have shown Arrested Development to these fucking jerks. Sam sets his beer down and mutters under his breath as he walks away.

"Chee-chaw," says Cas, sort of awkwardly, to Sam's back. Sam hears Dean's hysterical bray of laughter and thigh-slapping and tries not to think about killing them both and putting their bodies into the nation's newly cleanest walk-in refrigerator. He comes up behind Marta and clears his throat and she turns around.

"Hi," he says. Marta smiles at him, looks him up and down- seriously, like, from his feet to the top of his head, Sam feels naked- and then hands him an enormous box without saying a word. He takes it
obediently and she sets a second box on top of it.

"I know you can take it, tall boy," she says, grinning. "Come on." She leads Sam through the back of her shop, flicking a light on as she goes. The boxes are filled with floral wire, tape, ribbons, all kinds of crap that Sam can't exactly identify. She tells him where to set them down and then bustles around for a second, putting things where they belong. And then she says: "Hold on. I've got something for you." And she goes to the window, pulls aside a small flat of potted herbs, sorts through them for a second, and pulls out a small clay pot with a little fern-like plant swaying delicately on thin stems. She puts it on the counter in front of Sam. "Feliz cumpleaños," she says. "I never got you anything for your birthday."

"I- thank you," Sam says, in awe. "You didn't have to." He picks it up and turns it around. "It's really nice." He inhales. "It smells great. Dill?"

"Sí," she says. "Tastes even better. And keeps your breath sweet."


"Good for your stomach, good for your liver, good in tea," she says, and then looks thoughtful. "Good against evil, they say, too."

"What?" Sam says, probably too urgently. Marta shakes her head.

"What can I say, the Farmer's Almanac is full of that stuff." She smiles at him. "Hope it's good for you, Sam."

He thanks her and makes it out of the store without making a complete fool of himself; Dean and Cas are still sitting there on the stoop, making the occasional chicken noise, heads bent together conspiratorially. They see him at the same time and Dean starts to cluck in his direction. Sam puts a hand up.

"No," he says. "No, stop it, enough." Dean scowls. Sam ignores him. "You guys hungry? I'm starving. You know, there's a new salad bar at-"

"Vetoed," says Dean, flatly.

"Maybe the burgers from-"

"Not again," Sam sighs.

"It's two for one night at El Azteca," Cas says, with practiced calm, like he's just reciting a dictionary entry. "Not that I'm hoping to influence anything." He looks placid for a moment but then Sam catches him shooting a glance at the back of Dean's head, like he is sending some sort of telepathic laser-beam that is just saying tacos tacos tacos do not make me repeat myself it's humiliating.

"Yeah, tacos," says Dean. He turns around. "You guys up for tacos?"

"Okay," Cas says, casually. Sam cannot fucking believe that he is witnessing this.

"Meet you guys there," he says.

He swings back to the motel instead of going straight to the restaurant; he unlocks the door and puts the dill plant on the table. He changes his shirt, then gets a paper plate from their little stack of kitchen stuff, and sets it on the windowsill. He puts the dill plant on top of that in its little clay pot and stares at it for a minute. It's fresh and green and healthy-looking, and it has soft little leaves that
brush against Sam's hand and send a faint, pleasant shiver up the back of his neck. It's going to eat sunlight and make oxygen and taste really nice on baked potatoes. It's going to grow. It's good, he thinks. And smiles while he locks up, while he walks across the parking lot, while he turns the engine over.

He sings along to the radio in the car.
thirty-one

Sam gets back into town from his hunt in the middle of the night. He's exhausted from the drive and it doesn't help that he raps on the window at the front for five whole minutes before someone comes up to give him a new room. He'll have to get his stuff out of Dean... and Cas's room sometime tomorrow. All he can think about right now is a shower and sleep. Or maybe a shower in the morning, sleep now. Getting a room with one massive bed all to himself puts him in the wing opposite Dean's, across the parking lot.

He thinks that's great because, on the off chance that they're screwing around, he won't have to hear his brother's, you know, sex sounds and. Yikes. Other stuff.

He thinks this right up until 5 a.m. when his new neighbors decide to go for an early-morning round of 'Just how squeaky can this bed get?'

Sam supposes he could head out to the bakery, talk to Cas about the spell, show him all the notes and copies--

Then he remembers it's Saturday. Not even the frigging bakers should be up today, at this hour.

He turns the tv on to static, the volume on low; rolls over, finds a cooler spot in the sheets. He listens specifically to the white noise and sinks back off to sleep. Though even bed springs are a familiar enough rhythm to a boy who grew up in motels.

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Dean had climbed over Cas, onto his other side, to re-settle into sleep when their brains woke them at 4 a.m. and the alarm didn't.

Now he wakes with the sun glowing bright behind the thin curtains. He finds his hand is all up under Castiel's shirt, arm resting across his belly, fingers fit to his ribs. Cas breathes in and out quietly. He started off with a perfectly healed vessel-turned-body when he fell, and he hasn't yet picked up the years of gunk, the layers of dust that clog the sinuses and throats of your average adult. No snoring. Dean stays still and feels the air move through him.

He withdraws, after a short while, to decide if he's gonna get up. To decide what all he's going to do with the morning. He leans over and catches the digits on the alarm clock. 9:32 a.m. He could sleep longer but he'll have to make that decision after a piss and possibly half a glass of water. His morning breath tastes way gross.

Cas doesn't stir and Dean attempts not to jostle him too bad even through the process of untangling himself from their loose hold on one another. Cas had a grip on the back of Dean's shirt, their ankles had been tangled, and the sheets with them.

Dean decides to just go ahead and brush his teeth. Maybe make out with Cas until their fucking lips get tired. Until Cas starts grousing about wanting hash browns.

He shucks his shirt before he crawls back in.

Dean climbs over Castiel's body and cages him in, the sheet slipping down between them.

He starts on Cas's neck. Long, wet, lush kisses with tongue until there are fingers in his hair, not tugging but asking attention.
He moves up to Cas's lips and kisses them once.

"What time is it?" Cas asks, just barely conscious.

"Ten," Dean fibs. "Just lay there. Let me do this until eleven? Then it'll be lunch."

Cas's eyes fall closed again. "Mm," he agrees.

Dean curls down into him, pressing in tight, letting his hands slide up under Cas's shirt again and dig between him and the bed to feel the muscles in his back, sleep warm and soft.

He takes Cas's mouth again for a good long while, moves down to his shoulders and back to his neck, eventually. Cas just holds on, arms circling Dean wherever they may fall. When Dean asks to take off his shirt, he lets go and allows it.

Then Dean spends a lot of time on his collarbones, kissing and sucking. He sucks harder sometimes and bites lightly until one time he asks, "Can I?"

Cas cracks his eyes open and questions him with a glance. Dean descends on the soft flesh of his shoulder and nips. Then bites a little harder.

"Yes," Cas says, though he's mostly curious what the question even means.

It turns out to mean that Dean is gonna bite down light and then suck hard at the skin on the softer flesh, making it red, bringing a bruise to the surface.

Dean looks up, after, like, that's okay, right?

Cas sits up a little. He's more awake, and he liked the bite of that. The pull and the warmth after. The glisten of Dean's mouth left drying on his skin.

"Do that again," he requests. So Dean dives for the base of his throat this time and sucks a mark there. Kisses it, soothes it with his tongue after.

"Okay," Cas says, now familiar with the process. And yanks Dean's mouth to his for a while longer.

Dean lifts him against the pillows and pulls back eventually to ask, a little breathless, "Cas. Lemme do something else?"

He only nods rapidly, reaching to pull Dean back to him. Before he can, Dean sucks his own fingers into his mouth, leaving saliva on them, too.

Dean kisses him again while he pushes his hands back underneath, then down into the back of Cas's shorts to knead his ass for a while before he slips his fingers deeper.

Cas stops. His mouth falls away from Dean's and he doesn't breathe in or out. He waits.

Dean watches his eyes while his fingers move, seeking, pressing, easing around, trying to be less shocking than soothing.

"This okay? Cas, talk to me."

"I don't know," Cas finally says on an exhale.

"Alright. That's okay."
They work on it for a while. Until Cas is pressing down on his finger, seeking its entrance and pressure. It's clear this is unfamiliar and makes him a little uneasy. He grips Dean's shoulders, the varying pressure of each finger telling Dean when it's okay to push more, or that he should lean Cas back more. That he should move. Should pull his boxers off, spread his legs open.

They go so long, Cas starts to unravel when Dean moves in with just a second finger. So he decides to push with a rhythm, to wrap his hand around Cas's cock and watch the orgasm rattle out of him. His fingers shudder down Dean's arms and fall, pulling Dean's hands away from where he's sensitive. The breath that's been beating out of him slows down and down.

Dean moves over him and presses his body into Cas, his own erection patient, but growing less so, in his shorts. Cas's hands roam all over him, deciding where they want to be; he pulls Dean's head down and gasps into his mouth at the feel of them together.

Dean considers that, even given where they normally are these days, this is the sweetest breakfast he's had all week.
Sam startles awake at the very loud, very close honk of a car horn.

He sits up breathes, then the horn blasts again.

It only stops when he appears at the window and pulls the curtain aside to see Dean, arm wedged into the cracked window of Sam's stolen beater, hand poised over the steering wheel to honk again.

Cas waves hello from beside him.

Ugh.

Sam gets dressed.

"Welcome back," Dean says, cheery and disgusting.

"It's 12:30," Cas says, like being awake is awful but not having eaten lunch yet is worse.

"Food," Sam says, locking his motel room behind him. "Then function."

Cas heads off back across the lot to the Impala first, in total agreement.

Sam unlocks the back door of his car and gets his bag with the laptop and paperwork, while Dean rattles off their options for lunch, like he's actually gonna let Sam pick this time.

"I want noodles," Sam says, which at least narrows the options and increases the chance that Dean will pick something they can almost agree on.

It's Chinese, mostly so Dean can get fried wontons and egg rolls, Cas can slurp soup that looks like it's still too hot to eat, and Sam can get a mound of noodles as big as his face.

He starts to lay out the details for them. Clears Cas's tea and the soy sauce to the side to bring some of the copies out and present them to Castiel.

"It's not language like a spell, like a list and an incantation. It looks more like a story to me."

"I would agree with you based on the structure," Cas says. "I can see why you thought it might be at first," he circles a few of the prominent characters with his fingers. "Still. A story may lead us to the next path. It may show us where to look or who to consult."

"What, like another prophet?" Dean asks.

"No. More likely the scribe who wrote this down and whatever angel or saint inspired them to do so," Cas says.

"Chasing more dead guys," Sam guesses.

Cas pours himself more tea and agrees, seemingly unconcerned.

Sam sits across from the two of them, watching Cas's apathy amplify Dean's relief with every word spoken or shrugged off.
He shuffles the papers away, back into his bag. Doesn't bother with the rest of the scribbles he worked out, the translations, the supporting texts, any of it. That scroll sat underground for thousands of years before it sat in a university library for another forty. It will certainly hold until the end of the summer.

"So, it's Saturday," Sam prompts. "What else have we got going on?"

Dean explains how Tracy was working on this small commission at the beginning of the week: A flyer for some sort of festival that would be happening downtown, lakeside, over the weekend. Cas wanted to check it out and Dean wasn't opposed. A local brewer was supposed to be sampling beer and a lot of local restaurants were supposed to be set up selling paper plates stacked with their specialties.

Tracy had said there was still plenty of room available for another vendor, but Dean didn't want to have to rush to concoct a small but completely representative selection of their offerings. Thanks to their combined interest in basically all things edible, Dean and Cas didn't really have a safe little menu of items they thought would really stand for what the bakery is.

Shit's just different every damn day.

They hear music from the parking lot, as soon as they get out of the car, out past the green field and the lake shore. The town is small, but they make a good showing. There are kids everywhere and food and games. Crafts. Like a buttload of crafts. Little old ladies with crochet pieces flagging in the slight breeze, hippies with recycled soda can mobiles, painters both plain and eccentric.

Dean pauses after they get into the mix for a while. He just kind of tosses up his hands and says, "I guess it's a fucking craft fair?"

Sam shrugs. He's just happy to be outside right now. There's all sorts of things that smell delicious and there's people. People everywhere. So much life and ease. He starts to walk towards the small band shell at the corner of the park when a blissed-out six-year-old with powdered sugar on his face and absolutely no spark of actual consciousness nearly runs into him.

The kid looks all the way up, up, up at him, chewing, and then just goes on his way.

"What was that?" Cas says, eyes trailing the kid, a covetous gaze on the sagging paper plate he was holding. It was piled high with a messy pastry of some kind.

"Oh, shit. That's right," Dean's eyes light up. "Cas," he claps him on the shoulder and then tugs, pulling him in the direction of the food vendors. "Let me introduce you to funnel cake."

"Mother. Fucker." Dean mutters darkly.

"What?" Sam asks. He's not sure, but he thinks he maybe even hears Cas, like, growl?

Dean and Castiel both just hang there with food half-way to their mouths and they're glaring at one of the food tents. Trays are steaming and there's a small line of people queued up to get what looks like meatballs, pizza, maybe even those little deep-fried dough bites.
Sam thinks he recognizes the logo on the aprons the tent's crew are sporting, but he has to wait for the breeze to flip their banner back over to confirm. In bold, red letters ('in a completely overused font,' he can almost hear Tracy say) it reads: Mario's.

"I don't like them," Cas says, a lot more mild than how murderous he looks.

"Guys," Sam says in a warning voice. "Get over it."

"'Get the fuck over it,' he says," Dean elbows Cas. "Sam's all Team Mario all of a sudden. Look! Look," Dean points to a man on a cell phone, pacing behind the tent. "There's the shady bastard right there."

Cas eyes Dean like they've friggin' pre-conspired about the moment when they finally came face-to-face with the infamous Mario.

They'd already broken in and found nothing demonic about the Italian restaurant in the shopping center next door. But they'd also found what they believed to be Marta's fresh herbs in their breadcrumbs. "Mutilated and stored in the freezer," Dean had cursed, like that was the icing on top of the whole insulting cake.

To Dean, it had proven their guilt in withholding bread from the bakery's customers. But instead of asking the owner to simply cease and desist his bread bowl scheme, Dean had come back in during business hours and splashed salted holy water in the face of every employee.

Sam had only been filled in on it right before it happened. He ran over, got Dean to put the bottle of water down, and explained that Dean simply wanted an apology for not asking the bakery to strike the deal in the first place.

The manager on duty had flatly refused and sent them out before he called the cops.

The bread bowl offer did stop, to their knowledge, but they'd never once met Mario in person.

"Who knows what he is," Dean grumbles.

"Besides a dick, I'm still leaning towards demon," Cas says.

God.

They are really perfect for each other.

Sam turns about-face and heads towards the barbeque stand.

"Where you going?" Dean calls after him.

"We're not having a showdown at the community craft fair," Sam declares. And keeps walking.
The air conditioning fails. They've got the paperwork on the building straightened out. The money isn't all theirs, but more and more of what the bakery makes goes into actually paying the actual rent. That only makes it worse, of course, because the lackadaisical property owners farm out the A/C maintenance to a real dirtbag company who can't even fit them in for another week. They're not supposed to call someone in themselves and they're not supposed to fiddle with it on their own.

Dean tries anyway and actually does find the problem, but it's an expensive part that needs to be replaced.

He calls Sam up, tells him not to bother coming in. He'll sweat all over the place and be miserable as hell and he can do this work better from his computer, in the relative comfort of the motel:

"Find us the part, or get that motherfucker to pick up the phone and find somebody who will fix it today. Christ, I'd have to put up with less of this shit if we were still squatting in the damn place."

It's great for proofing. Cas is very satisfied with his doughs. But the sweating part is really awful. It makes the already-hot kitchen extra miserable.

He calls Tracy, too, and tells her not to come in. It won't cost her pay; it's their problem and he doesn't want her to have to suffer for it. She thanks him for the call, but doesn't say she won't be in. She'll probably be by later, anyway. It's like they're flypaper for stubborn bastards and Dean can't hate it.

Dean and Cas prop the front doors open and move most the tables and chairs outside onto the walkway, under the shade. It's not much better out there but for a very slight breeze. Dean's hauling the last few chairs out and Cas has disappeared.

A few people come in and ask if they're open and Dean assures them they are but that it might be better to take their stuff to go or to sit outside. It does get a lot of the refrigerated stuff out of the cases, actually.

Dean heads back to the kitchen and Cas is nowhere to be found again. There are some fresh trays of bread obviously just out of the oven but no Cas.

He goes to step into the walk-in for a moment and-- well, there he is.

Cas is sitting on the floor, arms teetering on top of his knees, all his exposed skin still wet with sweat.

"Cas," Dean squats down next to him. "You're gonna catch cold if you keep coming in here and back out into the heat and back in again."

Dean can barely see the shrug through Cas's slump. He frowns and tries to catch Cas's eyes. He's gotten shaggy. He needs a hair cut. Dean sweeps his dark hair back from his forehead and feels how hot he is, feels the clammy, tacky sweat.

"Aw, Cas," he sighs. "Lemme help you, huh?"

Cas lets himself be drawn up into Dean's arms. Dean pulls out the strings of his apron and takes it off him, uses it to mop the sweat from the back of Castiel's neck. "C'mon," he draws Cas out of the walk-in and the heat is like the blast of air when they open an oven.
"Ugh," is all Cas says.

"I know, I know. Look, let's see if you can wait next door with Marta. I'll call Sam back, get him to come pick you up. Okay?"

"I wanted to work on--"

"I know, but you're miserable, Cas. It's okay. Let us get the A/C fixed and then you can get back to your creations."

Cas has barely any more fight in him.

Dean explains to Marta and she kindly takes Cas in and automatically starts tending to him like a plant. She sits him down and gets him water and Dean thanks her and calls Sam back to explain.

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The heat is a bit of a drag on customers, but not by much. A lot of them end up taking their food to go so they'll just end up having to order more takeout boxes. No big deal.

But Dean does turn off every oven except for one, and spends most of his time out front. After Sam came to get Cas, Marta brought over one of the fans she uses in her back greenhouse. It's a bit of a relief but Dean still considers closing up shop early.

It's miserable. It's miserable mostly because it reminds him that he damn well doesn't have to be here. He's got no obligation to this place. They could skip town at a moment's notice. They have a home they could get back to - the bunker. A whole other life they could be working at. So why sit here, uncomfortable in the heat? For the customers?

Why not just say, 'fuck the customers' and ditch out for the day? It's not like they sell essentials or anything.

Of course, then, every person who comes in and feels the heat and sees him slumped over the front counter chugging another bottle of water, every one of them smiles sympathetically at him. Most of these people go to shitty jobs every damn day. He goes to a good job and it's shitty only a couple days.

Yeah. He can handle this.

He comes back from the kitchen cracking open another bottle of water and, goddamnit, there's Tracy.

Dean doesn't even get to say, "Seriously, Trace, head on back home," because she's taping up this big blue posterboard in the front window.

Sam comes in, trailing Cas. They're both hauling bags in and there's another bag by Tracy's feet.

"Tomorrow," Sam says, with grave significance.

"For?"

"They agreed to get a guy to come out here tomorrow. Until then?" Sam holds up one of the bags and swings it at Dean.

"The hell?" It's freezing cold through the plastic. He sets it down on the counter in front of him and there's what's basically a barrel of vanilla ice cream.
"In the mean time, I suggest you get back there and start making more pies. We've got a new special." Sam points to the poster Tracy just put up. She and Cas push past him to the kitchen to put the other barrels of ice cream into the freezer.

Dean hops over the counter because Sam is still taking up space with all his him and goes to the front to check out the poster.

In big perfect letters: 
Eat the heat! 
~Pie à la mode~

Dean doesn't know what's coming out of him until his fists kind of shake at the sky and he lets loose a "fuck YES" and bolts back to the kitchen.

Tracy is setting up a couple oscillating fans on the side counters and she goes to prop the back door open. "Sam's gonna park his car up close here so nobody tries anything," she explains when Dean starts to protest.

That's good enough for him. He starts getting things set out to make pies and Cas budes up next to him to help.

"You alright? It's still hot as shit back here."

Cas smirks. Then whips his shirt off. He turns to tug at Dean's apron, pulls the loop over his head and tugs at his shirt, too. When he's got Dean naked from the waist up, he kisses Dean's bare shoulder and moves the apron back over his head and into place. Kisses his neck above the apron, kisses his face when he settles it back in place.

They work closely for the rest of the day, cranking out pie after pie, all fruits and flavors. They're shoulder-to-shoulder but Dean manages to take everything out from under Cas's hands; he's the one who does the circuit around the kitchen pulling pies out of the oven, getting them cooled down, slicing them up, taking them up front. This way he gets to check Cas out, repeatedly. Gets to see the muscles that move in Cas's back, just under the skin, as he passes by. Watches a trickle of sweat slide down his back, to the top of the curve of his ass.

Dean smiles to himself. He will be beside Cas tonight, naked on top of the covers, keeping cool on this summer night. They will keep it cold in the room and they won't take it for granted. If Castiel gets chilly, Dean will just pull them together.

But that's tonight. That will be later. Right now, pies à la lotsa fucking mode.

They're such a hit, instead of closing early, they stay open to get rid of as much ice cream as possible.

Marta comes by for some, her skin glowing beautifully in the heat. Sam almost dumps her scoop of ice cream on her chest. Like, almost.

Tracy's mom comes by to pick her up since she left her bike at home when Sam and Cas came to get her. She brings Tracy's little brother who is much more interested in his ice cream than his pie. Mom eats the pie, he eats the rest.

They close up when they get down to the dregs of the ice cream buckets. They sit out on top of the cars and finish off the last of it between the three of them.

Dean mumbles out a thanks to them. For coming back and kind of saving the day. For toughing it out in the steaming shop with him.
It's ice cream for dinner after one of his favorite days in the bakery so far.
thirty-four

Sam's knocking on the front door of the bakery early. Earlier even than Tracy. The sun's not quite up yet, but there he is, yawning and scrubbing a hand through his long hair, laptop bag slung over his shoulder.

Dean unlocks the door for him and has him keep the keys. Then he points at the case. "You want something for breakfast? Or you wanna wait for the bagels Cas is making?"

Sam waves him off. "I'll just grab something. There coffee?"

Dean nods and heads back to the kitchen.

The corner table is still Sam's favorite spot. He can see most the traffic in the shopping center from there. He can see everybody who walks in. It's also sunny and far enough away from the clattering of the kitchen.

The laptop gets plugged in and booted up. He pulls down all the chairs and then, on his own table, he puts down two piles of paperwork, one for the bakery and one for hunting.

He decides on a loaf of nine-grain and heads to the back to borrow a knife and butter. He leans back and watches Cas fold dough for a while as the slices of bread toast.

For as much as Dean and Cas have each gained some bread weight during their time at the bakery, the strength in their hands and arms has only improved. Sam has seen Cas kill things with searing light bursting out of his hands, but watching him now, he thinks he'd have a chance at killing somebody bare-handed, the old-fashioned way. His muscles are corded in his arms, his fingers are all business, relentlessly kneading and pulling.

And it really is just flat-out amazing all the things that they've both dreamed up. The fucking rainbow of pastries in the cases is always shifting according to their interests more than the popularity of the items. They've got regulars, of course, but they've also got customers who are thrilled to try whatever's new, and something is always new.

Marta's online orders have almost doubled when paired with their tarts and cookies. That stupid Italian joint was basically stealing their bread. And Sam hasn't mentioned it to them yet, but the owner of the family barbeque joint up on the corner came around asking if they could come down on the price for the cornbread if it were ordered in bulk. Sam's willing to work with the guy, but he either has to come up on the price or convince Dean to use cheaper ingredients. And he knows Dean won't skimp on shit, so they're at a bit of an impasse in the negotiations.

Sam's just so fucking proud of them. Of this. Of the bakery. Of all they're doing. And even if he can't be trusted to make more than the coffee, he still likes being a part of it. That's why today's paperwork isn't going to be a chore.

He takes his toast and a hunk of butter and leaves them to it in the kitchen.

Tracy comes in a bit before opening, as usual. Sam already did most of the opening procedures so they get to talk for a while and Tracy finally admits to having some new logo designs for the bakery. Dean asked her several weeks ago to try making them a real logo that pops a little. She just hadn't come forward with anything because a menu is one thing, but a logo is another. A logo is kind of a big deal.
She pulls examples up on her laptop and can’t seem to sit there, watching Sam click through them. She busies herself with a piece of pound cake for breakfast and then making tea for herself and bringing a mug back to Cas.

Sam really, genuinely likes all of the designs she came up with. He just wishes they’d thought to change the name of the bakery before it started to carry a reputation. Then it would have been easier to call it something other than just 449 Bakery. He doesn’t know what they would have called it but the three of them definitely would have bickered their way to something creative.

Regardless, Tracy put serious work into these things and they’re gorgeous. Sam’s partial to one of the logos that has these little details that kind of remind him of the decorative engravings on the Colt. They’re not ostentatious and gaudy like some Ed Hardy, Criss Angel skulls and chains bullshit. More of a minimalist, old-west style, dark with some scrollwork.

Tracy finally comes back up front, still kind of shuffling around to avoid him. He smiles at her. "You’ve gotta let me show these to Dean."

She drops into the chair opposite, covering her face. "Ohmigodplease no."

"They’re good!" he says. "Seriously. They’re awesome, Tracy. I’ve even got a favorite already."

She peeks out from between her fingers and hesitates before asking. "Which?"

He turns the computer back around to show her.

"You just like that one because it’s a little floral and it’ll make us match up with Marta."

Sam’s at a complete loss for a long moment. His mouth just hangs open. "I. I. No I don’t!"

Her look is dark and narrow and dubious. "Anyway, don’t you know you’re supposed to pick one of the blue or red ones?"

"What do you mean?"

"Red makes people hungry, blue makes people relax. Red makes people eat more food, blue makes people sit down for longer and spend more money."

Sam frowns, nods. "I’ll have to take your word for it, Miss Marketing Major. But I don’t think that’ll mean shit to Dean. He’ll want it to look like us. Or he’ll want just anything you give him. He’ll be thrilled. So pick the one you think we should use. Or let me go show him!"

She sinks down and buries her head in her arms. "You go show him,“ she says, muffled. "I want no part of this."

"He’s gonna love them,” Sam promises once more before heading back into the kitchen.

Cas saves him from plopping the computer down in the splash of a milk spill. He calls Dean over and they click through the images.

"TRACY," Dean calls. "Tracy! Where is that girl? Get her over here."

"She doesn’t-- she’s embarrassed."

"About fucking what? These are awesome."

"Don’t yell," Cas stops Dean before he calls for her again. "Showing off her work makes her
nervous. You know what that's like, Dean," he points out.

"Dude, lookit this one," Dean keeps saying, pointing to the screen. "Dude. Lookit this one."

Cas's favorite is the one that looks more like handwriting. He likes the personal touch. But when Dean gets to Sam's preferred design, he says, "I like it. It's like a gun."

"Exactly!" Sam says.

"What the fuck. She's been pumping these out for weeks. How are we supposed to choose just one?"

"I donno. I think it's mostly up to you. If you pick one before eleven, though, I can maybe get it printed on the cake boxes."

"Fuck," Dean settles down with his elbows on the counter and leans in closer to look through all the designs again. He just keeps muttering "what the fuck."

"If it helps, she said that a professional would pick a red or blue logo. You're supposed to be able to sell more. People get hungry when they see red and relaxed when they see blue."

Tracy eventually comes over to knock on the side wall. "Shouldn't we unlock the doors? There's a couple people outside already, waiting."

"Sam's got the keys," Dean shoves him off, "you get over here."

She reluctantly joins them. Cas gives her a small smile but she doesn't return it.

"Which one is your favorite?" Dean asks.

"I really don't know. I think you should pick the red one with the rounded text, though."

"Because it'll sell more? Yeah, but whatever. But tell me which one is best."

"Dean," Cas says; a warning.

"I donno which one to pick!"

"Calm down," Cas demands. "I have an idea."

"We should vote on it."

Cas shakes his head. "No. Go out front. Go look at all your work. Go look at the cases and everything we've made here. Go help a customer. Then come back.""Why?"

Cas just shoves him in the same direction Sam was dismissed in.

So Dean does as he's told. He goes out front and he sees the morning sun shining in on the baskets of bread everywhere. He sees the cases glowing, this weird mix of all kinds of tarts and pies and stuff. He bags some stuff up for one woman, toasts bagels for another guy. Everyone seems easy. They're all clearly up and at 'em, either on their way to work or ready to haul their kids around all day. But they're content and they're eating. They're settling in over breakfast and it's just awesome. Dean knows that, sometimes, when you're stopping to eat, just dropping your tired body onto a vinyl seat in a diner or something, it's the wind-down after the fight or maybe it's the calm before the storm. Whatever it is, it's that in-between, ever-present part of life. It's one of the purest forms of humanity.
He knows well that there are creatures out there that never stop. Hell, Cas used to be one of them. Some things are so powerful they don't need to sit down and fuel their bodies and have moments this easy. This is an incredibly human thing and it's fucking gorgeous.

They are feeding people, here. They're selling cakes that sometimes come out a little lopsided and pies where the patchwork on top isn't quite pretty. They sell an absolutely arbitrary collection of whatever it is Cas wants to create that week. He gets to work around the people he loves. He stands by the register handing muffins over, knocking into Sam a little bit as they work. The coffee isn't gourmet, but it's good and it's fresh. It's just what people need and it's a little bit different and it's very much theirs.

When Dean re-enters the kitchen, Tracy is still there talking with Cas. She moves to head back out front, but Dean stops her again, even though her face is flaring all red like it used to when she first started showing up around here.

"I don't want you to take this the wrong way. I'm dead serious. I like every one of them. But," he clicks over to the design Sam had preferred. "What if this one were lighter? Throw some red in there if you really think it helps, but what if it were less gray and gunmetal and more, like, wheat and flour? Like piecrust and coffee?"

"Sepia-toned?" she asks.

Dean shrugs. "I guess." So it's still the scrollwork on a weapon, but it's the color of the bread. A mix of old and new.

At last, Tracy really smiles at him. "I can do that."
Dean had been the one to don the first apron, but he wasn't the first to claim an apron as his. There were six of them hanging on pegs in the hall along with a couple barely-used chef's jackets.

On the first day, Cas had taken a thin white apron and pulled it over his head and been confused about how the ties went because they were so long. So Dean circled around him and pulled the strings around twice and tied them in the back.

"This musta been for one fat baker," Dean had said. They found smaller aprons on the pegs, but Cas liked this one. It covered him everywhere. Dean picked through the other aprons. There was a dark red one and a few others in various off-whites. There was a bright pink one. Dean made a mental note to throw it at Sammy when he wasn't busy getting his mack on with the florist next door. Didn't have to ruin the kid's game.

Dean hung up the white one he'd used to bake Sam's birthday cake and pulled down the dark red one instead. Way cooler, he decided, with no frame of reference.

He wore the jackets until he realized why they were so clean and pristine: It was way too hot in the kitchen to be wearing so many layers. He'd never been this under-dressed in his life, just jeans and a t-shirt and an apron hanging off him all the time.

They tended to wear their aprons until they got something truly goopy and unholy on them like a separated mix with sour cream, eggs, and lemon juice. They'd make a pile of them and have to tote them back to the motel for laundry day.

But not really? Because aprons just kept appearing?

They found four more in the office. There was a grossly yellow apron that became Cas's new favorite. It had black stripes along the top and bottom and the belt was black. It reminded him of a bee.

There was also an apron with a strawberry pattern and a frill along the bottom. That had started a Winchester wrestling match and when Sam successfully pinned Dean to the office chair and tied it around him, he stood, towered above his brother, victorious, and proclaimed him "Strawberry Short Cake."

There were six small coin-operated lockers in the hall. Two of them had aprons at the bottom. One was black and white check and Sam actually really liked that one. "Ska apron!" he said, and put it on immediately. He couldn't stand how short it came, though, so he ended up folding it over and tying it around his waist that way. It had nice pockets.

Tracy took the one Sam gave her, at first. Then she found another one in the pantry that she liked better. It said "baker babe" and she thought it was really nice; a deep blue with sliver type. But then she realized it made people stare at her chest. Not cool. She traded it in for one Cas found buried in the pantry. Though even after she washed it, it still looked kinda dingy, it was pretty awesome. It might have been an actual bag at some point, the fabric rough and brown, black lining sewn all around the edges. There were words all over it in Portuguese and CAFÉ DO BRASIL printed big on the side.

They found several while they were deep-cleaning the bakery. One of them was deep green with a
daisy emblazoned on the pocket. It was wedged up inside what they had thought was a fake drawer under the register. Dean liked the deep green and would wear it on occasion shamelessly, though the strawberry print one had mysteriously been lost at the laundromat. He could rock flowers but he couldn't be known as "short cake" for anything.

Their finest find was when they moved the spare freezer around. After a wash it cleaned up to be--"YES. Plaid." Dean all but hugged the blue plaid apron to him and coveted it. Wore it and washed it and wore it and washed it.

There were a few more white aprons and a badass black chef's jacket in various storage areas. They even found one wedged behind the spare toilet paper in the cabinet of the tiny water closet.

Leopard print. Ewww.

Even with this massive and strange collection of aprons, the three of them still cruised aprons every time they went to a department store. There was one that looked like the pages of a local atlas that Sam really wanted. They resisted, though. Because they'd probably find more in the bakery eventually.
Sometimes Dean has the dumbest thoughts. Just the dumbest. Okay, Sam hates it when he talks like that. Cas hates it even worse. Once in a while when Dean says something like, but then, I'm just a grunt, or when he talks about being a sad old drop-out, Cas will look at him—well, Cas looks at him the way he does when Dean says, in the middle of Inspector Lewis, that British mystery shows are for doily-covered cat ladies. Like Cas is going to flex his hands and find a crowbar. When Dean questions his own intelligence, Cas looks at him like he is going to murder Dean for talking so much shit about Castiel's favorite person. Dean doesn't know what to do with that particular set of data, except to feel sort of guiltily good about it.

But honestly, sometimes, these thoughts. Maybe he should call them fantasies. Maybe he should file them away properly in the empty mental drawers he has sitting around, where normal people put their hopes and dreams: a bigger house, a better car, employee of the month, meeting Robert DeNiro, having grandkids, whatever. Dean remembers having big, ridiculous dreams when he was really little, like, he'd be the first hunter-fireman, fighting werewolves in a burning building and carrying whole families out alive. Or that one where they'd find his mom, working as a diner waitress with amnesia, but that when she saw Dean she'd put her hands to her mouth and go, I remember everything, and he would hold her and hold her and hold her. God, they seem so fucking ridiculous in daylight. As a kid Dean would lie in the dark next to Sam on some shitty motel bed, listening to the sound of television blaring in the next room or trucks passing on the highway. He'd make things up until he fell asleep. He'd put his hands over his eyes to block the streetlights, and imagine himself as a grown man, tall and strong, kicking doors in, pulling grateful people out of basements and caves, Sam and his dad beaming at him, waving, proud, safe. He'd imagine real birthday parties with cake and streamers, like people had in sitcoms. He'd imagine finally visiting the ocean, teaching Sam how to make sandcastles. Inside his tiny brain Dean could eat a whole pizza, hang out with the A-Team, sail to the moon. Dean's head was full of that shit until, one day, it just wasn't. He doesn't know exactly when it happened. But at a certain point he stopped putting his hands over his eyes, and started just staring up at the ceiling. He can remember a hundred different drop-ceilings, stained wallpapers, popcorn plaster gathering cobwebs. He remembers so few of his old dreams.

It sneaks up on him sometimes now, when Cas is still and soft next to him, sleeping like an innocent man with his hands open and his face inclined towards Dean, like even in sleep he's listening, attentive, head tilted, ready. It makes Dean's heart go quiet, Cas looking at him like that. Like Dean is a source of chlorophyll. Which would make Cas some kind of, whatever, giant sunflower. Wow. Once again, thank fuck Cas can't read Dean's mind anymore. But one minute Dean is looking at Cas's closed eyes and the lashes dark against his cheek, and then there's like—ugh, Dean doesn't want to admit this.

It's not even, like, sexual. It would be better if it was. But there's just this yard. Maybe. There's a couple of lawn chairs and a barbecue grill and maybe a hammock, Cas sitting there in cargo shorts with the legs rolled up a little more, his bare hairy calves propped up on a cooler, telling Dean how he likes his steak. And Sam is carrying potato salad and Dean can almost even see himself, cracking a beer, telling Sam what a good little helper he is, ducking a smack to the back of his head, leaning down to kiss Cas on the mouth. Dean doesn't know where they are or why they're there. He just knows they're happy. He just knows they're good. And he can see it playing in his head like a movie, a movie that repeats itself sometimes, unexpectedly, while he puts his back into the kneading or chops onions or swabs down the kitchen floor or almost falls asleep. He didn't ask to see it. He just does. It makes him want to put his hands over his eyes so the picture clears up, so it almost feels real. It makes him feel like a silly little kid, spinning stories.
Lately this stuff sneaks up on him. Sometimes it's the bakery he sees; Cas licking icing sugar off his thumb while sunlight slants lazily through the windows, Dean pulling his apron off one string at a time. Hey, Dean's totally used to fantasies like that. Cas generates about a dozen of those a day for Dean. It's the other stuff he's not used to. Like being in Wal-Mart last Wednesday to pick up another dozen rolls of toilet paper and a new toothbrush ("Something with a tongue cleaner," Cas had said, in the most serious voice, probably because he saw a Special Report on dental health, like Dean knows what the fuck he's talking about), and finding himself caught in front of a rack of flannel sheet sets, imagining what it would be like to shake those out, fresh, and spread them across a real mattress, to burrow underneath them with Cas against his chest, to sleep late while snow maybe even came down around- yikes. Okay, reel it in. Anyway. Shit like that. It's too much. It's dumb. Christ, he's supposed to be a hunter. He's not supposed to want that shit, and even if he did- how fucking likely is it, huh? Everyone would laugh at him if he said anything about it. He would probably laugh at himself. They've been sleeping together for like two weeks. Jesus, the guy's only been human for a quarter of the year so far. He doesn't need Dean to lay his demented nonsexual fantasies out like a quilt on top of him. No matter what he says he's ready for, Dean's not. Not quite.

So he doesn't talk about it. He just lies there and breathes through his nose and watches Cas burrow his face deeper into the pillow and grimace like a disappointed cat, and imagines what it would be like to capture that expression in a picture frame, to put it beside his bed. To fill an album with Cas and Sam, with Tracy, Charlie, maybe Marta or God forbid Garth, to flip through the pages and look at them, at their smiling faces, to see them getting older while the pages turn, getting happier, holding up handmade cards or forkfuls of dinner or even babies. To watch them living one page at a time. Dean falls asleep like that, imagining Cas taking the album out of his hands, marveling at the pictures, pulling them onto his lap and pointing out his favorites. Running his fingers along the edges of each one.

He's too tired to feel foolish. For once he shuts his eyes tight and doesn't look at the ceiling.

«»

The day is muggy and the afternoon is unbearably slow and for some reason, Dean can't shake the grump out of his shoulders. He tries not to take it out on Cas and Sam, tries to thump it out into the loaves and roll it out into the pie crusts instead of snapping every time somebody comes by and puts something back in the wrong place on his station. In the end he settles for just not saying much, trying to listen to the radio and zone out into the music, trying to put himself on another planet, a planet where he is not so fucking irritated for no reason.

After work, when the last customer has shut their laptop and the bell's jingled behind them and Sam's turned the key and Tracy is counting out the drawer, Dean goes and sits on the back stoop with his apron still on and his hands in his lap, dangling and useless. He feels like a lump. He stares at the silhouettes of the trees in the distance until Cas sits beside him and hands him a bottled water instead of a beer. Dean drinks half of it and puts the cap back on and thinks about maybe apologizing for being kind of a low-grade dick all day.

"You can eat violets, you know," Cas says, at last. Dean's head rotates slowly around. "And pansies." Cas takes a long drink off his own bottle. "Marta's got several chamomile plants. I've been wondering what it would take to make our own tea."

"Oh," says Dean. Cas looks at him.

"I want flowers," Cas says.

"Right now?" Dean asks.
"No," says Cas. "Someday."

"Oh," Dean says again. And then, louder, feeling brave: "Yeah, of course you do." He looks at Cas across their folded knees and Cas looks back, levelly, like he's daring Dean to take another man-sized step on this long journey towards Getting the Fuck Over Himself. Dean wonders if he can do that. He wants to try. "Cas-" he says, and then Sam's head pops into the doorway.

"So-" says Sam.

"-get this," Dean and Cas mimic, at exactly the same time. Sam makes the world's greatest Brother Face.

"Screw you both," he mutters, and turns on his heel. He's back exactly eight seconds later. "Um, I know it's kind of early still, but Marta was out front, and she's going to this tapas place, and I know how you feel about tapas, but if you wanted to come, she's got room in her car-"

"Go," Dean says. He waves a hand in Sam's direction. "Go on your tiny little food date."

"It's small plates," Sam tries to cut in, but Dean just waves harder. "And it's not a- I don't want to ditch you guys-"

"Sam, go," Dean says. "It's okay. We're good."

"Dean's going to make dinner," Cas says. Dean stares at him.

"Oh, I am?"

"Yes," Cas says, placid as a fucking mountain lake. "Have a good time, Sam." Sam smiles like a kid getting out of class early and vanishes back into the hall. Dean leans back into the doorframe, smiling too. He can't believe he's suddenly feeling so good.

"So what exactly am I making for dinner?"

"It was a euphemism," Cas says, calmly, and Dean almost falls down the steps. What? Awesome. "Although," he says, looking out across the parking lot, voice low and sly and absolutely fucking wonderful, "I do assume you're going to make me hungry." Fuck. Dean is going to keep him for a million years. He is going to buy the world's supply of flannel sheets and make Cas live inside it, like a fucking nest. He is going to write Cas a long list of all the things he's going to do to him, and then do them, in alphabetical fucking order. He is going to lay it all on the line, because there are no lines, not really. Not anymore. Cas was right, Dean doesn't need them. Fuck the lines. Cas smiles at him, steady and sweet, like he's getting all that straight from the telegraph office in Dean's brain. "Weren't you about to ask me a question, earlier?"

"Yeah," says Dean. His heart pounds a little. "Cas," he says, "how do you feel about hammocks?"
Chapter Summary

In which the tallest Winchester gets pushed around by short ladies and likes it.

It hadn't been a date.
It had not been a date.
It hadn't been a date.
That was not a date.

That really would have been a very good date.

That would have been a spectacular date if he'd had the chance to drive Marta home in a car that wasn't stolen. Or if he could have brought her back to his place that wasn't an extended-stay motel.

Then it would have maybe been a date. And then it would have been wonderful.

But it wasn't a date.

Alone in his room Sam falls face-first onto his bed.

It would have been a great fucking date.

Now, of course, the only date he has is with his palm and the fantastic array of mental snapshots he took of all the pictures she'd scrolled through on her phone, showing him her friends from back on base and what it looked like at her old job in the Military Police.

He had never before had a thing for women in uniform.
He still doesn't know if he has a thing for women in uniform.

Maybe he just really, really wants to fuck her wearing nothing but her combat boots.

Holy shit.

«»

Castiel has a "raspberry emergency" the next day. More than the light teasing, the standard Winchester Brothers Bullshit, Sam has had it up to here with his own flustering and bumbling today and he volunteers to leave the bakery on a mission to find enough organic berries to satisfy the picky bastard.

He strikes out at the first two grocery stores he tries (moldy containers at the first one, only two left at the second) and just has to pause. Has to stop. Has to seriously peace out and gather his wits about him or something. Has to just get away from everything.

Sam goes and eats lunch. Manages to find something that has no fucking sugar or gluten in it because he feels off-kilter and bloated and like he's had way too much flour in his diet lately. And then he runs through the Taco Bell drive-through for a size king-hell Mountain Dew Baja Blast. It's so disgusting and so good.
He starts to feel better.

The next few grocery stores have what he needs. He doesn't even have to fudge it and get GMO raspberries. Now it's just a matter of finishing his soda and destroying the evidence before he gets back to the bakery.

He thinks maybe he wants to go back to the motel after this, or maybe crash another motel with a swimming pool and just sit in the sun for the rest of the day. To that point, he parks in the front lot and is about to simply run the bags in when Marta's head pops out of the front door of her shop.

He waves and she steps out, propping the door with her foot.

"You gonna be next door?"

"Yeah. NO. No, actually," he corrects as he approaches the storefronts. "I was just gonna drop these off and head back out."

She nods. "Okay. I talk to you later," she waves him off.

Fuck. Marta in a bathing suit, Marta in a bathing suit, Marta in a bathing suit.

Shit. That could maybe happen.

He shakes himself and heads into the bakery.

Tracy and Cas are behind the counter. Cas is doing the thing where he stands too close to you and analyzes the minute reactions in your pupils as you eat whatever it was he just handed you.

"Woah," Tracy says. And not because she's unused to Castiel's proximity. She licks the remnants of something off her thumb, "Is there more?"

Cas's eyes hone in on Sam, crossing to them. "Soon," he says, like he's talking about doom and destruction and not just lemon-raspberry bars.

Sam shakes his head and hands the bags over. He accepts Cas's very serious thanks.

"Tracy are you guys good here, do you think?"

Tracy side-eyes the hallway to the kitchen. She turns up the volume on her laptop so the music comes a little louder. Then she steps forward, crowding Sam back out into the dining room. When they're out among the chairs she says, "It's been quiet, it should be fine. Can you just do one thing for me? I don't wanna bother the customers with my laptop the whole time but if you could ask your brother to turn on the radio back there? Nobody is gonna complain about music if it comes from the kitchen."

Sam frowns. "Have people been giving you crap about--"

"No, not at all. I'm just," she hesitates. "Sometimes. When it's slow. And they're back there. Like." She makes a face. "I know they wouldn't do anything back there and all but-- And don't get me wrong, I'm really happy for them! It's just--"

"Oh my god. I'm so. God, Tracy. Let me just," Sam blows out a breath. "I apologize for my really stupid, inconsiderate brother. I'll handle it okay?"

She practically melts in relief. "Thank you."
"Not a problem," he moves around her and back towards the kitchen.

Actually.

He turns back around and slides open the back of one of the cases. He retrieves a whole pie.

Sam sinks against the wall in the hallway and approaches the kitchen on hunter's feet, stealth. When he peeks around the corner, there they are. Cas's hands paused mid-way through prying open a box of berries, Dean's finger snagged in his collar, turning Cas to kiss.

Fucking--
Sam steps quietly, winds back, and hurls the pie face-first directly into them.

"HOLY FUCK!" Dean shouts.

The pie had exploded on Cas's shoulder and gooey filling had whipped forward into both their faces. Pieces of apple and crust are sliding down their arms and aprons to the floor and the top of the workspace. The pie tin and the majority of the bottom of the pie slide down to the floor when Cas finally steps away from Dean, wide-eyed, shocked.

"WHAT THE FUCK YOU SON OF A BITCH," Dean shouts after a stunned pause.

"You're being rude," Sam comes forward, stands, crosses his arms. "And probably unsanitary."

"We weren't fucking doing anything!"

"You were. And you were loud enough to bother the people out front. And either you're gonna stop it or you're at least gonna turn the radio up so nobody has to hear you."

"YOU THREW A FUCK-- you threw a whole FUCKING apple pie at us, what the FUCK is your problem??!!"

Where Cas is, off to the side, he's starting to shake in place and with each little jerk of his body, a plop of pie filling falls to the floor. His smile is fucking insane and when it finally cracks open it's to this little whining-wheeze that turns into unstoppable, riotous laughter.

Dean stares at him, stunned.

"You little--" and Dean skids through the pie goop on the mat below them and Cas simply steps back once as Dean's half-threatening lunge turns the pie-in-the-face comedy bit into the banana-skid bit and Cas loses it even louder.

"That wasn't even the right kinda pie!" Dean calls from the floor.

Sam just dusts off his hands and walks away.

Up front he hugs Tracy from the side as she's trying to count out change and smacks a kiss on top of her head. Her face flares completely red. "I'll see you later, Trace."

He swings his keys around his finger and troops over to Marta's shop.

Carmen, Marta's part-time help, is up at the register, on the phone. Sam stops short. "Hey," he whispers, "is Marta still--"

She covers the phone with her hand and says, "in the back."
Sam goes straight through, to the back door. The glass is all fogged up from the humidity out there, so he knocks before going through.

Marta's leaning back from the workbench to see who it is. "Sam!" she says. "Come in, come in. I thought you were going home?"

"Well. I was. But then I thought, maybe, instead, I'd ask if you wanted to go do something."

"Ha!" she yanks off her gloves and tosses them aside. "You're psychic!"

Sam stops and fumbles for words again. "P-pardon?"

"I was gonna ask you," she challenges. "I was gonna beat you to it. I feel like I got cheated."

"Oh. Sorry. Well, we can't have that," he closes in on her and leans against the bench. "So I guess you go first."

"No, no. What was your idea? Mio--" she mutters, "wait," she grabs his wrist and tugs. "Come on, you sweat like a pig. We go back in first."

Sam laughs and lets himself get dragged back into the air conditioning.

"So where we gonna go?"

Sam starts to doubt his plan. Maybe swimming is a little too... undressed? Considering they haven't even had a meal on an *official* date yet.

"You wanna eat?"

"You already ate," she plucks at his shirt, "I can tell."

"What?"

"I saw you hop outta your car up by the bank to dump out your trash." She winks. "You're hiding it from your brother."

"Oh my god."

"I won't tell!" she throws her hands up. "Promise! Anyway. We can go eat *later*. So you lose."

"Alright," he concedes. "What was your plan?"

Marta suddenly comes really close and backs him up to the wall behind a display. One hand lands on his hip and sliiides back around.

To tap a fingernail on the metal handle of his gun.

Marta tugs at the collar of his button-up until he leans down to meet her. She whispers in his ear:

"Wanna go to the *rrrange*?" She rolls the R, smiles at him, wicked.

Yes. Yes, he thinks. He definitely wants to discharge some firearms with this woman. *Hell yes.*
Castiel makes baklava.

Dean feels like he's been waiting for this moment since he baked the first cake. Cas doesn't always tell him the day's plans, so when he pulls everything out and arranges it, Dean's not 100% sure if that's where the recipe is going. But when he's sure, he stops absolutely everything else.

He watches.

As far as Dean knows, baklava is sex in a 13"x9" pan. Spices. Butter and phyllo, butter and phyllo, nuts, butter and phyllo.

Cas doesn't mind the audience. He's methodical as he can be, precise as the process allows. He's generous with the butter. And Dean just watches.

They go on about their business as it bakes and then, when it is done, it gets the syrup.

Dean is the first to taste it. He thinks it'll be somehow better -- sexier, even -- if he can eat it right out of Cas's hand, so when Cas pulls up a piece and offers it to Dean, he just leans forward and bites.

Flying pies be damned, Cas steps closer and feeds him the rest of the piece that way. Dean holds up his hand to lick clean his fingers and the first taste Cas gets of it is kissing Dean's mouth.

It's incredibly good. Not perfect, but it could get there.

On Sunday there are figs. They picked them up on Saturday at the farmer's market, despite the fact that Dean had no idea what to do with them. Cas ends up putting them in a bundt cake. He sets some aside and the rest he bakes with honey and cinnamon and brandy and dumps some on top of a slice of Dean's vanilla bean cheesecake.

Dean takes the whole rest of the cheesecake out of the front coolers and away from any potential customers. He covets these things for their pleasure alone.

Dean dunks pieces of Castiel's salty pretzels into chocolate and lets them dry. Cas dunks pieces of Dean's cookie dough fudge into chocolate and lets them dry. Sam dunks pieces of banana into chocolate and puts them in the freezer.

No one can quite decide who wins that one.

Tracy's neighbor has an orange tree that backs up to their fence. It dropped a whole grocery bag's worth of oranges in their yard and her mom sends her to work with them to share.

This is how Dean finally lures her into the kitchen. "They're your oranges. C'mon. You've gotta help us use all of 'em up."

She sticks to Cas's side and Dean doesn't take any offence. They've decided it's just how loud he is, his bold personality that she has a hard time with. Sometimes she's just a little unprepared for Dean. Cas shows her the best way to zest the fruit and what they end up with are orange almond biscotti.

The first time she sells one, Tracy literally has to go sit down in the office with the lights turned off for a while.

When she comes back out, Dean doesn't say anything. But he doesn't let her escape the kitchen
without tugging her into his arms, either.

Cas tries his hand at white chocolate and overloads on it quickly. He has to go slump over one of the tables in the dining room with a big bottle of water. He just lets the air conditioning beat down on his neck and he doesn't really eat anything for the rest of the day. Dean had tried to warn him.

When he gets hold of peanut butter chips, it's the complete opposite. The onslaught lasts for days and he never tires of them. He also tries to top everything with them. A sqiggle of chocolate and a dash of peanut butter chips lands on everything. Dean has to hold him back from throwing it on the danishes.

They go on the list of items Sam isn't supposed to order without checking that there are no other options. (Right below pre-shredded coconut and peaches.)

Sam comes in with a suggestion one day: Caramel apple empanadas.

Dean thinks at first it's because he's been hanging out with Marta so much ("sampling the cuisine, Sammy?" wink wink nudge nudge) but then he has to stop by Sam's room one day and spies Taco Bell wrappers in the trash.

It's not like he doesn't approve of fast food, but now he has to prove that his dessert empanadas can be better than the kind you get in the drive-thru.

And, of course, he does so well that Sam starts a strict new jogging regimen.

Through it all, Dean has come to love his sourdough. It is as perfect as it can get, at least for now. He loves it. He could eat it at every meal.

And then there's Cas's focaccia. He didn't notice at first, with all the experimenting still going on, but Cas will consider his ingredients sometimes and put them back where they belong. He'll pull some new things out -- maybe pepper and onion and garlic this time. Maybe jalapeño slices and cheddar. And he'll make a new focaccia. Every loaf is better than the last. Cas tweaks it, plays with different cheeses and herbs and flavors. Sometimes he returns to old flavors and makes the dough different. But he continues to tweak this one thing. And instead of determined and curious, he looks at ease with the focaccia. They've made friends, they talk things through, they adjust around one another.

It's Dean's favorite Cas Creation, anyway.

One day Cas reaches blindly into a box of glass jars fresh off the order pallet and cuts his first two fingers to shit. There's blood everywhere and Cas doesn't do anything but hiss through the pain. No cursing, no shouting. (Dean does all of that.)

Sam cleans him up and does the stitches in the restroom while Dean puts everything else away and pitches the second, unbroken olive jar directly onto the pavement in the parking lot. It bursts with a satisfying pop of glass.

Cas isn't really up for experimenting after that so he sticks by Dean's side and mostly tries to use his non-dominate hand to help out with the regular loaves and other pastries. When they're done with what they need to get done, Dean steps around him and acts as his hands again. After those other times when Cas would yank him over to perforate the focaccia dough with his fingers, now Cas needs him for the whole process.

Castiel keeps his left hand and, after a few days of working together as he heals, Dean becomes proficient as his right hand. He also grows used to the feel of their ears pressed together. The flex of Cas's shoulder under his chin. The warmth of Cas's back against his chest.
Cas helps him make sourdough and Dean helps him make focaccia. They fold each others doughs into each others hands.
They go in Marta's car, mostly because she knows where she's going, but also because Sam is keenly aware of the salt, holy water, lamb's blood and sawed-offs still sitting under a blanket in his own trunk. The trunk of his very stolen car.

"It's been having a," Sam reaches for a word and finds, "coolant thing. Staying, uh, cool." Marta raises an eyebrow. "No big. You drive."

She swings by her own house first, and Sam waits outside on the porch, feeling kind of awkward about crossing that particular boundary just yet. It's a nice little place, a compact semi-detached on a quiet street, with kid's toys littering the yard next door. The house has a brick facing and some worn-looking trim, but it's the garden that makes it: there's flowering clematis going up a trellis on one side, and dozens of little pots and containers grouped on the porch and down the steps, a kind of controlled chaos. She's got an eye for color for sure, in the way she's bunched things together-brilliant reds fading there into lilac and poppy, touches of gold, sprays of striped hasta acting as a border. Sam is bending down to run his fingers along a particularly striking leaf, edged with a red so deep it's almost purple, when he hears the flimsy screen door bang shut.

"Coleus," says Marta. "You like that color?" Sam nods and smiles, feeling kind of sheepish. "I'll give you one."

"I don't need-"

"I have forty," she says, rolling her eyes. She hands him an ammo box and he helps her load the car.

She's brought a couple of pistol cases out with her. He doesn't know what exactly she's got in there, but the cases make him sort of self-conscious about the second-hand Beretta he's got tucked into his pants. It's a new feeling. He's felt sort of anxious about cars and clothes and money and other crap around women before, nothing new there- but this is different. He's never been on a Gun Date with anyone. He never showed Jess the one he used to keep under his bed at Stanford- never got around to telling Amelia about the Taurus in his sock drawer. And okay, if you're talking long-term relationships, he and Ruby didn't do much, uh, shooting. It's kind of refreshing, Marta knowing about the gun, not caring, not recoiling, but basically crowding him against a flat surface and implying she's into trigger fingers. Sam shifts in his seat. Marta flips her turn signal on and coasts them through the intersection, tapping her fingers on the wheel to the radio.

The road twists outside of town, and the buildings fall away. For a while it's just suburban ranch houses and fences and then it's trees and power lines, farm acreage cut into uneven squares as far as the eye can see. Sam starts to relax out here, unconsciously, as the miles slip past. They talk about nothing: the bakery, Cas's stupid raspberry thing, Marta accidentally getting sent fourteen dozen It's A Boy ceramic gift planters when she ordered four. They talk about the tapas place and Marta flat-out tells Sam what a good time she had, and that she expects to do it again sometime. Sam agrees and watches the telephone poles go past and feels kind of dizzy.

"Where are we headed?" he asks, finally.

"Private club," she says. "The county conservation center. They've got a range there, pretty good, not so fancy." She smiles at him without taking her eyes completely off the narrow, pot-holed road. "I think you already do most of your shooting in the woods."

"Yeah," says Sam. He looks out the window. No point in lying, right? Sam thinks he could probably
pretend he got his skills in 4-H or the Boy Scouts. The age would be right. But thinking about another cover story makes him feel so fucking tired. He doesn't want to tell her stories. If he thought about it harder- which he is trying not to- maybe he could make himself admit the truth.

That he'd rather, for once, just tell her everything.

They pull up to a gravel driveway in front of the clubhouse, and Marta gets out. She waves at a couple of guys sitting in lawn chairs off to one side, and ducks into the front door. She's back in a minute, and then they head down a long drive that curls alongside the hill, ending in a locked gate with a warning sign. Marta's got the key on her ring already. They park behind the long shelter building and bring their bags and cases through to the shooting benches. There's nobody else around and Sam takes a minute to appreciate the silence, the sound of birds chirping and the rustle of the trees, the soft green light that comes through the woods on either side. In front of them, the ground slopes slowly up for about a thousand yards and ends in a high earthen wall. Marta's unpacking her stuff and Sam sees that she's got a SIG-Sauer and an enormous Desert Eagle, with what looks like a custom grip. She drops the empty magazines out and sets them on the table, then pulls back the slide and locks it, leaving the empty chamber in view. She stares at Sam for a minute and then he says, "Oh," and pulls his own gun out. He drops the magazine, then retracts the slide and locks it open, empty, like hers. He sets it on the table. She gives him an approving look, then fishes two pairs of enormous plastic earmuffs out of her bag. Sam tries not to look too awkward about them, like he isn't the kind of person who normally wanders into the woods and shoots at cans and wendigos without safety gear, some kind of uncivilized boor. He wonders, briefly, if that's why he and Dean used to shout at each other so much: maybe they weren't quite as angry as they thought they were. Maybe they'd both just blown out their goddamn eardrums by the time they were twenty.

When the guns are secure on the table, Marta pulls out some paper targets and goes on the other side of the shooting bench to pin them up on the stands. She comes back grinning and says, "You first."

Sam loads and pulls his ears on and steadies himself, tries not to think about anything, fires three times towards the center of the target, cleanly misses the two inner rings but hits all three shots close together, a tight grouping that even Marta whistles at, low and impressed. He goes again and practically lands his second group over the first.

"Shit," she laughs. "I came out here to impress you." She shakes her head while she loads the SIG-Sauer. Sam empties the Beretta and leaves it on the table, and Marta aims. He watches her get into stance and he's struck by how calm and centered she is, how natural she looks, how… okay. Sam's only human, so he spares a thought for how unfairly gorgeous her ass is, standing that way. Marta exhales softly and her first shot goes straight through the center. The next two land closer to Sam's, but then she's back on form again, hitting just inside the center ring almost every time.

"Holy crap," he says.

"That's more like it," Marta says, turning back with a satisfied smile. "Let's see if you can beat that."

They spend the next hour or so discovering that he actually can't. Sam is a good shot and he knows it-hey, so do plenty of demons- but Marta's got an unflappable calm with a gun in her hand that he can't quite match. Still, losing was never so sweet as when she crowds him up against the car in that little gravel parking lot, and asks, "So, I win?"

"Guess so," he says, pretending to be sad about it. But all he can feel is Marta's hipbone bumping up against his. Marta takes the collar of his shirt in both hands and says,
"Loser makes breakfast tomorrow?"

"Uh," says Sam, and then his brain catches up to what his body has already figured out. He bends down into her kiss while she rises up on her toes, pulling tight to get him closer. "Okay, sure," he murmurs, into the sweet heat of her mouth and the beautiful way she laughs as she kisses him, breathy and pleased. She rocks against him and licks his tongue with her own and Dear God, Sam is so fucking happy right now.

Marta drives a lot faster on the way back.

Sam doesn't really register the furniture or the pictures or the wallpaper or anything at all as he half-carries Marta through her own house, pressing her briefly against the wall of the staircase to kiss her again half a dozen times. But then she's spun him around and she's half-pulling him up the staircase with one hand up his shirt, spanning his ribs and dragging the material up to his armpits. They make the second-floor landing and she pulls his shirt up and over his head, and throws it on the floor. She pulls him down into another amazingly brutal kiss and Sam hears himself make a weird, pained, blissful noise in the back of his throat. He wonders, not for the first time today, what the fuck is going on with his life. And then Marta yanks his belt out through the loops.

They crash down together onto the bed, sending a couple of seed catalogues and a nightshirt sliding to the floor. Marta straddles his waist and pulls her top off, then unhooks her bra and flings it aside then Sam's hands are smoothing up her waist to cup her breasts, running his thumbs along the underside and making her sigh and murmur her enthusiasm. She's unbelievably fucking gorgeous, lean and compact and wound like a spring, grinding down every few seconds and causing little aneurysm-y starbursts to go off behind Sam's eyelids. He has no idea how they get their jeans off. It's a blur. A mystery. But then she's in front of him with nothing on but a pair of bright orange cotton underpants, which Sam pulls down her legs. She laughs and pushes at him with one foot and he kisses the ankle and then the inside of her calf, the curve of her knee, the soft tight line of her inner thigh.

"Higher," she smirks, and Sam sucks a hard kiss to that inner thigh, and her head falls against the pillow, sighing words that Sam doesn't actually understand but that go straight to his dick. He leans forward and kisses a path down her dark curls until he's right there, and then Sam slips down and spreads her gently and sucks a feather-light kiss on her clit that makes her tremble and clutch at his hair. He's tasting her, licking her up, tasting how fucking good she is, with one hand curled around her hipbone, feeling her rock up gently with every stroke of his tongue. "Fuck, Sam, oh my God," she says. Sam hums against her. He gets her off like that, and then she pulls him up to suck his fingers and kiss the taste right off his mouth, and that alone is almost enough to finish it for him. He wants to make it last, he really does, but then Marta's hand is around him, tight and sure and stroking hard just the way he likes it, running her thumb over his tip, and it takes like a fucking minute for him to tense up and come against her thigh, hips stuttering out and his mouth half-open around her name. He rolls down next to her and kisses the top of her breast, tries to breathe and get his heart to stop thudding so hard. Marta's unspooled next to him, arms stretched over her head and toes pointed down, practically purring. She curls into his arms. Sam closes his eyes and just lies there, face close to her hair, trying not to overthink. To just enjoy the feeling of her bare skin against his, the slight breeze from the window, the pulse in his chest. "I'm gonna want pancakes," Marta says, against him. When he opens his eyes, she's smiling at him, and her eyes are so unbelievably kind, and so full of light, that Sam's heart cracks a little. She looks at him like she knows him- like she already knows him, inside and out, and she likes what she's found there- but she can't. She couldn't. Or she would never look at him like this. Nobody would. Marta kisses his shoulder. "Can you do pancakes?"
"Sure," says Sam.
Sam wakes to the text message beep sounding from his pants pocket. The pants are somewhere on the floor. Flung, like, all the way over there. The call comes next. The phone just vibrates for a while. He lets it.

Then the text sounds again. So it's Dean, probably.

That's most likely the "hey, where did you disappear to" call. Dean won't be bothered if he doesn't respond for a while; he'll have dinner and Cas to distract him until morning. So Sam scoots closer to the soft warmth of Marta's back and chases the late afternoon light over the curve of her hip with his fingers. She doesn't say anything or open her eyes but eventually he sees her smile.

He smooths his hand down over her thigh and up again and the follows the shape of her up to her shoulder and down over her breasts. Descends on her neck to kiss there. She 'hmmms' and catches his fingers up in her own for a moment before reaching down behind him and pulling them closer together with a grip on his ass.

"You gotta great butt," she says, still sleepy.

Sam laughs. "You've got a great butt, too."

She smiles more and wiggles against him a little. He's already a little hard against that generous bottom of hers. His fingers trip back down the center of her and between her legs to run his palm over her once. The 'hmm' is of approval this time and she hikes her leg back and up, over his thigh, opening for him to dip his fingers in where it's slick and hot. He kisses her shoulder until she's pulling away and digging at a stretch into a half-empty tissue box.

Marta opens the condom for him and is impatient while he scoots back some and rolls it on. Then he's flush to her back again, forward and in with her hand eager to guide him. She keeps touching him right there, where he slides into her, and touches herself which makes her other hand come up to clutch in his hair.

He's got a grip on her hip pulling close and close and close. Manages to get his other hand under her head, to twist her face up and kiss those heavy breaths out of her.

She seizes sweetly, like before, only this time it's a tightness all around his dick and she tells him not to dare stop until he's come inside her. Those are just the right words and he can, riding it out just a short time more.

He pulls her around to kiss deeper, to interrupt every damn thing she thinks she's gonna say right now. All he wants is to taste her. Which he must say at some point because she invites him to do so with a laugh that's deep down, that he feels through her belly and into his. Her hips come up and her thighs to pull him closer still. He'll let go of her eventually. Let her pull away and coax him off the bed. Eventually.

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With pancakes in her mouth, Marta asks, "Were you a federal marshall?"

Sam's got his back to the kitchen table, still, inelegantly flipping pancakes for himself. He thinks, from where she sits, the tensing in his naked shoulders could easily be attributed to the fact that he's folding the damn things in half more times than he's getting them to turn over.
"Carmen's father is a deputy. He said you both were with the U.S. Marshalls before you bought the bakery. He met you when he was putting away that *puta*, Carla Simmons."

"Yeah," he says. "It was just-- it was something Dean always wanted to do."

"It was really new," she notes with approval. "The whole property is still really nice and I know he had all new equipment in there. The best."

"Yeah. We couldn't pass up the deal on it."

"Mm." Marta chews for a while. "That explains a lot," she says through another pancake.

Sam laughs at her as he sits down with his own plate. "What?"

"That explains a lot," she repeats with the tone of someone who has always had to repeat shit through her accent. "That you carry. *How* you carry. *Why* you carry a gun. The way you sit in a room."

Sam gives her a questioning look.

"You always sit in the corner so you can see the exits. The way you and Dean move around each other. You carry yourself like police. I seen it before."

Sam wants to say something in the affirmative or assure her that that time is behind them. Or something. Anything.

"The scars on your arms and things," she adds, talking down to her plate. "I knew you weren't even gonna blink at mine."

Her knee. He'd seen it, yeah, the burst of scars on it. Kissed on right past it and pulled it over his shoulder as he'd tasted her.

"They gave us the fucked-up cases," he says, suddenly. "We've been tired of it for a while and our friend Cas, he'd just. Lost his home. In a fire."

She smiles and cocks her head at him. "You don't have to explain everything. Not all right now."

"I want you to know," Sam says. "I really want you to know. And you," he waves at her, head to toe, "I wanna know everything, too. I do, I wanna know you, Marta."

"Okay," she rolls her eyes a little, like he's being over-dramatic, but she doesn't stop smiling. "We will," she says. "Eat your breakfast."
forty-one

Sam doesn't call.

And then Sam doesn't answer his texts, and then Sam doesn't pick up, and then it's close to nine o'clock and Dean uses the second key to Sam's room to barge in there and kick his laundry around and complain to the empty air. Cas watches him from the doorway, looking like he's not sure whether or not to be amused.

"He's with Marta," Cas says. "They took her car."

"Yeah, exactly!" Dean says. He's not sure what he's talking about, but that's not going to stop him. "That was hours and hours ago."

"Is it important?"

"There's, you know," Dean rambles. He goes over to Sam's laptop and touches the top, then shoves some papers across the table. "Stuff in this town. Probably. Mario's probably possessed," he says, defensively, pointing at Cas. Cas shrugs, but he doesn't disagree. Oh yeah, Point Dean. "We gotta keep our eyes on each other."

"You're," Cas says, totally dry, kind of incredulous, "worried about him?"

"No," Dean huffs. "Actually, I'm kinda proud. Marta's hot." Cas rolls his eyes and smiles at the same time, which makes him look ridiculous. Dean looks down at the floor, at the gigantic pair of unlaced boots sitting by the end of the bed. "Whatever. He's a big boy."

"Want to go for a drive?" Cas asks, out of nowhere.

"Yeah," says Dean. "Okay."

And they're off.

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At first Dean just circles the block and then takes them into town, past the bakery and the plaza and then past the high school, the football field, another plaza, through a little neighborhood with an old-fashioned fire station and a park and a swing set, back around to the main road, in the other direction, out towards the community college campus and the farm where they have pick-your-own blueberries. Dean thinks privately that it's kind of a rip-off, the blueberry picking thing. Cas sometimes makes interested noises when they pass that place, but you're not going to catch Dean bending over for hours in a bunch of scratchy bushes to harvest something he can order by the case. Anyway, they're apparently not going on an illicit nighttime blueberry raid, because Cas doesn't make Dean pull over. He doesn't say anything as they drive, not for a while. He has the window rolled down and he's letting his hand dangle loosely over the side of the door, catching the wind.

"So," Dean says. He turns them around in the community college parking lot, and aims them up the hill towards the dairy. It's nine-thirty and almost everything is closed, even though it's still summer and the light's just faded away barely an hour ago. Dean can see a few people walking hand in hand through the park, and little lights that could be bonfires in a few backyards. "Where are we going?" Cas lets his head sag backwards against the bench, and looks at Dean. "You want to hit Doyle's?"

"No," says Cas. And then, suddenly more alert: "Turn here. Left."
"But this goes-"

"I know where it goes," says Cas, and so Dean turns.

It's the road out of town, the one that goes west- and probably keeps going until it hits the Rockies, or the ocean. They roll past houses with kitchen lights left on, biker bars with neon signs disappearing like comets behind them. They drive twenty or thirty miles, until it's mostly woods and farms. Dean stops at a gas station when he realizes with some surprise that they've only got a quarter tank left. It crept up on him, considering that lately they've barely used the car for more than grocery runs or going back and forth to the bakery. He stands outside in the cooling air, watching bugs circle the gas station lights. There's a huge grey moth on the bulb above him, skittering around the light and landing once only to skitter away again, wings fluttering, swooping in quick arcs and curling down on the ridge of the lamp. He cranes his neck to watch it. Dean doesn't know if it's scared or ecstatic, the way it dives and retreats, never settling for longer than a second. Do bugs get scared? Do they feel fear like humans do? Joy? Dean doesn't know. Maybe he should pay closer attention when Cas watches PBS.

"Good luck, little buddy," Dean says to the moth. When he looks down again, Cas is coming back with a paper bag the size of a six-pack. "Hey," says Dean. "You're just full of ideas." Cas smiles at him and gets into the car.

Cas directs him down a bumpy country road and up a hill; there's an old closed campsite up there, but Cas seems to already know about the gate and how to get around it on a back driveway. Dean winces as the car lurches through the ridges in the dirt and the underbrush at the side of the drive, but manages to park her okay in front of the main cabin. He shuts the engine off and they sit in the increasing dark for a second. In darkness, Cas is barely a shadow in the other seat, a sliver of skin reflecting the moon; the last bit of sun's an echo now, a ghost of daylight, the glowing purple clouds of sunset disappearing far across the valley. Dean's got to admit, the view off the hill is spectacular. He wonders if Cas knew about this place before, if there's some kind of significance to it; some kind of burial ground, some sacred old shrine or whatever. Maybe Cas has more angel left in him than anybody could have guessed. "How the hell did you know this was up here?" Dean asks.

"Google Earth," says Cas.

They sit on the porch of the closest cabin, even though the whole thing looks like it's about to collapse and slide down the cliff. They drink their beers and Cas tells Dean a story that Tracy told him, about one of the other stores in their plaza, and how before it was an antiques place, it was a children's restaurant with some of those creepy animatronic animals. Tracy's little brother apparently had a birthday there the year before it closed. "Tracy says that in the back room, they still have some of the coin-operated rides. One of them," Cas adds, with a kind of eerie glee, "is a life-sized clown driving a miniature school bus."

"No shit?" Dean says. He considers it. "Wow. There has got to be a way we can terrify Sam with that. There just has to be."

As the air gets cooler Cas gets closer, until he is scooted into the open v of Dean's legs, with his head resting back on Dean's collarbone and Dean's arm kind of loose around his shoulders. Dean has his back against the last upright pillar of the old porch, and it kind of digs into his spine, but he doesn't care. He's had a couple of beers and Cas is warm and heavy on him and the sky is full of stars. Little tiny ones. It's like looking through a blanket and seeing the gaps in the weave where light comes in. They used to make blanket forts in motels when he was little, in the hours and hours they spent alone. They'd dump the pillows between the beds and stretch the duvets over the top, and read magazines under there with John's extra flashlights. His dad always wondered why the batteries ran
out so fucking fast. Dean thinks about that. About a lot of things. It's so quiet, though, up here. Just the sound of crickets and sometimes the whine of a truck engine on some road far in the distance. Dean can see headlights appearing and vanishing again, flickering between trees. "I used to do this with Sam," says Dean. Cas huffs a laugh and rolls backwards against him a little harder. "Not this," Dean says, embarrassed, cuffing him, and Cas laughs harder. He wraps his arm around Cas's waist and tries to poke him between the ribs, but Cas manages to knock him backwards and squish the air out of him instead. Dean cracks up and surrenders. "Uncle," says Dean, trying not to fumble his beer. "Okay, uncle, you jackass." Cas lets him up, but stays curled against his side, elbow resting on his thigh. Dean slings an arm over his back. "I just mean, Sam and I used to drive away after a hunt, find someplace empty to crack a beer and just, do nothing." He gestures out over the hills. "Kinda like this."

"I know," says Cas. Dean takes a drink.

"Yeah, my stalker," he says, and Cas squeezes his kneecap hard enough to hurt. "Hey!"

"You have a typically human ego," Cas says. "And yet," he trails off. He looks at Dean and then looks away, like he doesn't want to finish his sentence. But now Dean wants to know.

"And yet?"

"You're sometimes so afraid," Cas says, carefully, "that the ones in your life are going to replace you." Dean stares at him. "With heaven," Cas says. "With other people."

"I'm not-" Dean says, and shakes his head. "Cas, don't." Dean tosses his empty bottle into the grass. "Sam's doing what people do," he says. "They meet someone and move on. It's fine." It's dumb for Dean to act like such a baby, Cas is just trying to help. Cas is always trying to help, but fuck it, Dean just doesn't want to think any more tonight. Tonight's been kind of perfect, no thinking required. "Forget it."

"There is-"

"Drop it," Dean hisses, and gets up to stalk to the car. But when he gets there he just puts his hands on top of the door frame and leans forward until his face is touching the metal top of the Impala. He's such a fucking dick. "Cas," he says, against the hood. "I'm," he starts, and then Cas is already there, pressing a kiss to a spot between his shoulder blades. It almost overwhelms him. Dean knows he doesn't deserve it- the kind of steady kindness people give to tender new flowerbeds and young, wobbly-legged animals, the kind Cas gives out to almost everyone without reservation - but wow, he's grateful to be getting it. He can't even lift his head to look at Cas. It's too humiliating. He really wants to laugh at himself. The metal's cool against his forehead. "I'm so happy," Dean says, muffled, into the top of the car. "And-"

"You want Sam to be this happy."

"Yeah," says Dean. "Fuck, of course I do. If she makes him happy, that's awesome. It's fantastic. I got no call to be upset about it, and I'm not. I'm really not. He deserves it. I'll just- I'll miss him, Cas," he says, glumly. "He moves on, or we do, or whatever. It's just hard for me to picture." Cas looks at Dean and then looks up at heaven, exasperated, as if there was still anyone up there who could help with this crap.

"Dean," says Cas. "What on earth are you talking about?"

"Um," says Dean. "My- feelings?"
"You will always be part of Sam's happiness," says Cas, like this is the most basic shit in the universe. He sounds so sure. Cas takes Dean's face between his hands, very gently. "The way you will always be part of mine. I need you. Sam needs you," he says. "Not to live. Not to survive. But to be happy, Sam needs you." He smiles, sort of evilly. And whispers: "You dumbass."

"Shut the fuck up," Dean says, without malice, and tugs him near. He kisses Cas and presses him into the car, wrapping an arm around his shoulder, trying to get him closer. It's never close enough. Cas opens his mouth to Dean's andDean feels a hand snaking between his jeans and his skin, grabbing his belt to get better leverage. They slide down and make out like teenagers on the hood of the car, Dean between Cas's legs, shirts untucked and pushed up but not even unbuttoned, Cas's hands in his hair, down his pants, everywhere at once. Cas tastes like beer and blueberry muffin, like the good brown sugar, like himself. Dean comes in his jeans for the first time in like, a decade, and makes an effort to return the favor. Afterwards they sit on the grass against the car. Cas is humming to himself, with his head on Dean's shoulder. "So," says Dean. "Can feelings be our new code for-

Cas swats him.

There's a text message waiting on Dean's phone by the time they get back to the room. Cas has stumbled into the bathroom for a shower, and Dean is sitting in the dark on the edge of their bed, looking at his screen.

@ marta's don't wait up

Dean thinks about texting back- something sarcastic, don't do anything I wouldn't do; or even something earnest, like you kids have fun- but he doesn't. He doesn't need to. Sam's fine. He turns the phone off. And then he peels out of his clothes and follows Cas. He slips behind the shower curtain and slides against Cas, who is already wet and soapy and so warm. Cas makes a pleased sound and shifts against him. "You need me, huh?" Dean says, against the back of his neck. He means it to sound hot, not soft and sort of sad, but that's just the way it comes out. Cas reaches an arm up around his neck and just holds him there in place, while the hot water beats down on them both.

"Yes," says Cas. "I do."
Sam is in the goddamn kitchen again. He's just leaning on things. He's leaning. He's hanging out. He doesn't bother to help with anything. He doesn't compliment them on anything. He doesn't seem to want anything. He's just here.

"Sam," Dean barks in his quick-catch-this-cartridge-of-ammo voice.

Sam stands back to attention.

Dean leans into the dough he's folding and cocks an eyebrow. "Something you needed?"

"Oh, just. Yeah," he shrugs.

Cas, as always working across from Dean, has taken to looking at Sam weirdly, too.

"And that would be...?" Dean prompts.

"We have an order," Sam says 'order' like that's not what he means.

"You print it out. You pin it to the wall with the other orders. We make it. That's normally how this goes, dude."

"Uh. It's not a regular order. I think. Um. I think you should meet with the girl who's making the order."

Dean blinks. "Why?"

"It's special. It's different."

"Sam, we tried birthday cakes. I'm not wild about 'em."

"Not a birthday cake," Sam says, cheery and wide-eyed like he's made the key explanation.

Dean sighs and dusts off his hands. He decides to stand there and stare directly at Sam until he decides to stop dancing around the point.

"It's a-- a catering thing."

Dean just hikes an eyebrow.

"And a. Wedding cake."

"No," Dean says. "No. No-no-no-no-no-no. no. Not happening."

Sam's earnestness doesn't always do the trick. He loses a lot of battles when he doesn't just give in and gaze hopefully, pathetically at Dean, like his daddy is just breaking his heart.

But Dean was always a hard-nosed parent and the puppy-dog eyes don't always work. Extensive application has made Dean somewhat immune when it's not a case of life or death.

Dean reaches over and spoons up a hunk of butter from Cas's side of the workstation. He poises the spoon, pulls it back, aims--
"Oh, COME ON, Dean. Please. Please? Just hear me out."

"Hear this out," Dean threatens, nearly releasing the head of the spoon.

"Just one! One wedding cake! She wanted you to cater but I told her we couldn't do the whole deal and--"

Dean lets go the spoon and the hunk of butter catapults and plops against Sam's chest.

"No."

"You haven't even tried making one yet!"

"People are bitchy enough about birthdays and they get those every year. Chicks get one wedding. I'm not gonna be the guy responsible for ruining that."

"No one said you would-- Cas," Sam turns to address him as he picks the clump of butter off his shirt and pitches it at the sink. "Tell him he doesn't know he'll fuck up the cake. He has no idea if he can do this or not. He needs to try."

"You just said all of that in front of him, though," Cas points out, confused. "Do I have to say it again?"

"AGREE. Agree with me or something!"

Cas reaches across and reclaims his spoon from Dean. "Weddings are a sacrament. I don't know that we have any business taking part."

"What?" Dean's head whips as if he's been smacked. "Holy shit, Cas, you make it sound like we're completely unholy or something. We're not gonna bake a hex bag into the middle of the cake or anything, geeze. What does that have to do with anything?"

Cas shrugs. "I would be willing to try making a wedding cake. It would be interesting. I just don't know that our experiments are fit for such an occasion."

Dean eyes Sam, like, see?

Sam is at a loss. "I donno how you guys think you're still just experimenting, like, fucking around at this stage. We've been running nothing but profits since two months in. This isn't some game you're playing this is a Successful. Business." he says, pointedly. "And we don't do any advertising except for having the logo on the take-out boxes. Cater one event-- just one, and I'm not even asking you to fully cater the whole thing and--"

"Nope," Dean says one final time and turns away, back to his dough.

Sam slumps. "I don't get you. You don't know that you won't like it."

"Nope. I'm assuming I won't like it and I have no interest in finding out otherwise. I'm a total stick in the mud. Go tell her what a horrible human being I am. Scram," he waves.

Sam looks to Cas one last time only to see that he has no interest.

When Sam goes back to the front he complains about it to Tracy. She just sits there at the end of his rant.

Sam looks at her.
"I'm not getting involved," she says, like that should have been obvious.

"But it's somebody's wedding."

She just looks at him for a while more.

"You're our marketing guy!" Sam says. "You of all people should know how good this could be for us!"

"Well," she shrugs. "Yeah. But it's not my business. And we don't really operate like any other bakery I've ever been in. We're a little weird."

Sam doesn't try to sway her any further. Mainly because she said "we're a little weird" in this way that made it look like she was wholly proud of the fact.

He attempts next to enlist Marta's help. She's already doing the flowers for the wedding in question and she's got plenty of experience dealing with happy (and stressed, and angry and difficult) couples. She plucks off her gloves, dusts the dirt off her arms, and marches right back over there with Sam, trailing stray leaves through the back door to the kitchen.

"Really?" is all Dean asks, dryly, when he sees them.

"What, you're not up for something a little different?" she challenges.

"Marta, that's just not what we're about. I'm happy-- we're happy here, okay?" he motions with a powdery white hand between himself and Cas. "We don't need that kinda hassle. And, I mean, Cas is good with the details, but we don't exactly have the, like, delicate hands. You'd need to make something, fuck. Uh. Pretty? I donno."

She points to the front, where their overflowing, eclectic cases are. "You've literally tried everything else but you won't try this?"

Dean sighs. "I can't believe he dragged you into this. It's just not for us Marta. I don't wanna screw up somebody's wedding!"

"Mira, it's RUSTIC. That's the whole point, is shabby-chic, barnhouse, rustic, whatever. You just throw it together and make it look the best you can! It's not gonna be in a freaking ballroom."

Dean finally turns, "What the hell do you care about this anyway? I don't understand why I'm arguing with you."

"This lady asked for you guys specifically, Dean," Sam says. "Her fiancé loves this place and she's trying to surprise him with a cake from here. Why can't you just hear her out?"

"And tell her no flat-out to her face? Uh, probably because I want you to have to do it," Dean says, shit-eating grin in place, and turns back to his work.

Marta throws her hands up in the air and stomps back out muttering in Spanish, Sam goes to follow her but she comes back in just to shout, "PUSSY!" at Dean, and then she leaves again.

Dean rolls his eyes and Cas smirks and Sam flails back and forth and back out again to follow Marta back to her shop.

Sam can't get Cas alone long enough to plead his case properly and even reminding Dean that a girl called him a pussy over his refusal to make a wedding cake doesn't get more than a put-upon sigh.
out of him.

A more direct approach is required.

The next day he picks up one of the order boxes, walks it to the front of the store, goes out the front door, and leaves it outside on the sidewalk. He does it again with a box of brown sugar. He takes one box at a time off the order pallet as Dean and Cas are trying to unload it and he disappears out front with it.

Dean finally goes to see what kind of game his brother is playing.

"Sam," he says, as Sam steps back through the front door and passes him to go get another box. "What the hell, man?"

Sam ignores him and Dean heads out through the front door to grab the boxes and Sam comes up to the front door and locks him outside.

Dean pounds a fist on the glass. "What the fuck!" Sam hears, slightly muffled through the glass. And Sam simply points to Dean's right where a lady sits at a table with a coffee and a half-picked muffin.

She stands and walks forward, hand raised to shake. "Hi. Are you Dean? I'm Donna. Donatella Durante. I came to talk to you about the cake?"

Dean's fist slides down the glass and he looks up to the heavens like there was ever anybody up there who didn't wanna piss down on him in the first place. His head hits the glass for a moment and then he straightens, kicks the boxes carefully up to the door and pastes on a smile.

He comes forward and shakes her hand. "Listen, Donna, I'm sorry. I donno what my brother told you but--"

"He said you wouldn't do it. He said you said 'no.' But I had to come plead my case anyway."

Dean glares back inside. Sam has disappeared into the back but Cas's head is popped out around the corner, back in the hallway. Dean waves him off and goes to sit across from Donna.

"Please," she starts off, "please, you've gotta do this for me. I know you can't do full catering but if you could do a cake-- or even like cupcakes or something. The other desserts if you're feeling up to it."

"We've just never worked a wedding before," Dean explains. "I don't wanna screw this up for you."

She raises her hands from the table and spreads her fingers wide, an attempt at a calming gesture though she's got kinda wild eyes. Dean thinks it's probably the overall stress of wedding planning. "It's fine. I know it will be fine, whatever you do. Look, I didn't even know this place was here, but my fiancé, Chris, he loves this place. And so getting you guys to do the desserts or-- hopefully -- the cake, it was supposed to be a surprise for him. The wedding." She stops. Sighs, heavy. "The whole thing has been. He's made the whole thing about me," she smiles, kinda dopey and adoring. "And it's great and I love him for it. He's been fine with everything, every step of the way, so I just want to do this one thing for him. He'll be so excited. And I already know he loves your stuff. You don't even have to make anything different or special! Just whatever you make fresh and," she gestures wildly, "we'll find some way of getting it there.

"It's just," she rolls her eyes. "It's just that my dad has kind of taken over this part. I mean, it's great. It's what he does for a living and it's cutting out some of the cost so the money can go to other things like the flowers," she points to Marta's shop, "and the cake?" she says, hopeful.
"Okay," Dean says. "Wait. So your dad does this for a living? Look. I'm sorry. I just really don't wanna be the one to mess this up! If your dad does it for a living, now I'm being judged by like, professionals? I donno. Doesn't your dad know a guy who can do the cake?"

Her eyes narrow. "He wants to do the cake. But look, there," she restarts. "My dad." She stops again and her features tighten up, angry. She blows out a breath. "My dad's great. Really. But," she looks, actually looks out over the parking lot, still dead, dawn just lightening everything, all the stores still locked up before business hours. No one is around. She even checks behind her. "His food sucks. Alright? I love my dad, but he's already catering and the food is just *blah* and the cake? The cake at the end is what can really wow everybody. All I have to do is convince my dad that I'm getting my way on everything else and that the cake is what's special to Chris and that he's at least gotta have something for him," she concludes.

Then she says it again: "Please. Please."

Dean heaves a sigh. He's positive that they're capable of making a goddamn cake. He still doesn't want to be there, in the way, all their grand Winchester luck rubbing off on someone else's major life event, but she's sitting here pleading with him, subverting her father, trying to do something nice for her husband-to-be. And she looks just this side of electrocuted, her eyes a little too wide, her hair in a neat bun but snagged, her fingers tapping rapidly even though she clearly hasn't finished enough of her coffee to have her buzzing.

"Look. If your dad is that insistent-- just. Can you make sure he won't try to fuck with the cake? Just to sabotage it or whatever, or prove that you should have gone through him for it?"

"PROMISE," she says, instantly. "I promise. Whatever you can do for me, there'll be no problem from my dad. He won't give you-- crap. He won't give you crap, I promise. He'll stay out of your way."

Dean smirks a little but then frowns again and she reaches over like she's going to grab him and shake him, though she stops just short. "Please! Seriously! I can't have the whole damn thing catered by Mario's, I mean, have you tried it? Some of it's really horrible. It's embarrassingly, but it's free and I just, I'm not in the position to turn down--"

"Did you say Mario's?" Dean interrupts.

She blinks at him.

"Mario is your dad," Dean says, to clarify. He thumbs to the west, where the shopping center behind theirs is. Where Mario does his bread-thieving.

Donna nods.

"Your fiancé. Chris?" Dean asks.

She nods.

"What flavor cake will he want?"
He struggles, at first, with whether or not to make a dessert spread that puts Mario's offerings to shame. He could do a tiramisu right, a cheesecake right, he could do everything Mario's got in his dessert case and he could do it correctly.

Dean shakes that off.

This is Donna's wedding, this is a marriage, not dueling banjos.

While Cas is busy with the cake, Dean goes a little wild coming up with other desserts. The wedding is to be traditional white with green accents everywhere. Green accents can mean everything from mint to matcha, rosemary to melon, pesto to pear, dill to lime.

First thing's first. Dean's got Donna's list of what Mario is already serving. The main courses on offer are basic: a chicken, a veal, a shrimp pasta, a vegetarian lasagna.

They're offering cocktails. And, she hopes, a sort of open dessert bar.

Dean does some Googling and thinks, *aperitifs and appetizers*. Yeah. He can do that. Sandwich Mario's shitty main courses between their snacks and desserts and it'll completely overshadow his boring proteins.

So bread-based finger foods to start. Dean plans it out. He'll make the breads the day before so they're freshest and spend time first on the other desserts. He writes down "crostini" and plans to top some with pesto. He ropes Sam into brainstorming with him but even though the jolly green giant loves his leafy greens, he blanks, and Cas offers up another option first: apple atop brie. They round out the green-on-white look with feta and spinach leaf with olives. (And apparently Cas is deeper into this cheese thing than Dean had ever feared.)

They'll chop up some of Cas's focaccia into manageable pieces. He'll stick with herb, mozzarella, asiago, and parmesan to keep with the color.

Sam insists that the rosemary loafs be offered somehow. It is, after all, a white loaf shot through with green. Donna hadn't said anything about bread being on the table with the main courses, so he agrees. "Even if Mario is bringing bread, it probably sucks."

Dean had grand plans for the desserts. Namely: EVERYTHING.

But he reigns it in some. The cake is supposed to be the main event. Cas has taken the lead on it and Dean isn't going to overshadow him at all. Some light tarts and lots of fucking cookies, he thinks. Dusted with powdered sugar and topped with sprigs of mint to keep with the theme. Tarts with pears and more of the green apples. A lime meringue. Only one rich dessert: mint chocolate chip fudge.

As proof that he's fucking certifiable, Cas decides that, not only is the wedding cake gonna be another experiment, but it's going to be a wickedly detailed affair. Donna's only mandates for the cake are that it involve pistachio and it should fit well with the color scheme.

So after figuring out pans, trying, fucking around, mixing differently, messing things up, destroying and burning things, Castiel settles on using a wok and begins construction on a fucking crepe cake. What seems like hundreds of layers of wide vanilla crepes with pistachio creme atop each.

He makes smaller crepes and does a second layer, only half the diameter, that will go on top,
confident at least that the bottom portion is dense enough and the dowls sturdy enough to support another tier. He ices the tops of both tiers a smooth white, but not the sides. The sides he carves off to make as neat and round as he can. The lines of green show through and are interrupted here and there by the edible flowers Marta gave him to match. White chamomile blossoms sprout out from where they're stuck into the sides.

It's not all smooth fondant and artsy lines. It's got an incredibly individual touch and it's a little imperfect. You know that someone crafted each tiny layer.

Cas teams up with Tracy when he can't come up with anything to put on top of the cake. She suggests a stylized set of initials for the couple, D & C, and draws out lots of options for him. Cas traces and traces over them, then tries not to blow through too much icing practicing with the bag before he actually lays the beautiful, flourished letters out on the top layer of the cake.

The two layers stay separate until they can be assembled in the tent and Dean grumbles something awful that they're going to have to rent a windowless white van to get everything to the wedding. He insists on windows so they don't look like weirdos and Sam just rolls his eyes. "It's not creepy. We're trying to keep everything from melting."

Donna's whole 'rustic' motif means that she runs out of time to handle some of her stuff on a DIY basis. When she comes back to Marta in a panic, Marta drags her back over to the bakery and introduces her to Tracy, who immediately begins work on seating place cards, personalized tags for the little take-home gift baggies, and big hipster signs with cheesy quotes about love on them.

This means Sam is left to be the calm little eye of the whole wedding storm. He mans the register, tells Dean and Cas that they're closing up early for the day, forces them out the door when they need to go home and sleep, and makes Tracy's decaf tea when her hands begin shaking too much.

He helps Marta, too, the evening before the wedding. In her transport van. With stuff. Perfectly legitimate stuff. Afterwards he's breathing hard and squinting and says, "the shit that goes down in creepy windowless vans," and Marta loses it, gasping the whole time about how that's not funny.

The day-of is a little strange. It's a Saturday and Dean and Cas get up and head out like it's any other day. They get an early, baker's start out to the wedding location with the van full of food. Sam will follow with the rest in his car which has better air conditioning than the Impala. They beat Mario's crew to the bed-and-breakfast type place nearby the field where everything is set up. This means they take up most the fridge and freezer space and Mario's little minions have to run out and buy coolers to pack their stuff in with ice.

Dean and Cas share satisfied smiles and take turns keeping an eye on their stuff while they toast bread and run desserts down to the tent. The little shits can't sabotage anything that way.

Some of them clearly remember Dean from the holy water incident. The ones who don't are informed in whispers and Cas says it comes off less angry than crazy. They're mostly like, who throws water on a guy?!

Sam arrives with Tracy. She's been invited to sit in on everything and leaves to go attend the wedding. Meanwhile, the guys assemble the cake and move it out to the tent for the reception.

The tent is expansive. It looks sort of thrown-together from the outside, adding to the DIY motif, but inside it's more evident that the place is actually somewhat of a permanent wedding hot-spot. There's a dance floor installed and a huge sound system. It's cooled and well-lit. It's also draped everywhere
It turns out that Mario had planned some appetizers, too. They just go more with the theme of his own food than with the overall look of the wedding. Dean and Cas share a look over it, but don't say anything. They simply peek in now and again, after the ceremony, as everyone files in and starts to grab drinks and taste everything. There are little toothpicks stacked with mozzarella balls, fresh basil, and tiny tomatoes. There are tiny pizzas which everyone heads to first. There are fried raviolis and garlic bread, as well, but they're a little messy, a little too drippy for everyone in their nice clothes.

The waitstaff are neutral. They take the crostinis and focaccia out with Mario's appetizers in equal measure and it's pretty clear what gets demolished most because Dean and Cas run out of stuff to send out first. Tracy checks in. She's all dressed up and blending in more with the hipster crowd of the couple's friends than with the more traditionally sharp-dressed relatives and parents. She keeps an eye on everything from the sidelines and comes back to report that the pizzas were better than Mario's normal fare. But the greened crostinis were a true hit, single-bites, easy to handle. The father of the bride was a fan of his own garlic bread and nothing else.

Tracy has a spot at a table with the groom's younger siblings and throws Dean a tiny thumbs-up when he looks in at the tail end of dinner. Everyone's already hitting up the desserts.

"Our man on the ground looks impressed," Dean mutters to Cas as they make another trip back.

Sam's waiting for them, glaring at the Mario's staff who are packing up and not so much as daring to breathe in the direction of such an imposing dude.

"We're feeding the people some pie," Dean says. "How's Marta?"

"Good, almost done. She's gonna go sit with Tracy. I, uh, don't think we're invited. You wanna try and grab some food anyway?"

"I had some of the chicken," Cas says. "It was dry. I want a hamburger."

"Yeah," Dean waves him off. "We'll eat when this is over. I donno if I can eat now."

Cas sneaks in the other side of the tent while everyone's turned to the cake-cutting. He takes pictures with his phone while the couple cuts and poses. He meets Dean back at the staff entrance to the tent to cut and serve.

When they're on the point of leaving again, Donna spots them and pulls them away, introducing them to Chris and giving them the credit for all their work. Chris shakes their hands and praises the pastries.

And Mario cuts in.

"It's unprofessional is what it is," he hisses, breaking Dean and Chris's hold. "What is this?" he points to the cake. "It's not even iced properly, it's uneven. You couldn't make the damn flowers? You had to stick plants into the fucking thing?!"

"Dad," Donna steps up from beside Chris. "Dad, stop it."

"Who are you, exactly? Who the hell do you think you are?" he says, getting right in Dean's face.

"Mario," someone barks, just as Cas is pushing in front of Dean, murder in his eyes.

Two big guys -- one who Dean definitely recognizes as the shift manager who he'd doused with holy
water -- step in and start pulling Mario away. They try to quiet him down, explain he's been drinking too much and eating too little. It's a party, they say and slap him on the back and haul him across the dance floor. Donna thanks her uncles and turns to make excuses for her father.

Dean pulls Cas back. "Not necessary. It's okay." He cuts a hand through the air, making it final, and puts his hand to Castiel's back. "Right?" he turns to ask him.

Cas takes a breath and nods.

"We're glad you enjoyed everything," he says.

"Well," Donna says, pointing up front, "you'll stay for a drink, at least? You know. Enjoy yourselves for a while," she invites.

And they do, despite Mario glaring in the corner and cursing them. They stick with Tracy and talk with some of the other guests who have nothing but nice things to say about their tarts and bread and cookies and the cake. Many of them had never heard of the bakery before but are now strongly inclined to drop by.

Dean and Cas don't push it, though. They wait through another couple of songs, then get up to start taking plates and platters back up to the house.

Cas stays behind in the B&B to pack up while Dean makes another couple trips.

"I can't find Sam," Dean announces with the final load of serving platters.

"Find Marta," Cas recommends, cleaning their spoons diligently before folding them away. "Sam will be where Marta is."

Cas has gotta be right. Dean heads back, around the other side of the huge tent and out towards where the low trees give way to the vast field, there they are. Marta is adjusting a goddamn, shit-you-not, serious-as-a-vamp-attack flower fucking crown on top of Sam's head as they sway to the music coming from the tent. They're laughing, they're close. They're ridiculous.

It's kind of awesome.

Christ.

Dean heads back up the slope and pulls out his phone. Texts Sam: **we'll give tracy a ride back. help marta get back ok**

In the kitchen, Dean pulls Cas's hands off the platters and away from the boxes. He leads him out to the reception tent one more time. They peek in as some tearful speech is being made by an older lady with an empty cocktail glass in her hand.

The cake has been demolished. Everybody's laughing, happy, cheering the newlyweds.

"You good?" Dean asks Cas. Castiel lingers over the sight for just a minute more before letting the canvas fall closed and nodding. There's another song starting up.

Dean kind of winces, if he's honest about it. And he steps in close and tugs Cas to him.

"You wanna dance?" he asks. "Just once?"

Cas smiles and plucks at the front of Dean's jacket, pulling it open. "I want a hamburger."
"Ha! Okay. Awesome. Go find Tracy. I'll load up the federal surveillance van."

"You mean the Free-Candy-Mobile."

"Justin Bieber Tour Bus."

Cas squints. "Shaggin' Wagon. Where's Sam?"

Dean points. "Other side. Being so-- well, come look."

They go around the side of the tent and peek.

Cas absorbs it for a moment then pulls back. "That's really nice."

"C'mon." Dean grabs his hand and yanks Cas around into his arms. He dances him back to the tent flap because he can't not, then pushes Cas back into the tent laughing.

There's finally a text back from Sam.

kk.

They leave the fancy country wedding for drive-thru and cervezas.
Sam wakes to a single image. It's the kind of thing you can't tell if it's something you ever saw or it's something in real life or it's some scrap of dream that fell through and let you hold on to it.

A hand on his shoulder with so many faces attached to the person behind him.

Dean's face fits there, Jess' face fits there, Bobby's face fits there. So do more sinister figures. Brady. Lucifer. Ruby.

It's an image as if from afar. Like seeing a picture of himself.

It doesn't hurt. It doesn't panic him. He doesn't long to fall back into sleep and see who is attached to the hand.

He thinks the point of the image is that they're behind him.

Jess and Bobby both behind him because they've passed so long ago now. Dean behind him because Dean is always behind him -- it's support not death in his grip on Sam's shoulder. Lucifer once held on to him by the shoulder in a too-real dream. Brady and Ruby behind him, propelling him towards something he didn't want.

There's a face that doesn't fit behind him. If he ever had a sense of where Marta was, she would be at his side, or in front of him, facing him.

None of those other people are behind him because they're what he was. He is those things today, all of those things. Except when he's lying about it.

Or especially when he's lying about it. He's not quite sure. Whole-life revelations don't just bless you with all their knowledge from the jump. You have to shake them around. Let them settle into the cracks like sand.

Like how he knows Marta is not behind him. He filled that part in himself.

Marta has already asked where they live. He was honest about the motel situation after the probing turned into a flat-out question. She had only shrugged and they'd gone back to sleep at her place again. Later supposition on her part had kind of implied that Dean and Sam were sharing some kind of solidarity with Cas, whose house had burned down and who wasn't ready to resettle yet. He hadn't confirmed or denied this.

Now he kicks his foot against the wobbly motel bed frame while he wakes up, yawns.

And then he gets out the laptop, gets on the Internet.

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She doesn't have Carmen today, so Sam shows up at the bakery around noon just to steal food and bring it over to Marta. She's singing along with the radio and painting white-out across a form. She's got a pen behind her ear and a pH soil tester pinning up her hair.

"Nice," he sets the sandwiches down and points to her head.

"Is brooooo-ken," she sings and caps the white-out. "You brought me food! What a good boy."
Sam smiles and tugs the printout from his back pocket. "I also have a favor to ask you."

"Que?" she asks, setting her paperwork aside and unwrapping her sandwich and digging in.

He comes around the counter and leans next to where she's sitting on the stool. They're of a height this way. Sam opens the paper and slides it over.

"Axiom Tattoos," Marta reads. "Are you getting a tattoo?"

Sam doesn't say anything. He taps the counter for a moment, studies his fingers.

"I'd like you to get a tattoo. A specific one. It's a protective symbol. It would protect you from some things that are very real."

Marta finishes chewing what she has in her mouth. Then she places the sandwich back down on its paper and dusts off her fingers. She swivels the stool and sets her hands on her thighs, attentive. She watches him, full-on. Waits while he will not meet her eyes.

"There's. My, um. Time. There's." Sam stops completely. Swallows hard and turns his back to the counter instead. "You would be. Completely within rights. To tell me to leave and get my head checked, or to not come back. I know some things that not a lot of people know. Or that not a lot of people believe. And. The only people who can back up any of what I have to tell you. They're my brother and Cas. There are others. Other people who know what we know. But what we... have done for a living. What we do? What we used to do? People don't think it's fact-based until it happens to them."

They let the words settle for a minute. Marta reaches out next to her to snap the radio off.

A customer comes in, jangling the door and closing out a call on his cell phone.

Marta greets him. Sam moves to the side, pulls his own sandwich over and picks at it while Marta works. She arranges a bouquet for his wife, upsells him a vase and a card.

After the guy bustles out again, Marta goes to the office and pulls out a plastic chair, places it behind the counter. "Sientate," she points. Sam sits far below her up on her tall stool. It's a strange perspective for him. She takes another bite of her sandwich and sets it aside while he settles down, wipes his palms on his jeans.

"A lot of people see pictures in the news," she says. "They see people in print on the top of newspapers, all surrounded by cardboard houses and carrying guns around. Like it happens someplace in Africa and no place they ever gonna know. They would be surprised to know how many places people carry automatic weapons in the street and the places where they don't. They would think it's reckless the age I first had a gun in my hand, for any parent to do that to a child. The heat. Of a desert, of a forest. You can see a video, on the TV, of a man, sweating," she swishes her arm around, "hacking his way to the coca farms and using gasoline to make the powder that a junkie calls 'candy.' And he puts it into his body with that shit in it! The same thing you put in your car! He use it get high. And you can hear about a roadside bomb but here, on the news? On ABC and NBC you'd think it was a firecracker going off in a pile of rubble and making people yell and scream and hate the west for no good reason. There's a lotta shit people don't believe until they see it. Until it has a body count," she pauses, corrects, "until you're doing surveillance on the fucking funeral." She nods.

Sam still takes a minute to figure out where to start. He decides on the immediate priority.

"This tattoo," he says, and taps his chest, where he knows Marta has noted it.
"This is the protective sigil that's capable of keeping a demon from entering your body. And I don't mean demon in the abstract. I mean a demon, an actual human soul, twisted by its time served in hell. They escape hell, through spells and portals and gates. And when they do, they're a black smoke. If you're weak or you're stressed out or corrupted in your own way, it's easier for a demon, in that smoke form, to get into you and take you over."

Marta doesn't say anything.

"It could be anybody. In fact, there are a lot of things that like to wear humans. Or that imitate them. And these are things I've seen with my own eyes. I've met them. I've hunted them. I know they're out there."

Sam takes a deep breath.

"Dean and I didn't quit the Marshals Service. We thought there was something strange—something not human going on in town. That's why we were here. We were impersonating officers."

"Marshals. You were impersonating federal marshals," she corrects.

Sam cringes. And doesn't say anything.

"That's a felony," she adds.

Sam takes out his phone and Googles himself. He hands it over.

"I'm also dead. Officially. A few times over, now. We both are—me and Dean. Cas is something else."

"Something else?" she picks up on that as she scrolls and taps on articles.

"Yes. Cas is something else."

She hands back the phone. "You say there are things that aren't human and that he's one of the things that's not human."

"Yeah."

Marta hops off the stool and pulls the pH meter out of her hair. It falls down to her shoulders and she leaves it on the counter. "You sit here," she says. "You don't move."

Sam sits and sweats.

"Tracy," Marta says and smiles.

"Hey. Looking for Sam?"

"No," she puts her finger to her lips and winks. "Shhh."

Tracy grins and watches as Marta rounds the counter and disappears down the hallway.

Dean and Cas are in the kitchen huddled over three bottles of syrup, taste testing each, when Marta comes in. Dean raises an eyebrow but she doesn't come to them, she walks over to the old radio and
turns the volume up some. Then she pulls the spoons out of their hands and grabs both Dean and Cas by the apron and tugs them towards the back, then out, into the parking lot.

Cas squints at her and Dean is half-grinning. "Uh. Marta?"

"You died two years ago. You and your brother, I seen pictures," she crosses her arms over her chest.

The color drops out of Dean.

"No. No, I can explain that, see, there's these guys who looked lik--"

She drops her arms and comes forward and yanks at the collar of his shirt to expose the flaming star on his chest.

"Prove to me there's demons. Prove to me there's such a thing," she says, rocking back onto her heels, still up in his face.

Dean feels Cas beside him, elbowing in, intending to put space between them. They've both heard Marta can handle herself. Dean extends an arm out to him, a hand to hold him in place. Cas only comes as far as the barrier of Dean's reach, but keeps his eyes intent on Marta, aware of her every breath.

"You don't want me to do that," Dean finally says.

"But you could?"

Dean looks at Cas, back to Marta.

"I could. But then it would be wearing a person and it would be right in front of me and I'd have to stab it in its face."

"Is he one?" Marta points at Cas.

Castiel steps back an inch to pull at the collar of his own shirt, exposing his own tattoo.

"Sam said you're not human," she challenges.

It's Dean who sways closer to Cas, this time, edging in front of Marta.

"I wasn't. And now I am," Cas nods.

"What is this, huh?" her narrow eyes scour them both. "Did you stop hunting demons to bake cookies?"

Dean shrugs. "Basically."

Marta is very still until her spine straightens and her chin ticks up and she marches across the lot to the back of her shop.

Dean and Cas look between each other for a minute in her wake.

"There's no possible way for him to have done that right," Cas remarks.

"Yeah. I wouldn't know where the hell to start."
Cas's lips purse and he squints at the sun. "Sam is going to be sad."

Dean can only nod. The truth is necessary between them. So very necessary. Their truth is also a complete clusterfuck.

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There is another guest waiting by the time she comes back. Sam is stuck behind the counter and it's completely evident he doesn't know how to help the woman. She's got a child napping in her arms and another screeching at her heels. Marta smiles and is kind and patient and helps the woman choose flowers for her sick sister's bedside. At the register, Marta shoos Sam to the side and rings out the transaction. She circles around again to get the door for them and pick up a fallen pacifier.

She returns and pushes Sam back away from the stool where she perches once again. He stands, awkward, looks between her and the door. She points at the chair again until he catches a clue.

"Mi abuela, she never had a reason to lie to me about anything. She taught me the way the world works and she said you stand in church and you say your prayers in case you need them, even if you don't think Jesus ever comes to listen. You watch your ass. You go to work. You go to school. And she never tell me anything fancier than that." Marta cocks an eyebrow, like, do you get it?

"She was no-bullshit," Sam says quietly, and nods.

"So she tells me this story about a boy in town. She said when he found out who his papa really was, the son of the priest, he got really happy one day. He stopped being angry about what his mama told him and was just... happy. Excited. He was happy when he stabbed the priest in the street and when people came up to try to stop him, he threw them against walls, against the buildings. And they stuck there. And when he killed as many people as he wanted, he left. He was just gone. And they never seen him again."

"Did she say his eyes went black?" Sam asks.

Marta's jaw clenches but she doesn't answer him. "My grandmother. She never had a reason to tell me that story. When someone said their house was haunted she laughed at them, called them crazy. When people say prayers got answered, she say no, they don't. She never ever not once changed that story."

Sam lets her scrutinize him.

"You didn't have any reason to come out and tell me that. You're smart. And practical. And you love your brother. Brothers," she corrects, motions to her left, to the bakery. "Why did you tell me this?" She pulls the printout with the map to the tattoo parlor out of her pocket. "You want to protect me."

"Yes. I want to tell you everything. And if that means you can't believe me and we can't do this anymore, I want you to make that decision now. Before it's all really," Sam shrugs. Can't finish the sentence.

"And what about me, huh? What if I didn't care and I didn't wanna know for a while longer? You go and make decisions for me?"

Sam shakes his head and stands up. "That's a trick question. I can't win that, Marta, unless I rolled into every town telling people exactly who I was and I don't do that. Because no one would believe me. What we have to do, no one would believe that. All I can do is tell you the truth now and hope to God you believe me and get my heart broken if you don't. That's all."
Marta taps the square of paper against her lips.

She hands it back to him.

"Go away for now."

Sam takes his keys out of his pocket.

"I'll see you later?" he asks.

The door shudders and then a UPS guy elbows through it.

Marta rises to help take the packages out of his hands and greets him by name.

Sam goes around them and exits.
Dean locks the back door behind himself and bumps into Cas when he turns around. "Dude."

Cas is standing there staring at Marta. She hooks her bag higher on her shoulder.

"I'm following you to the motel."

Dean thinks this has bad news written all over it. But at least she didn't just decide to tail them.

"Sure," he says, and points to his car.

Marta darts back across the lot to get her own. She rides the Impala's taillights to their place.

Dean calls Sam on the way over, so he's waiting in the doorway of his room when they pull up. Marta spots him and parks beside his car. Dean turns the opposite way, towards their room. He and Cas watch Sam invite her inside, watch the door close.

Dean spins his keyring around his finger for a moment. "I ever tell you about Cassie?"

Cas blinks at him and shakes his head.

"I told her," he says, staring off across the lot, to the road. "I was a kid. We were kids, practically but I was in love and I told her the whole deal. She kicks me out, says I'm an asshole. Calls me crazy. She dials me up a few years later and there's this ghost in town and she knows now I'm not as whacked out as she thought I was. She was too attached to what everyone thinks. Other people don't think there's more than one layer to the world. And I'm not talkin' about The Matrix here, I'm talking people say the word 'faith' a lot and 'believe' a lot but they have no idea that the words they put out there or the symbols they draw get imprinted, animated on the other side. That they don't mean reality to us but in the reality where demons come from. Where dead people go. Where the angels were, right?" he looks to Cas.

Cas nods.

"That's reality and we're the words. Heaven and hell, they're just different sides of the same coin."

Cas is silent. Then he reaches up to stretch out his stiff right arm. "I've never known a coin to have three sides."

Dean thinks about this. "There's heaven and hell and we're the coin." Dean points at the ground. "Earth is the coin."

Cas continues to pull on his shoulder.

"Or we're. Humans are. Shit. So whatever. Bottom line is that people can't accept that there's more than one reality. That they bleed through into each other and that's where the problems start. Everybody thinks they live in a no-leaks world."

"This reality is drippy?" Cas asks.

Dean considers.
"I haven't had a conversation this complicated since the last time I got high."

Suddenly Dean kind of perks up.

"Hey. I wonder if weed's decriminalized in this state. Dude," he throws his hand out to shake Cas a little. "Edibles."

"Edibles?"

"Yeah. They're awesome, see, you have to cook the THC-- out-- of th--"

Dean pauses and recalls the shape of Cas in the driver's seat of a truck, offering him pills.

"Nah," Dean covers up, quick. "Nah, that won't work, nevermind."

Cas follows him into the motel room.

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Marta asks him how exactly they got into the job. It's a little easier to see when there's a pain so raw attached to it. That this thing, this life, knowing these secrets, swallowed both of his parents, and eventually his brother. Sam doesn't get too far into it. There's not nearly time enough to cram the whole story in. He sticks mostly to the overarching theme of the Family Winchester:

Somebody meets a demon; somebody goes to hell.

After a while, Marta is in the chair next to the tiny table and she's got her bag tucked up close to her front. Sam is on the corner of his bed with his elbows on his knees.

"So now I just. I need you to believe me. And I don't know how to show you how."

Marta thinks for a while. "How many towns do you have to leave? When people find out?"

"All of 'em. Every one of them. Until lately, we haven't been in one place for more than a month. Not when we're together. We follow the jobs."

"Why not this time?"

"Dean. It was just. You walked in that one day and we had just found out the case wasn't something weird. Wasn't our usual gig. And we stayed. I looked for other jobs at first, but Dean was so happy. And Cas was finding. Finding himself, I guess. I guess he still is. I think that's gonna take a while."

"And Cas. He is...?"

Sam sighs. "Castiel. Is his full name. He was an angel. He's not anymore. There are no more angels. It's complicated."

"Complicated," she repeats with derision.

Sam extends his hands in a calming gesture. "Complicated-- all of it's. All of it's complicated for right now, for this instant. For tonight."

Marta sits back. "I'm really not trying to pick a fight. I just want to find reasons not to believe you."

Sam half-smiles. "It would be easier not to."
"So. There are no other jobs?" Marta asks.

"There are jobs. I just stopped looking for them because I want Dean to-- to sit here for a while. To have this thing for himself."

Her eyes narrow. "How do you find jobs?"

Sam thinks for a second. Then he gets up to take the chair across from her. He turns the laptop so both of them can see and types in Dean's favorite tried-and-true search term.

Freaky accidents.

"You're kidding."

Sam laughs and shakes his head.

He scrolls until he finds something that looks promising. A man driving home, late-night, ran into a road full of rabbits, nailing and killing over 30 while attempting to come to a stop. The name of the town is Sellers. So he pulls up the local news site and there are more signs. Crop failures, several of them, spread throughout the town and surrounding county, all of them belonging to one company and no other farmer.

"So, rabbits," Sam explains. "Rabbit slaughtering is a witch thing. They can't seem to help themselves. You find a freaky story like that, you look around the same town. If you find anything else strange nearby, that's usually connected. We'd take a look at it. It could just be mating season for the rabbits or something. I'd look that up first. The guy whose crops are all failing might be using a new water source or new pesticide. I'd check that. If none of those is true, then it's safer to assume a witch hates this guy," Sam points at the businessman's portrait on the web page, "and the rabbits were either a sacrifice or drawn in by the power."

"She couldn't just go to a pet store?" Marta asks, dubious.

"You go to enough pet stores, buy enough cats and rabbits, either people talk about you like some kind of animal hoarder and call a television producer or someone reports you for animal abuse because you keep killing your pets."

"It's easier to," she swoops her hands in the air like she's exploding a marionette, "summon a bunch of rabbits??"

"For them, maybe, yeah."

"Witches."

"We'd look into it."

"And demons."

"Whatever you got, we've probably met at least one."

"Chupacabra."

"Dad chopped one up in south Texas the weekend of my first ever field trip. Dean would remember it better than me."

She looks ready to fight him again. Sam gets up and heads to the door. "Be right back."
The TV's blaring from inside Dean and Cas's room. He hopes to fuck that's not the cover for them bouncing bedsprings.

He knocks.

Cas answers with half an eggroll in his hand.

"I need to get into the trunk."

Dean comes from around Cas.

"It's not 'cause you're chopping up her body, right?"

"Oh my g-- gimme the fucking keys."

Dean tosses them over.

Cas follows Sam out into the parking lot barefoot as he retrieves their dad's journal.

"Is there anything I can do, Sam?"

Sam pauses before closing the trunk and thinks about it.

"I donno, Cas. Short of taking her to a crossroads and calling somebody up. But. You know. I don't wanna do that in this town. It'll leave a trail. Someone will wonder where that demon got to."

Castiel nods. Stares.

"You know, I can't believe that people buy that you're human in the first place. It outta be clear enough, you just standing there being. Being you," he gestures vaguely.

Cas cocks his head to the side. He doesn't disagree, he just takes the keys, bites into his eggroll, and heads back to the room.

«»

John Winchester's journal is personal. Intimate. The leather cover soft and the pages edged the color of coffee rings.

And there's no reason to make up the things she reads in the first few pages.

Paired with the picture falling out of the back, a scruffy Marine and his two baby boys.

It's too intimate. And how much do you really need? Really?

Sam sees that she's stopped reading and flips to the first pages on chupacabras. He flips past drawings and number spreads, taped newspaper clippings, miles of handwriting. She shuts it before she can really read about the creatures.

Marta stares at the leather that Sam's fallen asleep on top of more than once.

"Is this a joke?" she finally asks.

Sam shakes his head. "This is life."

"Do you get the tattoo there? Every time? Does it have to be right there?"
"No. But it's easier to get to if it's on a limb. You know. Easier to burn through it, slash through it. Lop off that part of the arm."

"Is," she stops. "They won't be open this late, will they?"

"I donno. They probably will."

"And if I don't want to do this today?"

"You don't have to ever. It would just make me feel better. I wish everyone would get one."

Marta nods. "I'm going home. And I'll see you tomorrow," she says without getting up.

Sam smiles sadly.

"You don't know me that well yet," Marta says. She pulls him forward to kiss his face. He hangs on to her arm and wants to follow her forward.
The day begins with Dean sucking green food dye off Cas's fingers in the shower because it's still there from yesterday, set deep into the fingerprints. Yesterday had been cake balls and there had been something of a color explosion. For his part, Cas pulls at the back of Dean's neck and scrubs out the remaining red and purple sugar crystals.

Four hours later, Dean's already got more in his hair -- rainbow sprinkles this time -- and falling down the back of his shirt. He trails little seeds of color on his way up to unlock the front door for Tracy. He tries to pick the sprinkles out of the band of his jeans before he literally has a rainbow in his buttcrack.

The summer nights are closing out and passing bonfires in town a while ago had planted in Dean a longing for s'mores and beer. He doesn't know how he's gonna bake with beer, but the s'mores can go into brownies. Cas is on this kick (thanks to the cake balls) where he shoves sticks into everything. They arrange graham-marshmallow stacks, shove sticks through them and coat them in chocolate.

Sam comes in mid-morning and comments what an awful waste it is to be sticking paper sticks into everything and then setting them up in paper cups, too. "You're just going through a lot of paper products there, Cas," he points out.

So instead they continue on with these dense, chocolaty brownie monstrosities and then start to fold chocolate and marshmallow and graham into hunks of cookie dough. They are huge, stuffed, gooey. Dean eats them until he almost pukes.

Cas makes a return to cookies, then, since he's so happy with the results. He likes the giant cookies they make, already, thinks they make a lot more sense than eating a handful of cookies one at a time. He learns about thousand-layer cookies, dark chocolate espresso cookies, and Tracy recommends caramel apple, which he starts stuffing into and topping everything with.

Tracy has some other great ideas, flavors they haven't really chased after because they were out of season. "There'll be pumpkin soon. And gingerbread, peppermint, hot chocolate, eggnog."

Cas wanders back to the kitchen in a daze. He calmly makes a few pans of focaccia while he sorts through and itemizes everything in his head. He decides that where he will start on the Fall flavors depends mostly upon what Sam can get them on the next order pallet. He'll consult with him while these are in the oven.

For his part, Sam hangs out at the bakery, now, from open to close. He sleeps in less, shows up earlier, and he no longer slips off to Flores de Funza. When she comes over to have breakfast or a snack, Sam and Marta are still on good terms, but there's something in the air between them that Dean doesn't like. They speak quietly and, on occasion, they still laugh. For Marta it looks like she's starting all over, like Sam is new to her. For Sam, it's like he's allowed to be what he always was-- is.

Cas had expressed worry that Dean might lecture Sam, scold him in the wake of their break-up for everything he told Marta; one big 'I told you so.' But they didn't break up and Dean doesn't know that he's angry about anything.

He doesn't know if maybe he considers hunting a part of his past yet. Maybe. It's possible.
Cas still takes the online orders over to Marta's shop. She doesn't treat him any differently, except in the way she speaks. She thought he was just some guy with a bit of high school Spanish, but when she pushes him, he can converse with her fluently, even in a close approximation of her accent. He knows more Farsi than she picked up. And sometimes they talk about what it was like in Kuwait and Afghanistan. He can speak to it because he had, apparently, popped in so often, seen so much of it. He knows more of the mid-east's history than her.

When she tells him where in Colombia she grew up, it's odd, but he seems to instantly know her somewhat better.

«»

Sam decides to ask Tracy if she'll give him permission to have her logo replace the shabby sign outside, where all the shops in the plaza are listed, and maybe replace the simple "449 Bakery" above the awning. He'd need the image file to do so and when he settles down behind the counter to open the topic, Tracy steps in first.

"I should have probably told you before. I know it's late. But I go back to school in a week. I'm gonna be leaving town in a few days. Sam, I'm really sorry. I know I should have told you two weeks out, it just didn't occur to me. Time went by so fast."

Sam stops and blinks at that. "Wow. Yeah, I guess school is almost back in, huh? Wow," he repeats. "Well, hey, look. It's no problem. And you know we're not formal about this stuff. I'll just have to man the register more instead of hanging out at my table," he smiles at her.

Tracy blows out a relieved breath. "Thanks. I'm really sorry. It's just all of a sudden I remembered that I was supposed to be packing this week. If this means you can't rehire me next summer or-- or whatever. You know. I understand."

Sam shakes his head, "No. Not at all. That's not gonna happen, Trace. Any time you're in town and you want to--" he doesn't say 'pick up a shift,' because, god, that sounds like such a shitty, corporate thing to say. Dean would kick his ass. "Any time you want to come back. To the register or even the kitchen. Or just to hang out. It's fine. You know we love you, right?"

YEAH, he shouldn't have said that. At least not outright, like that.

Tracy's face flares totally red, she turns to go dump out the kettle and make more tea and wipe down the tables and attend to customers, anything not to have to look Sam in the eye for a while. So he doesn't get around to asking his original question for like half the day.

He wishes he didn't even have to think about it, but Tracy's gotta go her own way, she's gotta head back to Loyola for another couple years at least. And he dreads having to tell Dean.

Sam is aware that Cas has been attempting to smooth things over with Marta for him. He hates to have to dump Dean on top of that pile of worry and hurt feelings, too, but Dean has to be told and the only one who he really lets take care of him lately is Castiel.

After closing, when everybody else has gone and they're about to head out, Sam comes back to the spotless kitchen and drops the news about Tracy.

It's just as bad as Sam thinks it's gonna be. Dean nods and talks like he accepts it, but he has a really hard time watching people walk away. He worries. About them. And about how they'll forget him.

"I was thinking--"
"Tacos again," Dean claps his hands and pretends to get over it, plotting dinner. But Sam doesn't let him step over this.

"I was thinking," Sam repeats, "that we'll give her her last paycheck in cash so she has spending money for when she gets there and she doesn't have to wait for the check. And that we could give her one of the protective charms to wear. You know. In case. And maybe, I donno. You can do some kind of lemon cake for her?"

Dean swallows hard and nods. And he picks up his jacket and heads for the parking lot first, leaving Cas and Sam eyeing each other in the silent kitchen.

People leaving for college.
That will never get any easier on Dean.

«»

The next morning, Dean lets Tracy in before opening. They don't normally exchange petty pleasantries and today is no different. Only, instead of heading back to the kitchen, Dean sticks around to start the coffee afresh and picks a blondie out of the case.

"So. Are you all packed up for school?" Dean asks. "You need any help?"

Tracy smiles. "Thanks, but I've got it. Or, well. My mom helped me pack and dad is supposed to come in to town to drive me down."

"Supposed to?"

She rolls her eyes. "He's a little unreliable. But he'll make it in for this."

Dean clears his throat. "Well, if he doesn't, then call me, okay? We could always drive you down."

She thanks him, though she doesn't expect to have to make the call. They talk for a while about the residence hall she's switching to and about how she's decided to take the other few courses that will round out a minor in Graphic Design.

"You helped me build up my portfolio, you know? For typography. Between the bakery and the menu and the signs and stuff I worked on for the wedding. I got a lot of practice. And. I've got a lot to show off. So thank you for that."

Dean nods and his smile is a little sad and that's when he escapes back to the kitchen.

Cas is in there, working quietly. From this morning's experiments, he's got a dusting of nutmeg on his face like imitation freckles, and Dean pulls his hands away from the spoon and bowl and tugs him in and kisses him once. Castiel lets him hang on for a while. Soothes his hands down Dean's back.

After a long minute, Cas says, "It's a Jesuit institution, Loyola. There are chapels on campus and it's routinely blessed holy ground. So there's that, at least."

Dean kisses him again for that.
"Ciabatta," Dean says, like it's a joke. "Yeah, 'cause I wanna pay for more air than I would with a brick of Swiss cheese and, also, I wanna chew it. For a long time. Just all day." He chuckles to himself.

"It's nice for sandwiches," Cas disagrees.

"Chewy. Like a chewy brick. I have a sandwich in my hand, I wanna get to the meat, I don't wanna have to gnaw through the bread for fifteen minutes to get there."

"Perhaps your ciabatta would be fresher," Cas says. "Maybe mine would."

Dean shakes his head and continues trying to scrub the gunk out of the mixer. "If I was eating bread that hard, it better have been toasted. No thanks."

Cas nods. "That's fine. When my ciabatta's done, you won't have any of it."

Dean grumbles. Knows damn well he'll be chewing it for hours after, telling Cas how great it is. Fucking ciabatta.

They listen to nothing but the radio for a few minutes before Sam comes in clanking what sounds suspiciously like...

Dean looks up to check. A sixer of beer. Guinness, actually.

Sam sets it down on Cas's work station. "Do you know they won't sell you beer here until after nine in the morning?"

Cas smiles, "Thank you Sam."

"Nine?" Dean says, and the brothers share this bewildered look.

"I know, right? You can serve it all night, but, like, from sunrise to nine, no beer."

"Wow. Three hours. That'll really motivate you to. Uh. Sleep until the store opens," Dean shrugs, mocking.

Sam laughs, "Anyway. As ordered, Cas," he nods and goes to hang up his jacket and pull on his apron.

"Starting early, are we?" Dean asks.

Cas pushes the beer over to Dean's side of the work area.

"I'm working on gingerbread tomorrow. And I found a way for you to bake with beer," Cas pulls a print-out from under a bowl and it puffs flour like smoke as Cas waves it at Dean.

"Gingerbread cake with stout buttercream," Dean reads. And then his eyes go wide. "No."

"Yes," says Cas.

Dean cleans the mixer faster.
Up front, when Sam finally looks up from tying his apron to help whoever just *dinged* through the front door, he's thrilled to see Marta, instead. Busily refreshing the bundle of seasonal flowers over the condiment bar. (The one concession Dean was forced to make from the otherwise plain decor. The puppy dog eyes had actually won that one.)

He pushes out from the counter.

Sam watches her step back and narrow a critical eye at the display. She steps forward a couple more times to adjust it before it's just right.

"Que bueno," she commends her own work. Then she taps her cheek and presents it without turning to him.

Sam leans down and pecks next to her ear.

At last, she turns her smile on him, pleased.

"I saw you come in here with beer. I'm here for the party."

He laughs. "Pretty sure the beer is for baking."

"What a waste," she rolls her eyes. "Now, Carmen said there's pecan pie. I bring you flowers. You give me some."

Sam snaps to attention. "Yes, ma'am," and retreats back behind the cases.

"I want the piece with the most pecans. The MOST pecans. And a coffee."

She rounds slowly over to the counter between the cookie case and the register. Marta watches him work.

"Vanilla ice cream on top?" Sam asks.

"Bah. It's breakfast," she waves him off. "Whip cream, not ice cream."

She likes the look of him when he laughs. She likes that he laughs easier now. It makes it hard to drag out whatever hurt remains from the initial confusion. Marta much prefers this to reactive discomfort, awkwardness.

Other than speaking with her, frankly, about all he knows, all he has hunted, their everyday experiences of one another are normal, contended, and familiar.

He slides her pie over and she goes to sit so he has to come bring her the coffee.

She points to the seat opposite and, with just the point of her fork, commands that he join her.

They talk about how Dean's doing after Tracy's departure and whether or not they're going to look for someone else to man the register.

"Not right now," Sam says. "I don't want, um. Dean to have to think about that right now. Whoever it is will get hell from him if we bring them in too soon. You know. Nobody'll be good enough."

Marta thinks she does know. She 'hmms' around a mouthful of pie.

"So you should be looking for something else," she says after a moment. "Like a place to live. A real place to live? You've been here for months. For the whole summer. And you're still at that--" she
shakes her head, frowns. "You can't live in a motel."

Sam nods, knowing how true it is. At this point, it's beyond time to be looking into it. By now they could have been half-way through a basic lease on a not-too-crappy apartment.

She pulls another piece of pie off the fork with her lips pursed tight. Then says, "I have a really big house, you know? With all that room and just me. I'm just saying."

Sam's mouth goes dry.

He remembers passing an empty guest bedroom upstairs in her house, wandering, trying to collect his clothes from the floor.

Of course, the thing he remembers most about Marta's house is the glow of her naked thighs in the muted afternoon light.

That was definitely the best part of Marta's house.

Typically, this moment is interrupted by the door. Five women loaded with shopping bags, laughing and already gushing about the aroma of the bakery.

Sam wipes his palms off on his jeans, flashes Marta half a smile before pushing up and heading for the counter.

The next time he's free, he spots her vacant table, her empty plate helpfully moved just behind the counter. Her mug nowhere in sight.

He has to think for a while before he can head next door to retrieve it from her. He waits until after lunch when he still has no fucking clue what he's going to say. Doesn't want to say anything, really. When he sees her, all he wants to do is crowd her behind the counter and find the taste of her mouth again.

If she'll let him.

The way she smiles at him, pushes the mug across the counter with two fingers, says she probably will.

«»

They do, in fact, share some of that big space in her home that night. And some time in the early morning she gets a surprising call.

Nearly the same one Dean got right before her.

By the time all four of them, Sam and Marta, Cas and Dean, throw on their clothes and arrive in the plaza parking lot, there's absolutely nothing to be done.

Of the two units, only one wall of Marta's shop remains, the rest is scorched, crackling, dripping rubble.

Sam watches their faces in the spinning lights of the fire truck and the single sheriff's cruiser that showed up on scene.

This is fucked. This is completely fucked. There's Marta, rigid, chewing her lip and alternating between looking off into the night and back to the charred mess. She crosses her arms over her chest and contains herself. There was the devastation in her eyes when they'd rolled up and now there is
only anger.

It's Dean he's truly worried about.

Dean who remembers at least something about the first fire that destroyed a place he'd called home.

Dean doesn't look away from it. Men and hoses pass in front of his vision. Cas grabs his arm and holds on for a while and tries to catch his eyes. Sam grips his shoulder and holds on more and nothing shakes Dean's vision away from where the bakery once stood.

Marta approaches the Deputy after he's done speaking with some firefighters. She asks questions and he seems to recite everything he knows for her. Then she comes back to stand in front of Sam and she stares at the bones of her shop some more.

When Dean finally moves, it's only to say one thing.

He tosses one hand up and lets it fall. "All my good spoons were in there."

Cas is the only one whose eyes are not angry or lost or sad. His face is wet with tears and his jaw is clenched.

He's the one who sees Marta start walking away. Castiel palms Sam's upper arm and pushes him off in her direction.

Sam follows her across the street to the 24-hour mini mart.

And that is how they end the day. Sort of the same way it began. They drink the beer this time. All sitting in a row across two parking spots. When the lights cut out and all the professionals roll away, they stay. Each hanging over their knees in one way or another.

For hours.

Dean is the first to rise and kick past the caution tape and into the slush, the blackened brick and glass.
The sun is rising and glowing, not brilliant off the front windows like every day before, but dull yellow off what remains of the steel appliances that still stand towards the back.

Sam follows Dean into the burned-out waste of the bakery.

Cas goes and opens the trunk of the Impala and comes back to where Marta sits with a bag under his arm. He offers her a hand up. Empty beer cans roll away when she climbs to her feet.

He leads her over to her side of the remains first and beyond the yellow line he starts to dip his hand into the bag and spread salt.

"Salt and fire purify," he explains. "We had enough of it laid down next door. If we spread the embers this should be enough."

"To purify," she says.

Castiel nods. "Just in case."

When the bag is half empty they climb next door. It's still so hot in so many places.

Sam and Dean have managed to shove the central workstation in the kitchen to the side. The floor mats mostly melted into the tiles but they need to clear enough of it away to see.

A lot of the tiles cracked away from the floor in the heat. But it doesn't look like the devil's trap was intentionally fractured.

Cas explains the symbol to Marta and agrees that it doesn't look as if it was disturbed on purpose. The smell of everything else is too overwhelming and they can't see sulfur anywhere but Dean insists that doesn't mean there wasn't any foul play.

"C'mon, Dean," Sam says, doubtful. "A demon would just get so impatient waiting to find us--waiting for us to come back in, in the morning, that they'd burn the bakery down and not stick around to fry up some firefighters? Doesn't make sense."

Dean won't concede that it doesn't. Instead he just leaves.

"What about."

Sam and Cas turn to Marta.

She hesitates before she starts again. "What about the baker? What about Mr. Baxter?"

Sam shakes his head. "He was cremated. If there were anything left of him, it would've been floating around the bakery. No point in burning himself out of here."

Marta gives Sam another one of those very long looks. She didn't even ask if it was a ghost. She didn't have to use the word 'ghost.' To them, the activities of the dead and impossible are just facts. A set of facts and rules by which they operate.

"You don't think it was any of them," she clarifies, meaning any of the countless creatures she's not even sure exist.
Sam looks to Cas.

"I don't see how," says Castiel.

Sam nods. "Alright. So. Well." He gives the mess around them one last look. "Let's get out of here for now."

They carefully shuffle and climb back out to the parking lot.

"Accelerant," Cas observes.

"Totally," Sam agrees.

Dean is leaning against the car, arms crossed, looking down.

"It wasn't an explosive," Marta notes. "I know the look."

"We press them for an inspection," Sam says.

Castiel mutters something about Mario.

"Okaaaay," Sam rolls his eyes. "Mario is the only guy in town who really has a reason to hate your guts. But I'm not placing money on it, guys."

Cas nods. "Then we need to look into whoever would profit from destroying the shops. The property owners."

"Unless someone hates me!" Marta interrupts.

Cas and Sam turn to her.

"Alright," Sam says. "Does anyone have any reason to try to-- to. Destroy your shop?"

She squints at him. "Nooooo. Everybody loves me. I'm fantastic. But I demand recognition as an equal target."

"Yeah. Gimme your keys," Sam begins tossing empty cans back in the big box they'd bought and tosses it in the back seat of Marta's car, then holds the passenger-side door open for her.

She is still and silent and staring angrily at him. Maybe not angry at him exactly. Maybe just half-drunk and angry at everything.

He waves to the passenger seat. "In. You'll get a couple more hours sleep and then we'll start investigating. Nobody's even up yet. It's six."

Silently, she gets in and pulls the door closed behind her.

Sam turns to Cas and his brother.

Dean is blank. That expressionless vacancy in his eyes that says he's sitting in the back of his mind steadily sharpening his weapons and making a list of fools to fucking kill.

When Sam says something about them heading back to the motel to just cool down for a while, have breakfast, a shower...

Cas is listening, he's ready to go. He knows what needs to be done. But Dean's body kicks into
automatic, his mouth and nodding head agreeing with what's going on, his mind still clicking away behind the actions. That deadly serenity that comes before stupid jumps and self-sacrifice and silent assassinations.

Months of peace may have settled into Dean's frame, his words, his attitude. It didn't change him in nature.

Before parting, Sam makes sure to maintain eye contact with Cas until he gives some indication that he knows what's going on.

It comes after another moment, after Dean mechanically sits down in the car and starts her up. Cas stays where he is and looks slowly to Sam and nods once, grave and sure. It is only then that Sam feels okay about leaving them alone.

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Sam can't convince Marta to go home. She directs him to the growhouse and property she shares, where many of her flowers are grown. It's all there, but she still insists on circling the tent-like structures and walking between rows for a while. She's done being all bunched up into herself. Her arms are at her sides, hands in fists. Chin ticked high. Eyes steady.

He tugs at her elbow when she looks back to the field one last time.

He wants her to lay down for an hour or two more, but she slips off to the shower instead. He has strong coffee ready for her when she gets out.

When she's dressed there's food, fuel, caffeine. And a determined set to her shoulders. She starts digging out paperwork and turns her laptop over to him.

They begin the investigation.

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Castiel lets Dean be silent through coffee and breakfast. Dry donuts from the mini-mart. Dean turns on the news and there's a couple fresh, daytime shots of the black husk of the shops, followed by the weather.

Cas turns the television off and comes to the end of the bed where Dean sits. Pushes forward and wedges his thighs between Dean's knees. His whole body is locked where it is. His shoulders stone and his neck, too, where Cas slides his hands. He pushes his thumbs up under Dean's jaw to draw up his attention.

"What do you want to do?"

Dean swallows. His first word in the last hour sounds empty coming out. "Donno."

Cas drops a frown and cocks an eyebrow, like, bullshit.

Dean shrugs.

All he knows is he doesn't want to hear what his heart has to say right now. He doesn't want sympathy or consolation. He's always wanting the impossible: for bad things to just up and reverse themselves. Like maybe if he went to sleep on the other side of the bed his cell phone wouldn't have gone off. Or maybe if he'd stayed up later, was more tired, he wouldn't have heard the phone when it buzzed. Wouldn't have had to see what little flame that remained lick up from where the baguette
baskets used to sit. Maybe they left something on. An oven or a burner and it was all their fault. All his fault that Marta got dragged down with them. After their grand intentions to save the place, to not sacrifice it to ensure there was no haunting.

His lungs are one knot, all his guts a nest in his center, a mess that aches and forces him to work his throat more, bite the inside of his mouth so whatever dumb move he decides is next won't hurt the man in front of him, or his brother or Marta or hurt himself more. He always knows what he wants to do, so saying he doesn't is a lie. He just can't put it into words. The action will burst out of him, though, through rage or resignation.

Cas reaches down and unfurls Dean's fingers from their grip on the bedsheets. He pulls Dean's hands up to rest warm on the backs of his thighs. Then he handles Dean's head again.

"Let's find someone to blame," Castiel says.

"What if it was us? What if I left the fritzy fucking toaster plugged in?"

"You would be very satisfied with blaming yourself, of course. But first we're going to find out if it was the toaster. If it was you. If it was me, if I left something on the stove. If it was a heat lamp in Marta's shop, or a crossed wire. If it was a competitor or Mario Durante or a group of teenagers. I'll misdirect Sam, if it is, and I'll let you hurt them until you're happy."

"God, Cas," Dean breathes.

Castiel shrugs. "If you want. We may find them and you discover that it's not worth the effort or exertion. We will find out, though. Let's do that first. Tomorrow you can think about what it means that there's no bakery. That is for?"

Cas pauses, waits.

"Tomorrow," Dean answers, like a quiz.

"And first?"

"We find out who did it."

"And if it's us? You or me or Marta or Sam?"

"That bites. And. Shit happens."

"And if it's someone else?"

"I get to kill them."

Cas nods, serene, as if killing someone weren't an overreaction to property damage. Dean supposes that it feels that way right now. And Cas is right. It may not be worth the blood in the end. But for now it sounds right.

Dean's hands climb his body and pull him down. Cas steps one foot over and sits on his thigh.

"I want to go hunt," Cas says, and kisses him.

Yes, Dean thinks, draws him in again.
"So your property pays out in the event of vandalism and arson," Sam says. "Dai and Helen Ito own the shopping center. Did you ever meet them? I only ever got them on the phone three times. Helen gave me crap about the A/C when it went out."

"I met them. They were kind of stuck up but not horrible," Marta says. "Helen made sure we had our 'disaster preparedness' practices up and fire evacuation and that I trained anybody who worked for me about it," Marta waves her hand. "They liked to have all the paperwork in order."

"So do you," Sam notes, tapping the two neat piles of paperwork that Marta had brought out.

Marta sips her coffee and zones out again. "I called Carmen already. I need to get my mail held. I need to call my supply guys and my vendors. Update the website. Put orders on hold."

Sam sighs. "Yeah. You've got a lot to do. I gotta call Dean about that, too. First, though," he pulls up a blank Word file and slides the laptop back over. "Write out everything you saw this morning. All you observed. And write down what the Deputy told you."

She frowns. "It wasn't much. He said they got a 911 call almost the same time as a cop called it in."

"A cop? Another cop? Who didn't stick around to handle it?"

"Um." She shakes her head, blinks, puts her mug down. "Trooper. He said a trooper. A highway patrolman called it in."

"Alright," Sam nods. "You start writing. I'm gonna find out where the Itos were last night. I donno that it fits that they'd hit part of their property and not even the main part of the plaza, with the bigger stores. Then we'll find out about the trooper."

«»

Sam makes the call to Dean. Cas is the one who picks up. "Dean will be out of the shower shortly. Where will we start?" Cas asks, all business.

"With the 911 and dispatch calls. I don't think we can fool anybody in town into thinking we're feds, so leave the suits. We'll just have to get up in peoples' faces and demand answers."

"We're not starting with the property owners?" Cas asks.

"They were home last night. Two kids almost grown, their aunts and a mother-in-law there to visit. The cops called Dai Ito, he called Dean, his wife called Marta. I doubt they did it."

"Then why didn't they show up when we did? It was their building, too."

"I donno. They're in the next town over. They had a full house. Hell, maybe it was to maintain their alibi if they hired somebody out to do it. But why? Ever since we moved in, we've brought more traffic to the plaza. Marta's profits were up and we were paying them rent on time. We were regularly raking in more than Baxter did on his best day."

Cas is silent on the other end.

"It's too easy to get paranoid about this, Cas. I say we follow the official leads first. You guys get over here to Marta's place. Bring my laptop."
They decide to split up. The local LEOs know who Dean and Sam are from the investigation before they "moved in" to town. Sam is able to sneak in to their network and download the dispatch call from the Sheriff's office to the Deputy who went out to the fire. However, they don't have the name of the State Trooper who called it in. Down at the station they'll try to get his name.

Meanwhile, Marta and Cas track down Lizzy, the bartender who called 911.

She's on lunch break at her second job when they show up. Cas helps her carry her Coke to the table (and drops some holy water under the lid on his way there).

"Yeah, I was getting off work. Filling up my tank across the street. I wouldn't have stopped for gas that late at night except I was on fumes and I wanted to sleep in before work today. And I thought I saw the lights on in that building."

"The bakery?" Cas asks.

"I, uh. I'd never been. I think it was a bakery? It was just weird because all the rest of the lights were off all over," she motions vaguely, "that side of the road and I was like, is that fire? Or what is that?" She sips her Coke, unperturbed at it being a little watered down. "So I waited until I was done filling up my tank and I turned back and I was like, that's totally a fire. I went in the station and went to the guy at the counter. I go, 'does that look like a fire to you?' And he thought so, too, so, I called 911. It was weird. I've never had to do that before. She was telling me to calm down and just tell her where I was and I was pretty calm but I couldn't even remember the name of the damn street I was on," Lizzy laughs a little nervously.

Marta smiles a bit in sympathy. "Well, we just wanted to thank you for calling them."

"Didn't look like it helped much. I drove by this morning," Lizzy grimaces.

"Still. You did the right thing. It might have burned out of control if not for you. It might have spread to the other buildings," Cas says.

Lizzy shrugs a little and even Cas thinks Marta's getting a little weird with the scrutiny when she stops staring and says, "That's a lovely ring," she points to Lizzy's finger. "Is that white gold or sliver?"

"Oh, silver. It was my grandma's."

They chat for a few moments longer before Cas and Marta head out to her car.

When they shut themselves in and she turns the key, she asks, "Silver is-- well, I saw something in the journal Sam showed me? And we talked about it some."

Castiel nods. "Silver is unsafe for many creatures. Djinn, wraiths, shapeshifters..."

"So if she was wearing silver she wasn't any of those things, right?"

"Some of the more powerful ones might tolerate wearing it, but you're right. I doubt a shapeshifter would wear silver on a regular basis. She also had no reaction to the holy water I put in her cup. She seemed quite genuine."

"Now we have to find out if the trooper is a-- if the trooper could have anything to do with it?"
"Sam and Dean have their methods. We should follow up with the gas station attendant Lizzy spoke to."

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"Weird, right? That a State Trooper would call it in but not hang around to make sure everything came out okay?" Dean asks, staring a the road as he drives.

Sam shakes his head. "From what the deputy said, I think he was headed out on another call. The trooper probably just stopped to make sure the fire rescue was gonna show and handed off control to the local guy. Don't wanna step on each others' toes."

"Donno. I got a feelin' about this one."

"We'll see," is all Sam says.

And they do see, quite clearly, that the trooper doesn't flinch when Sam steps aside to take a phone call in Latin.

They've tracked him down to the local unit office and 'dropped in just to say thanks.'

"I appreciate that, but really, I'm back on in five. I gotta head out," he rises from his desk to shake Dean's hand and leave. No reaction to the iron or silver rings Dean sports on his fingers for the occasion.

"Fuck this," Dean says when they're headed to the car again. "I'm gonna find out where Mario was last night."

"Dean, he's just a grumpy hack with an old family restaurant. I don't see him really being a part of this at all. And from the way they over-seasoned the pasta at the wedding, I doubt if Mario were a demon he would have survived to bitch about the cake. Drop it on this one."

Dean doesn't say anything so Sam knows that's not going to happen.

They meet up with Cas and Marta downtown. They all sit down at a restaurant but everyone's too puzzled and annoyed and angry to really do anything but share a pitcher of beer and a basket of fries.

"And the boy at the gas station says he saw nothing," Marta fills them in. "He went outside and looked across the street with Lizzy and he say he just saw the light from the fire and a window blow out. They didn't see anybody nearby. He knows he seen some cars and all but it was quiet."

"So no suspicious activity leading up to it," Cas says.

"This was the Hess, right, not the Stop-n-Go?" Sam asks.

Cas nods.

"Dean doesn't go to the big, corporate gas stations. He's never been in." Sam says.

Dean squints at him. "So what?"

"Well, if you're the only one who hasn't been in there, you can roll in with a badge and get the security camera footage. Maybe they have a camera that's got a view on the rest of the street."

They throw back the rest of their beer and take off, Dean alone and the rest in Marta's car.
While Dean gets into a fed suit and goes to get the footage, the rest of them go back to the blackened crater where their businesses once stood.

The sun is at its peak and the heat of the flames has gone completely. It's easier to pick through and look for anything suspicious. They're in the back of Marta's shop when Sam's phone rings.

"Sam?!"

"Tracy?"

"Oh my god, Sam, are you alright? Is everybody okay? My mom just called me! She said she drove by to get groceries and the bakery and the flower shop are gone! She said they're just gone! All burnt down and--and--"

Sam scrambles away and out of the mess back out to the sidewalk.

"We're okay, Tracy. We're alright. It happened in the middle of the night."

"Oh god." She sounds just devastated. He can hear her tears begin and it chokes him up, too. "Marta's okay, too? She wasn't there late?"

"No, she's fine. They both got calls when it happened, her and Dean. We-- well. It's over. It's just. It's just a matter of finding out what lead up to it. Don't worry, alright? Everybody's okay. Nobody got hurt."

It takes a minute to convince her. And then she finds the local news website has pictures of it that they'd showed on tv this morning and she's sobbing.

Marta comes out to find Sam wide-eyed on the phone and silently insists he hand it over. She talks quietly and sweetly to Tracy until she calms again and then goes to hand the phone over to Cas so Tracy can hear that he's alright.

Dean makes it over just in time to get the phone shoved to his ear, too. He hands his own phone over to Sam and takes the phone Cas offers him to walk off into the parking lot and talk Tracy down further.

"Hello? Yeah, Trace. Yeah, I'm okay. No, it's alright, sweetheart, it's gonna be fine..."

Sam thumbs through Dean's phone. He'd simply taken screenshots of the best stills that had been on the video. It was all blurry as hell even before it was a series of cell phone photos so, it's likely a dead-end.

But there's one still of the tail-end of a tow truck that gives Sam pause.

"I need my laptop. Or I need my phone back. Or. Cas, hey gimme your phone."

It only takes a quick search to discover that yes, indeed, Carla Simmons is out of jail, trial pending.

Sam squints between the phones trying in vain to match features or plate numbers to the tow truck they'd used to flip all those cars last spring. It's not working.

When Sam explains to Cas and Marta, Cas is the first to take exception to the theory.

"Carla Simmons said she was prevented from harming the bakery somehow."

"Yeah, but that was before Baxter's cremation. And even if it were still protected, she could have just
started the fire in Marta's shop to begin with and let it spread to--. To the. To the bakery," Sam trails off, following a line of spots on the sidewalk. Like some kind of food coloring spill.

"Sammy?" Dean joins them only to see Sam poking at the ground.

"Look up. Um. Look up. What was his name? Dean, look up that guy who-- Carla Simmons' boyfriend. Find out why he's not out of jail yet and she is."

"I can't remember his name," Dean shrugs.

Marta and Dean run through names together, trying to remember. Marta's on the point of calling around and asking a few people who knew Carla and the baker-- then they remember.

"Lester," and she peeks over Dean's elbow has he looks it up on Sam's phone.

"Uh. Wow," Dean says at last. "Tax fraud."

Sam comes at them to collect his phone and hand Dean's back. He's grinning wide. "I got it."

"Got what?"

"I know it was Simmons and I know how she did it. Look, call around, see if you can't track her down. Marta?"

"Sí."

"Ready for some breaking and entering?" Sam asks.

"Of course."
It turns out Carla inherited a hunk of farmland when her father died.

"Must have spoiled her for Baxter the Baker," Sam says, and Marta can only agree.

"What do we do?"

"We wait in the car and see if she's in the house. Or we wait for Dean and Cas to call and tell us they found her."

They don't have to wait long before Dean and Cas find Carla Simmons at a bar.

"Perfecto," Marta says. "She's breaking the terms of parole."

"Better than that," Sam says, busily texting Dean back. "She's drinking. Last time she got busted, she was so drunk she confessed to everything. We've got time enough to gather our proof now and in the meantime..." Sam finishes his text and sends it.

"You have your brothers buy her drinks until she gets mouthy."

"Exactly. Then call the cops on her. And, hopefully she drove there on her own."

Marta follows Sam out of the car and up onto the Simmons property.

There's a sort of low wooden divider between the yard and the neglected waste of the farm. Not even anyplace they have to break into. And there, behind the house, on the stained concrete of the back porch, is his goal: A barrel supported on its side on a stand with a hose coming out of the front. Sam kicks aside a trash bin and finds cans and glass recyclables in a box. He picks an empty condiment jar, peeled of its label and pumps some of the gasoline into it.

Marta blinks. "It's purple."

"Yeah," Sam grins. "This is it. There was that stain on the sidewalk outside of your shop. Some of the gasoline splashed and stained where it fell when she busted through the window or whatever. I'm pretty sure the fire marshal will confirm it, but this is all the proof I need." He hooks the hose back up and swirls the gasoline in the jar. "It was tax fraud. Her boyfriend was operating his tow truck on the free gas she gave him." Sam taps one of the metal stilts holding up the barrel. "Farm oil is tax free but it's only supposed to be used in farm equipment. So they dye it to make sure you don't use it in your car. It'll stain the tank. It's a simple test to find out if you're using it in anything that's not actually farm equipment and that's tax fraud."

"So if she's filling up her car with the same gas, and we call the police on her, she's not just going back to jail for violating parole, she's going to prison for fraud."

"And the cherry on top will be if we can get her to admit to burning our shops down."

"I'd kiss you right now but the fumes are getting to my head."

Sam smirks. "That's not totally a bad thing."

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Castiel sits on the side of the booth facing the door, facing Carla's direction, and sends drinks over to
her.

Dean offered to do it, offered to chat and get her all liquored up, but Cas never encountered Carla during their original investigation. He made the call. He would flirt with her, buy her next few drinks, and then, given a positive response, he’d go over and do shots with her.

"I donno. You were a fucking champion at it before. But you're not superhuman anymore. It'll go to your head faster."

"Stop worrying," he slides his eyes away from Carla and over to Dean. "You're the only one who gets to pick me up tonight." And with that assurance, Castiel almost slinks out of the booth and cozies up next to their mark.

Dean scoots and sits with his back to the wall and fucking fuck.

Watches Cas make *Dean eyes* at Carla.

Dean's seen this seduction, seen it in the mirrored backs to countless bars, felt it in his own body. The positioning of hips and the dark smile and holy shit. Cas has learned an uncomfortable amount from him. It's not perfect, and Dean's sure he still sounds a little otherworldly, but it looks all right. And Carla's already had enough to drink that she's probably just soaking in the attention without regard for the oddball qualities of the one lavishing it upon her.

He doesn't keep eyes on them the whole time, but he does catch them taking a few shots between whispers and laughs.

They clink glasses, nod to each other, Carla looking smug, Cas looking.

*Wow. Douchey.*

And they throw back their shots.

Except that Cas's gets tossed right over his shoulder while her head's thrown back and her attention isn't on him.

Dean's impressed but he's also pretty sure some bartender running this or that way is gonna eat shit when they slip on the puddle of tequila on the floor.

Cas dumps another shot in an empty beer glass next to his elbow. Another he tosses sideways over the counter, across the glasses and sink behind the bar. There's gonna be tequila everywhere if this goes on much longer. Each time they flip and slam their shot glasses down, satisfied grins in place.

Cas is certainly doing the job right. She gets louder and louder with every drink. They laugh and she curses and brags and lures him in for a peck on the cheek. Finally they excuse themselves to a dark booth at the opposite end of the room.

Not cool. Dean tries to decide which stool up by the bar will give him the advantage of sight without making it obvious he's watching them. He's on the point of getting up to make his move when Sam comes into view. He flags Sam and Marta over to his booth and points the way that Cas and Carla drifted off to.

Sam looks majorly concerned.

"How long has he been at it?" Marta asks, all business.

"Half hour, now."
"How drunk are they?"

"He's doing a pretty good job--" and appropriately, Dean is interrupted by her banshee howl of a laugh.

Marta huffs an impatient breath.

"Fuck this," she says. "I'm done waiting. We did our investigation. Sam? Call the police on her."

And Marta gets up and marches across the room.

"Crap," Sam says, and dials the Deputy.

*Screw it*, Dean thinks, and gets a seat up at the bar to watch.

Marta steps up to their booth and looms over them.

"Hola, Carla," Marta purrs, deadly.

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It dissolves into a screaming match quickly but that means the whole bar gets to hear how Carla Simmons burned down their building.

Marta carefully does not lunge for her throat and crosses her arms over her chest to resist the temptation as they shout at each other. Cas is at Marta's side, attempting to maneuver in front of her any way he can but they keep edging around each other and eventually Carla really comes at her.

Marta yanks Cas out of the way. "Don't touch her! Don't let her touch you. This puta won't be able to charge us with assault." Then Carla lands a claw that digs two of her nails into Marta's neck. Cas shoves her off and away and Marta only smirks. Gladly gives the other woman first blood. That's another charge on top of the others.

The bartenders are shouting at them and corralling them toward the door. Sam is off the phone, has stepped up by now and eventually gets to Marta's side. He leads them all outside and in no time at all two county vehicles pull up, lights spinning. The deputies pull Carla away from Marta and Sam steps up again, this time to explain the entire situation. The cop who had been witness to the blaze last night comes up in his cruiser and leads Marta off to take a statement about the assault she'd just been through in the bar.

It could have been a lot easier, Dean considers as he watches.

"You coulda just let me lure her out of here. Ganked her like the subhuman filth she is. I can't believe we're the ones calling the police."

Cas nods. "Yes. Let's not do this again. This was a lot messier than your average hunt," Cas shakes out his tequila-soaked left sleeve.

Dean laughs at him.

"Marta wouldn't have stood for it," Cas says, in a more serious tone.

"Yeah. Yeah, I know." They watch Sam finish his story. As he does, there's a call put through to dispatch and one of the deputies picks out Carla's car and starts circling it. The other one gets Carla settled in the back seat of a cruiser, safe behind the cage.

Safe from Dean, mostly.
Back at Marta's place, in her bathroom, Sam gets to patch up the scratches on her throat while she's perched on the counter next to the sink. "That was the fastest investigation I have ever been a part of," she muses, tapping her heels against the cabinets. "You know, I'm a little rusty. Maybe we should do this again some time."

Sam only half-smiles. Because he doesn't know where all they're going to be tomorrow.

Marta sees straight through him. She pulls his hand from the box of bandages and plucks the washcloth out of his other hand, dumps it in the sink behind her. She hooks her ankles around his legs and draws him near.

"Where are you going?"

"Honestly? I don't know."

"I mean right now," she says into his ear, quietly, as she pulls him down to her.

"Not anywhere right now."

"Me neither." She kisses her smile into his neck.

Dean wakes up at 3:38 in the morning. He's on the far side of the bed and he rolls over onto Cas's out-flung hand. It chased after him in the night because Dean belongs closer.

He scoots carefully away and sits up. With nowhere to go.

Cas's hand slides up his back a few minutes later.

"I could go home," he says. "To my bed. You know. To the job. To my kitchen."

Cas doesn't say anything.

"You know I don't just want you to follow me, Cas. I want you to have an opinion on the matter."

He has to turn after there's more silence. Cas sits up a little, supported by his elbows. His mouth is drawn in, squaring his jaw, and he looks to the sky like he used to. Like back when things were actually happening up there.

"I don't know what I want, or where I want to be," he says eventually. "I have to work on that. There's something else I know I do want. I have to be with my family." He meets Dean's eyes. "First I want to be where you are. And I want you to be alright."

Dean's not okay, he's not alright. He has nowhere to go at this hour of the morning and it will be like this for many of the mornings to come. But at 3 a.m. and 3:30 and 4 a.m. and until he can get himself settled back to sleep, he can feel Cas's arms come around him. They can abandon this motel at last and he can fold back down into his memory foam until it knows him again. But with the added limbs. With the space where Cas's body will fit against his. Or, more likely, where Cas will lay still and straight and Dean will orbit around him, crawling into different sides on different nights and curving his back against Cas's shoulder sometimes.
They never made a home here and that won't make it as easy to leave as they might have hoped. Dean spares a thought for what decision his brother will make. Dean carved himself out a space in the bakery and it's gone now. Unless he chose to stay here and build again, that decision was nearly made for him. Sam carved out a space in Marta's life and who knows how that hollow sits between them.

He's close enough to Sam that he already hurts for his brother. Marta is. Gorgeous. And strong. And she's built a life here. Though her family is all still back in Colombia, this is where she built, what she knows. She's done well here.

She's also full of surprises.

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There's a very quick settlement. Carla's design was to destroy the bakery. If she couldn't have it, nobody could. Now, instead, she has less than nothing. For a reduction in charges, Carla Simmons cashes out and pays off all she can. Her lawyer works fast.

The insurance company doesn't work as fast. But Dean and Marta do have money coming to them.

All of Marta's paperwork was 100% legitimate, so, of course, she'll get everything back. She'll have the ability to re-establish her business entirely, if she chooses.

Despite their own paperwork being really fudged and carried over from the original store owner, the insurance policy on the bakery will still pay out significantly. Sam and Dean agree that it needs to be funneled into the only legitimate account they've really got: Castiel's.

And upon the conclusion of their business there, on a Friday morning (after a too-early, 4 a.m. start at packing the car), the Winchesters hit the road heading north. Back to Kansas.

The three of them.
Back at the bunker.

In the half-dark of the room, just before morning sun changes tone from blue to gold, before edges sharpen and the world becomes focused, real again; Dean hears Cas say:

"I've never been idle."

He doesn't sound upset about it. Just thoughtful. He doesn't sigh or shift or put his face deeper into the pillow. Dean can feel him lying perfectly still on the other side of the bed, and when Dean opens his eyes he sees him flat on his back, hands folded over his chest, gaze skimming the ceiling. Dean blinks. After a second, the sentence actually registers.

"Pants on fire," Dean says. "I've seen you watch five episodes of The Golden Girls in a row without moving." Cas's eyes stop interrogating the ceiling and narrow down on Dean.

"They're very wise," he says, defensively. He looks away again. "That's not what I mean. I'm used to having a," he falters, and trails off. Dean waits. "A purpose," says Cas. He makes a small, wry face. Dean recognizes that expression. It's the one that usually comes just before some kind of unhelpful human proverb that he's going to use ironically. "A reason for getting out of bed."

"There's always breakfast," Dean says. It's too flippant, and he realizes that as the words leave his mouth. Ugh. "There's lots of things," he adds, and Cas rolls onto his side, facing him, a little closer. He smiles faintly.

"I know," he says.

"There's stuff to do around here," Dean says. "Things to organize. You and Sam should tackle the archives." Cas makes a noncommittal noise, but it isn't a no. "And we'll probably find a job soon." The thought doesn't thrill him like it might, but it also doesn't sting like it could. It's what they do, right? It's what they did. Hey, Cas isn't the only one that just took the longest working vacation of his life and doesn't know what the fuck to do with himself. Dean nudges their shoulders together.

"Come on," he says. "Get up. I'll make you an omelette."

Dean chops peppers and onions and ham and beats the eggs together with a little milk. He fries the stuff and then ladles the egg into another pan and sprinkles everything on top, waits, folds it over. Flips it once. Waits some more. Takes it out of the pan and slides it onto a plate. Does it again. By the time he's folding the edges of the third omelette, Sam's awake and padding into the kitchen on bare feet, stretching his arms so high into the air that his stomach shows under his t-shirt. Sam yawns like a Kodiak bear and tries to flatten his hair against his head and fails, and sits down at the kitchen table, rubbing his face with both hands. Dean watches him out of the corner of his eye, and he seems kind of- flattened, maybe, is the word. Washed out. Not sick, like he was after the trials, but sad somehow. Dean doesn't know if he's heard from Marta. Doesn't know how they left it, and hasn't asked yet. He doesn't want to poke that wound with a stick, if it's still fresh.
"Where's Cas?" says Sam, after a couple of minutes.

"Around," says Dean. Truthfully, he doesn't know. He offered omelettes and Cas seemed sort of positive about that, but after taking a shower he disappeared. Dean doesn't want to chase him around the bunker, make him feel like he's being gang-pressed into breakfast, into some kind of enforced morning cheer routine, if he's not feeling it today. So Dean is just going to stand here and make omelettes, then. Even if he feels kind of dumb. He finishes the last one and plates it and passes it over to Sam.

"Thanks," says Sam. His face lights up a little as he shovels in a mouthful of pepper and hot egg. Really hot egg. "Ow," he says, and keeps eating. Dean eats too, slowly, hoping Cas will come in and take the third seat.

He doesn't.

Dean washes the dishes and makes Sam dry the dishes and takes a shower himself, alone, and gets dressed and then basically sits in his room and counts to one hundred and thinks, fuck it. And goes to find Cas. He's in a corner of the library, on the spare laptop. He looks up, sort of startled, when Dean comes around the shelves, and he makes a very awkward attempt at looking casual. He's closing out of his browser windows and saying something about a grocery store run when Dean realizes what it is he's trying to hide.

"Are you on craigslist?" Dean says, incredulously. "Cas, when I said a job- I meant a hunt, man, what are you doing on there?"

"It's personal," says Cas, like he didn't become a human being less than six months ago, like he could even have personal shit to do on craigslist of all places. Dean gives him the skeptical face that answer deserves.

"Are you looking for work?" Dean asks. Cas doesn't answer, just shuts the laptop and stands up, like he's going to push past Dean and escape this conversation. "What are you going to do, get a boss?"

Dean boggles at the thought of it: Cas with an application in his hand, page after page of fake information. Cas interviewing, Cas giving overly literal answers to those stupid what's your best quality questions, like: my lethal aim. Cas being gone every day, Cas being tired, Cas being told to wear pieces of flair by some power-hungry managerial douchebag. It hurts Dean, somehow. It makes him feel unreasonable. Out of breath, even. "Are you going to work in some shitty restaurant? What am I- am I supposed to get a job now, too?"

"You ran a successful bakery for months," Cas says. "You have references. You could easily-"

"Maybe I don't want to," Dean says. His face feels hot. He's not sure why he's talking so loudly. Why he sounds so bitter. "Maybe it's over," he says. "Maybe it's done. It was good, it was really good for a while, and I thought- but it's done, it burned, it's done." He paces away. He can't look at Cas. "You want to go work the line at Biggerson's, you go ahead."

"Dean," says Cas, calmly. "Stop." Dean stares at him. He still doesn't look mad. But he also looks like he's trying really hard not to roll his eyes. "I don't want to work at Biggerson's."

"Okay," says Dean. Deflated. And then, softer: "I'm sorry." Cas nods and sits against the edge of the table. Dean moves closer. "So," he says. "What do you want?"

"I don't know." Cas stares into the middle distance, jaw tight. "I have always- I've known before, what I must do. And I've done it, however difficult, or distasteful. And now I am," he gestures, vaguely, across his body. "A breathing animal with a desire for sleep and television and egg rolls."
"I'm not complaining," he says. "That is not a complaint. I don't miss waging war for heaven. I do miss-" he pauses. He looks at Dean and his face is younger in that instant, somehow- bare, guileless. For such an opaque thinker, his eyes are so clear. It's like Dean can see straight through to the middle of him, for the first time. It's beautiful. And it's so humbling. Christ, there is a whole unexplored person inside this person that he loves, that Dean still has yet to learn. Does that make any sense? Dean is pretty sure it doesn't. "This is not a career crisis," he tells Dean. "This is- more. It was easy not to think about it, at the bakery. It was easy to think only about flour and sugar and yeast, about the work, and you. But now I cannot escape the thought."

"What thought?"

"That I no longer know," says Cas, "what I am for."

That strikes Dean right in the center of his chest. He doesn't know when he stopped thinking of himself as a blunt instrument. It wasn't that long ago, but he's far enough past it that it seems blurry, almost indistinct. He doesn't feel that same stinging anymore, the place where there used to be a hole with frayed edges at the middle. The part that used to tell Dean, you're not a person. You're a blunt knife, a bullet. You only have hands so they can hit. He doesn't know what filled the hole, or at least plastered it over. But it's been a while. Things are different. He thinks about Cas pressing his thumbs into cookie dough, Tracy's shoulder warm against his palm. It aches to think that under everything, under all the touches and the reassurances, Cas is drifting. Cas is missing something. Cas is wondering what's left.

"Hey," Dean says. He stretches out his arms and Cas goes into them silently, and they hold each other. "You're gonna figure it out. We're gonna figure it out." Dean puts his face into Cas's neck, feels the undercurrent of pulse, heartbeat, with his nose pressed against warm skin. "You don't have to be for anything. What you are, it's good. It's really good."

"Dean," says Cas.

"You should do something you want to do," he says. "Something that's yours. Whatever it is, whatever you need. I don't care what it is. It just has to make you happy." Cas huffs into his shoulder. "I mean it."

"Okay," says Cas. "Thank you." He pulls away, puts some space between himself and Dean, and Dean can see there's a question forming already in his face. "I-" he starts, and then Sam's head pops up over the top of the closest shelving unit, like a dementedly tall whack-a-mole. "Guys," he says, and Dean curses out loud. "Am I interrupting?"

"What is it?" Cas asks, obviously taking the out. Dean gives him a sideways look and Cas kind of shrugs, like so sue me. Sneaky son of a bitch.

"Got a lead," says Sam. "Garth called, they've got a possible woman in white in Dodge City. He didn't want to ask, but we were the closest. I told him I had to talk to you two first." He looks between them. "I know we're rusty, but it should be a simple one."

"Why do people say that?" Cas asks. "Why do people ever say, it should be a simple one?"

"It's a mystery." Dean rolls his eyes up to the ceiling. There's nothing helpful printed up there. Maybe they should install some inspirational signs, paint the words don't panic in huge letters, for all the time they spend looking upwards. "Alright." He looks at Sam. "Tell him we're on our way."
Sam nods and goes, and Dean turns back to Cas. "Raincheck?" he says. "On this conversation?"

"Fine," says Cas.

Dean just hopes they still have enough friggin' salt.
"I'm not going with you."

Cas says it across the bed, as Dean is shoving an extra shirt into his backpack—bloodstains make for interesting conversation at the Wendys drive-thru, so he's learned it's best to bring a spare—and for a second Dean thinks he means, like, to go pack the car. Dean's brain can't process why, for some reason, he's not going to help them carry duffels of folding shovels and rock salt up the stairs. Dean gives him a crooked, confused look.

"Come on," he says. "It's three bags. I'll buy you lunch." He wiggles his eyebrows. Cas has told him that this expression is not sexy or appealing in any way, but Dean thinks he's lying. He probably loves it. "A Baconator."

"Thank you," Cas says. "But I'm not coming."

"Not coming— not coming on the hunt?" Dean asks. He stares at Cas and the bag he was holding slips out of his grasp and bounces back down onto the blanket. "Why not?"

"I have to find something I want," says Cas. "Right now?"

"Right now?" Dean hisses.

"Right now," says Cas.

And that's that. Which is why, four hours later, Dean finds himself slumped into the passenger side of the Impala, face pressed against the window, complaining to Sam about how some people just have the worst fucking sense of timing, and how Dean is not talking about anyone specifically, but has Sam ever noticed that—

"Dean," says Sam. "Can we focus?"

"Yeah," says Dean. "Sure. Fine." He blows a deep breath out, and slumps down a little further. "Lady in a white dress, yada yada."

"Four men have disappeared on the same stretch of road in the last three weeks. We've got eyewitnesses saying they've seen a woman in a white dress walking the shoulder and then disappearing into the woods. I think I've even got the house, off of Fairway. Belongs to Kit Hawthorne, some used car salesman. His kid drowned in a river on the back of the property three months ago, and his wife disappeared two days later. Her name was Joyce."

"Joyce," says Dean, glumly. "We're gonna salt and burn somebody named Joyce." Sam mutters to himself and then swings the car abruptly onto the side of the road, while Dean thumps against the door and hollers in surprise. Sam throws the car into park and stares across the bench seat at Dean.

"What the hell?"

"Are you here?" says Sam. "Or are you someplace else?" He taps the steering wheel. And sighs. "It's okay;" he adds. "It's okay if you are, I just need to know. I can take this one myself. If you're out, Dean, you just need to tell me. I can't walk into this thinking you have my back, when you're a million miles away."

"I'm right here," Dean says. "Okay? I got you. I'm here."
"Do you even want to be?" Sam's face is kind, concerned. "Because-

"Drive the car, Sam," Dean says. "I'm here." He turns his face back to the window, to the fields and forests in the distance. Sam doesn't have to worry about it. He's not going anywhere. He's got nowhere else to be.

They stake out the house for a while, but it's about as interesting as watching paint dry. Nobody's been there for months, apparently, not since the drowning of the six-year-old and his mom's walkabout into the great beyond. Sam thinks her body's still on the property somewhere, and that the ghost might lead them to it. So they circle back and drive the stretch of road a few times, as it gets darker outside and the sun starts to slip behind the clouds. Dean texts Cas a couple more times about the case, like he's been doing all day, hoping for input—okay, mostly hoping for acknowledgment—but gets nothing back. Presumably the guy is out discovering himself, Dean thinks. He tries not to dwell on the absence in the back seat. They loop around on the country road, drive in the opposite direction, and still nothing. They're arguing about what to do about it being long past dinnertime—Sam says one more turn on the road, and Dean says they should pack it in and go to the Fairway Diner—when a flash of white in the distance catches Dean's eye. "Hello," he says. He nods forward and Sam catches it, too. "Think we got a live one." They slow down a little, and sure enough, there's a tall, sad-eyed woman in a white sundress, walking fast, glancing over her shoulder. Sam brakes and Dean rolls the window down. "Hey," he says. "You need a ride?" The woman smiles. There's something off about it, inhuman, something broken and not-quite right. Dean finds it hard to look at her, actually: the light's bending around her, and he can't quite put his finger on it, the way she seems to come in and out of focus.

"My heroes," she says. She comes towards the car, hips swaying, eyes dark, the dress so bright it's almost vibrating in the glow of the headlamps. She leans in and Dean smells wet sand, seaweed, green leaves, everywhere—something harsh and heavy, overpowering. His head reels. Beside him, he hears Sam sneeze a couple of times. Okay, so there's some weird sensory shit going on with this ghost. Dean blinks, really slowly, almost shutting his eyes. And then she's in the backseat already—how did she get there? Her hand's on his shoulder. "Take me for a ride?" she says. Her voice is so, so beautiful. It's like—Dean's out of metaphors for the moment. It's like something so nice.

"Sure," says Sam. Dean leans his head back against the bench seat and watches Sam put the car into gear, grinning like a fool. Sam's face is hazy, indistinct. He looks super happy. Wow, Dean thinks, for no reason that he can tell. This is great. "Anything you like." Dean looks down at the phone in his hand: he's halfway through a text to Cas. Cas, he thinks. Wish Cas was here, he'd be having an awesome time. He should totally meet this ghost. Dean thumbs out a couple of words: wish you were here, maybe, or maybe something like sooooo awesme smells lik ocean wish uuuu were heeeere, and hits send. The phone beeps and slides out of his hand. And then he's just sailing. Drifting away. He can smell the hot sand and hear the rush of water, like he's got his ear to a seashell, like he's falling asleep beside a churning river. In the backseat, the woman's still talking in a low, soothing voice.

"Turn left," she says, to Sam. "Keep going."

Dean shuts his eyes.

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When Dean comes to, he's lying next to a river in the woods, face down on a wet rock, his cheek getting cold and his neck stiff and sore. He sits up and winces and looks around. He's alone in a clearing where the road ends: just a muddy turn-around by a drop that leads down to the water. Dean rolls out his shoulders and looks up at the short incline between him and the road. There's a line of
broken twigs and scuffs in the mud, and when he looks down at his own wrecked clothes he realizes, with uncomfortable clarity, that somebody rolled him down the slope. He doesn't know how long he's been out: a while, at least, because there's the faintest bit of cool morning light coming through, coloring the edges, from far behind the tree line. Not quite dawn. Dean shivers.

"Sam!" he calls. He stands up, scans the woods. "Sam!"

"He can't hear you," says the woman, from behind him. Dean whirs, feeling for the knife in his jacket. She's sitting on a flat stone a few feet away, dangling her feet in the water. Her dress is soaked through, and her hair's in tangles. "He's dreaming."

"If you hurt him," Dean says, very very honestly, "I'll kill you again." She looks sort of surprised at that.

"I didn't hurt him," she says. "I want him. I want him to come with me."

"Come with you?" Dean stares at her. "No offense, lady, but no way. He's not going anywhere with you."

"I'll show him things," she says. "Beautiful things. Paradise."

"We've seen heaven," says Dean. He shrugs. "It was okay."

"I don't mean heaven," she says. "I'll take him under the waves." She stands up and it's so fluid that it's unnerving; for a second, her skin seems cold, bluish, sleek like dolphin skin, shining like the side of a fish. She slides in and out of reality the longer he looks at her. Like she's trying hard to maintain a reflection. Holy shit, Dean thinks. She is one hundred percent not a ghost. Certain pieces start to click into place. "I'll take him under and show him what the sun looks like from below. I'll show him the depths. There are places men have never seen. I'll take him to the edge of the world." She holds out her hand in Dean's direction. "Come with me. I'll show you, too." Inside his jacket, Dean grips the knife.

"No thanks."

"You've never known quiet like this," she says. "Under the water. It's like being born again. Come with me."

"Is that what you told your kid?" he asks. Her mouth opens and shuts, silently. Her eyes go dark. "Joyce? Is that what you promised?"

"Shut up," she hisses. "You don't-"

"Did you take him under?" Dean steps closer. He'll only get one shot. "Did you hold him there?"

And then she shrieks, hands over her face, diving backwards into the river: for a second, in the air, Dean thinks he sees a giant creature, sleek as an eel, almost human-sized, rippling and flashing, and then she's gone. He stands on the river bank for a minute, totally at a loss. "Sam?" he calls again. Hell, maybe she's so offended she's calling the kidnapping off. That would be a nice break. He turns to the muddy slope and grabs onto a root, thinking about how he's going to pull himself up out of here, and suddenly there's a hand slithering down his collar, cold and wet and strong, yanking him backwards. He tumbles ass-over-teakettle and lands hard on some rocks. A bare human foot kicks him in the face and he slides back, reeling, into the shallows of the river. The cold is a shock to his system, and Dean fights to keep from gasping in too much air, hyperventilating.

"He was supposed to be like me," she screams. "He was mine! He was mine, my flesh," she wails. "He should have been like me, why wasn't he like me?" Dean clammers up towards dry land and
she's on him, yelling and shaking him, pushing him back into the current. He grabs at her arms but they're slippery, incorporeal. The water rolls around his shoulders, drags at him like a collar. "I would have given him everything, I would have shown him- but I'll show you," she hisses. "I'll show all of you." The woman, the shapeshifter, the witch, whatever the fuck she is, she stretches out her fingers and Dean feels his windpipe constrict, feels the phantom crush of a strong hand grinding against the small bones in his throat. It pushes him down further into the river and the foam churns around him, skims the top of his head and gets in his eyes. He scrabbles at the rocks but they're slippery, cold and wet, and his fingers slide off. He can hear chanting, and then it's like a physical shove, an invisible hand that dunks him under the surface of the water. He tries to take in air and claw the hand away but there's nothing to hit, nothing to resist. His vision blacks out or at least it starts to-and ironically, all he can see is fire. He is staring into the rubble of the bakery again, or up at the ceiling. There's only fire, blood red and orange and white at the edges, taking everything. Everything's gone, gone again. Sam, he thinks. He thinks, Cas. There's a faint sound like thunder, a rumbling noise, maybe an engine. He hopes it's Sam. Please, God, let it be Sam. The woman is yelling something, something angry and slithering that shoves him down further, under the current. He tries to fight, tries to kick upwards, but there's a weight like lead on his shoulders. Dean reaches up, out, gets his fingers just above the water into the air, stretches towards the road with his last, struggling gesture-

-and then a taco truck whips around the bend; heating through the trees at eighty-five miles per hour, shuddering like a busted washing machine, metal awning rattling, lights flipped on, horn blaring; and plows into the woman in white.

The woman flies about fifteen feet into the air and lands in a muddy rut. Dean's throat releases and the weight on his shoulders vanishes and he pops up like a cork, sucking in air and panting and clawing his way up the bank. He gasps and flops himself back up onto a rock. The truck has got a cartoon pig airbrushed onto the side that's holding a pork taco in each hand, with an expression that says, *yum yum, I love eating my own kind.*

"What the fuck is happening?" Dean whispers to himself. He climbs out of the water, everything aching, clothes soaked and heavy, and pushes to his feet. He sways a little, and swipes at his eyes. He can hear Sam shouting from somewhere over the hill: it sounds like his name. Okay, Dean thinks, *so if Sam's not driving,* who the hell- Dean staggers towards the taco truck, leaving deep footprints in the mud, and the driver's side window rolls down.

"Hello," says Cas. He looks down at Dean. His eyes are worried as they scan up and down Dean's body, taking in the blood, the rivulets of water running down his face still, the twigs caught in his coat and hair. "It wasn't a woman in white," he says. "It was an encantado. A shapeshifter with a need to return to water--"

"Yeah," says Dean. "I gathered."

"You're alright," says Cas. It sounds like a question.

"I'm alright," Dean says, and puts his hand through the window, to rest on Cas's shoulder. He turns back and sees Sam coming over the hill. He's muddy and irritated-looking, but coming fast. He looks okay. "Hey," Dean calls. "You hurt?" Sam stares at the truck, and then at him, and then back at the truck, and shakes his head. "Good." Dean's heart stops thudding quite so violently. Sam starts wandering around the outside of the taco truck, mouth hanging open. "So, uh," Dean says, glancing around at the beads hanging from the rear-view mirror, the empty milk crates sitting in the passenger-side footwell. "You've had a busy day, too." Cas nods, and then breaks into an incredibly weird, kind of sheepish grin. On anybody else it would be terrible. On Cas it's kind of gorgeous.
"If you don't like my driving," he says, obviously reciting from one of those fucking bumper stickers, because of course, of course he's never seen that joke before, he's the last person on earth to see that joke and think it's still funny, "call one eight hundred eat-"

And Dean opens the door and drags him out and kisses him like the drowning man he was a second ago.

"How the hell did you find us?" Sam asks, from somewhere over Cas's shoulder. He sounds legitimately bewildered. And sort of drugged, still. "And where the hell did you get this thing?" Cas gently detaches himself from Dean- but not all the way, because Dean doesn't let go of his arm- and says,

"I got Dean's texts. The details felt wrong, so I followed you. I was on my way to the Hawthorne house, but I saw the Impala from the road." He gestures back along the dirt track that leads out of the woods. "It's parked about a half-mile back. The doors were left open," he says, sounding kind of offended on Dean's behalf. "It smelled like wet animal." He looks back at Sam. "And in answer to your second question, craigslist."

"Craigslist?" says Sam.

"Craigslist," says Cas.

"Okay," says Dean. "Can we maybe discuss this later? Somewhere else?" He holds up his arms and water runs off his elbows in a little shower. Cas gets back into the truck, and then it turns out to be easier said than done, because the damn thing's got two back wheels stuck into the mud. They throw some gravel into the ruts and try again ("It's not made for off-roading," Cas says, kind of peevishly, like it was Dean's idea to drive like a maniac through the woods and commit vehicular homicide) and with both Dean and Sam pushing they finally get it back onto the dirt track. They try not to spend too much time looking at the mangled corpse that now just looks a lot like a giant fish. Cas drives them back to the Impala, which does indeed smell like wet animal, and Dean takes his coat and jeans off and wrings them out over the grass. "Yuck," he says, sniffing them. He leans into the car and inhales. "Double yuck. We're driving with all the windows down." By the time they get back to the bunker, hours later, it smells a little less like a cat food tin filled with seaweed. Dean takes a hot, satisfying shower and when he gets out, Cas is talking to Sam about dolphin people and the Amazon River and something about an underwater kingdom. "This is the plot of Finding Nemo, right?"

"They're very dangerous," Cas says, flatly. "They can create illusions, insanity. Sam saw visions of-"

"Um, let's not," says Sam. His face is kind of pink.

"There's nothing to be ashamed of," Cas says. "Marta would make a very beautiful mermaid." Sam throws his hands up and walks straight out of the room, accompanied by the sounds of Dean's hysterical laughter. When Dean's got himself under control, Cas shows him the notes he's made, talks about a couple of references they should dig through, in case they ever run across another one. And after a while he looks at Dean, who has been sitting silently. "Something's bothering you."

"I feel sorry for her," Dean says.

"She would have killed you," Cas says. "She killed several people."

"Yeah," says Dean. "But the first one was an accident."

"I'm not sorry I hit her with my truck," says Cas. "But it is a terrible thing, to hurt the one you love above all others."
"Yeah," says Dean, again. He looks at Cas and Cas shuts the notebook and comes into his arms, leans down over the chair and lets Dean wrap himself around Cas's waist, put his face into Cas's stomach. Cas puts a warm hand over the back of Dean's neck. "Thanks," he says, a little muffled by the fabric of Cas's shirt. "For saving our asses." For being there, he thinks. For being there when I needed you to be. For still being here. No matter what Dean loses, there is this. There is this.

"You're welcome," says Cas.
Sam calls Marta the next morning, after a jog and a shower. There's a bit of a twinge in his back from getting dumped in the woods by a murderous, grieving fish-woman, but he works it out, tells himself he's pretty much always had worse. He goes into his room to make his call, sits down and looks at the phone for a while. Thinks about what kind of thing you say, day after a hunt, to your kinda long-distance-ish girlfriend. He's never really had this problem before. After a minute he rolls his eyes and stops thinking and just calls her. Marta picks up on the third ring.

"You okay?" she asks, first thing. The concern in her voice is palpable. "That, what did you call it-woman in white?"

"It wasn't, actually," he says. "It was an encantado. They're like these-"

"Hijueputa," she breathes. "Those things are fucking real?"

"Uh," says Sam. "Pretty real."

"Is there anything frightening that's not real?" she asks. There's a brief silence. "Never mind. Don't tell me. I already sleep with a gun in the nightstand." She sighs, and then makes a short, eager sound. "Hey. People have been asking about you. You guys. Where you went, are you coming back, is there going to be a new bakery. I don't know what to tell them. I'm telling them you're regrouping." Sam can almost hear her making the air quotes for regrouping over the phone. It's adorable. "Is that what you're doing?"

"I don't know," he says. He thinks about that for a second. "Cas did buy a food truck."

"He what," says Marta.

"Right?" says Sam.

"Well," she adds, and makes a thoughtful noise. "Food trucks are hot right now." Sam tries to pretend, for a second, like he was already totally aware of that.

"I'm not sure that was part of his reasoning, but good to know." And so then he tells her the story about the truck running over the shapeshifter. He does not say anything about the, uh. Mermaids. That is Sam's personal business, he thinks.

After Marta's filled him in on some other stuff- looking for a new location, trying to get a refund for that frantic week of last-minute cancelled wholesale orders, wondering what the fuck she's going to do with a thousand business cards that now have the wrong address on them, telling him a few things about myths she can remember from her childhood ("If the Candileja is real, too, I quit," she says, disgusted), and talking a little bit about what she's wearing because Sam is a lucky, lucky man- she tells him she's got to call another supplier, but that he maybe should skype her later tonight, because she's going to be very bored.

"And who knows, maybe very naked," she says, and hangs up.

That, thinks Sam, went pretty damn well. So well that he probably can't hide his smile good enough when he wanders out to the kitchen and finds Dean there by himself, cracking eggs and humming
along to the radio. Dean turns around, takes one look at him, and winks slow and suggestively like a filthy-minded carnival ride operator.

"Gross, Dean," says Sam. Dean puts his hands in the air like he's offended, even though he's grinning.

"I literally did not say anything." Dean's still smiling. "Marta, she's a heck of a girl."


"That would be the fried onions," says Dean. He points to his cutting board, where there are neat little piles of fresh herbs. "Thyme, parsley, garlic."

"Frittata?" Sam guesses. Dean nods.

He watches Dean add the eggs and stir the herbs in; after a few minutes, Dean opens the oven and slides the cast-iron skillet on the rack. He sets the kitchen timer, and then goes rummaging in the cupboard for plates. They both turn around at a weird squelching noise coming from the hallway: it's unmistakably the slap of wet footprints, like Spongebob Squarepants is walking around the bunker leaving a trail of seawater. And Cas appears in the doorway. He's wearing nothing but a pair of soaked-through cargo shorts that are threatening to slide off their precarious place on his hips, and an old pair of Dean's converse that look filled to the brim with soapy water. He's wet, hair plastered to his head, and he's kind of, uh, shiny. Sam is not above noticing that Cas is hilariously built, even if that's not Sam's personal cup of tea. All together, he looks like an advertisement for the Florida beaches.

"Good morning," he says to them, brightly. "The truck's clean. Well. Cleaner. I did manage to take a sample of the encantado remains for your research, Sam." Sam thanks him, and Cas beams, and then Cas's shorts slide a millimeter further down.

"Erk," says Dean. Sam looks at his face, which is holding perfectly still through what Sam assumes is superhuman effort.

"Erk?" Sam repeats.

"Shut the fuck up," says Dean. He puts the plates down on the counter and tries to turn around, but he can't stop looking over his shoulder into the doorway. "Uh, Cas," he says, in a pretty neutral voice, "you're kinda dripping everywhere."

"Oh," says Cas. He looks down at himself. "Sorry. I'll go-" he starts, and then walks abruptly away, in the direction of the showers. Dean stares after him, and then slides a guilty, caught look over to Sam, like Sam is already judging him, like Sam can see his awful, damp, sweaty thoughts and Sam is going to disown him. Sam sighs.

"Why don't I pull the frittata out of the oven," Sam says, slowly, like he's just having a normal, totally unrelated idea, "and you can, uh, go see if Cas needs any help."

Dean makes the face that grateful dogs make when you open the car door for them, and fucking sprints down the hall. He only slides on the wet tiles and falls on his ass once, and Sam does not laugh that hard. I'm such a good brother, Sam thinks, shaking his head, and then stops in the hall with the paper towels for a long second, replaying that sentence in his head. He can't remember the last time he thought that. And not ironically, either. He wonders if he really thinks it's true. Sam mops up the mess in the doorway and then pulls the skillet out of the oven and stands over it, inhaling deeply, letting the steam warm his face a little. It smells like a garden, like Marta's planters on her
back porch. It smells wonderful. Dean and Cas wander back into the kitchen about fifteen minutes or so later, red-faced and both still kind of wet, but in different clothes.

"He couldn't find the, uh-" Dean starts, and falters, and looks at Cas. "Soap stuff. Important soap." Cas looks back at him with narrowed eyes.

"Sam knows we-"

"Hey, who wants frittata?" says Sam.

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After breakfast they go out and look at the truck. Cas has got a title with his new name signed on the back, and a bill of sale that says he paid in cash.

"That was your third of the money," says Dean, looking up from the paperwork. "All of it. Cas-"

"It was something I wanted," Cas says, and that shuts Dean up immediately. Plus it puts a tiny, weird, hopeful smile on Dean's face. Sam assumes he's missed some kind of important conversation, there. They walk around the truck and Cas shows them the inside, the flat-top griddle and the triple sink, the refrigeration unit, the little ovens and the fryers. All of it's in okay shape, if a little dinged-up and pretty damn grimy. Sam is secretly impressed with the little awning that goes up and the plexiglass windows that slide open and closed above the service counter. Dean opens the hood and complains about everything he finds in there. But then he looks over at Cas and says that he can fix it, that he can get it mint in no time.

"As long as we get rid of that creepy frigging pig," Dean adds. He stares up at it. "It's unnatural."

"What's the plan?" Sam asks, finally, after he realizes that Dean is never going to say it. Like Cas, he's already too caught up in the minutiae of detailing the truck and de-greasing the appliances and talking about whether or not they could actually make flatbread pizzas on the grill. So Sam asks. "What are you going to do with this thing?" And Dean stares at him, mouthing rude. But Cas looks strangely unruffled, like he was waiting for the question after all.

"The plan is," says Cas, "no plan."

"Uh-"

"I don't want to choose." He looks at Dean, and then back at Sam. "I don't want to have to choose one thing and leave everything else behind. The work you do-"

"We do," says Dean. "The work we do."

"It's important," Cas continues, without taking his eyes from Dean's. Sam sometimes wonders how they deal with that, with both of them being turned up to 11 in each other's direction all the time. "It's righteous. But not always pleasant. The life we had at the bakery, it was pleasant. It was peaceful." He smiles, faintly. He looks over at Sam. "But sometimes peaceful is not enough, either."

"No," says Sam. It feels kind of good, kind of clean, to admit it, and he sees something like understanding in Cas's eyes. "Not always."

"I know you two have talked about light at the end of the tunnel," says Cas. "I don't want to live in a tunnel." He looks at the truck. "I think we should just live."

"So we take this on the road?" Dean asks. "Gank demons, make cheeseburgers? Kill a werewolf,
"bake a pie?" He sounds genuinely curious. He stands closer to Cas, looks up at the truck with him. Shoulders to shoulder. When Dean speaks again, it's lower, quieter. "You think we might- you think we'll come across some of your, uh, family out there?"

"I think so," says Cas. "I hope so."

"Okay," says Dean. "Food truck. Kitchen on wheels. We make a little money, fight a little evil."

"Local ingredients," says Cas. "Vermont blueberries. Brisket in Texas."

"Wisconsin cheddar," says Sam.

"Tennessee whiskey," says Dean. "Corn in Iowa."

"Peaches from Georgia," says Cas. Sam looks over at the two of them and wonders if they realize they're basically holding hands. "If you don't like the pig, we're going to need to paint it over. We'll need a new design. And a name."

"Well," says Sam, something dawning on him. "I think we know somebody who could design a food truck." Dean's head whips around.

"Gumbo," says Dean. "And what are those fried dough things?"

"Beignets," says Cas.

"Beignets," sighs Dean. He turns to Sam, game-faced. "You call Tracy. I'm gonna call around and see who's got an alternator for this beast." He points at Cas. "You can start mapping our route. Look up the college calendar, too. I want to show up just before a big weekend, and then bam! Hungry college kids." He rubs his hands together. "You think I could top a burger with crawfish? Oh," he says then, sounding stunned. "Po'boys. On fresh baguette." They lead Dean back down into the bunker, while he babbles about remoulade with glazed eyes.

Turns out Tracy's more than game to help them with the design: about a week and a half later, they get a set of stencils in Sam's email that they print out and tape together. She's gone with their open-ended, little-bit-of-everything approach to the menu and made simple, iconic designs for sandwiches and slices of pie and baked goods and soups, all different kinds of foods, that they can paint in patterns onto a plain background. It takes them a week, under Cas's careful supervision, to stencil the pictures and some stylized lettering onto the sides and the front, but when they're done, the whole thing looks cool, not too flashy, way better and nicer than the trucks Sam used to eat out of at Stanford. Dean in particular can't stop walking around it, patting the sides tenderly, like it's a horse. "Awesome," he keeps saying, under his breath. "Awesome." Cas, too, looks dementedly happy-well, for Cas, which is like a normal person's cheerful- and has a perpetual stripe of blue paint across his forehead. Sam loves them both so much it makes him feel kind of stupid. He says something about that to Marta one night over skype, with his hand halfway over his face because he feels like such an idiot. But Marta doesn't laugh at him, she just smiles and smiles and says, very seriously, very softly,

"That's what love is, corazón."

"It makes you dumb?" Sam asks, smiling too.

"So dumb," she says.

He's sitting alone in the stacks one night, just a couple of days before they're going to leave- reading up on ghost lore around Loyola, just in case anything turns up while they're down there, because it
"Come with me," he says, and Sam follows him. They go outside, and there it is. The food truck, lights glowing warm and inviting, plexiglass windows open, amazing smells coming from inside. Sam walks closer and sees Dean in there, wearing a white undershirt and an apron, both stained with a wide streak of mustard.

"Hey!" says Dean. He leans out of the window. "What can I get you?" His grin is ridiculous, but Sam feels the same one stealing across his own face. He can't help it. It's just so perfect.

"Uh," he says, glancing at the paper menu. It just says, in big letters, **ASK FOR A PO'BOY**. "A po'boy?"

"Coming right up," says Dean.

All three of them take turns being the first customer for each other, and then they sit on the back bumper eating hot sandwiches and talking about how good everything is. Because it's ridiculously good. Sam gets sauce and pickles all down the front of his shirt, and Cas inhales his sandwich and starts eyeing the second half of Dean's, and Dean gives it to him. It's a beautiful night, and even with the lights on in the truck, Sam can see about a million stars. He thinks about doing this again, somewhere else. Everywhere else. Stars in Chicago and out in Columbus and down in Nashville and on the West Coast, by the ocean. Bright stars blinking everywhere, and hot food out of a truck, and good work to be done. **No tunnel**, Sam thinks. Just a hundred million little lights. He turns to watch Dean and Cas, bickering a little about who gets the leftovers. Dean's holding a bowl out of Cas's reach. "How are you still hungry?" Dean demands.

"Give me the oysters," says Cas.

"You know, maybe Sam wants some, you-" Dean holds them up, like a game of keep-away. "Sam, you want an oyster?"

"I'm good," says Sam. He looks up again. "I'm good."

He wonders which state has the best apples.

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**Chapter End Notes**

Final notes.

We just want to thank everybody who hung out with us while this fic was being constructed.

Thanks for visiting bakeries. Thank you for creating seriously dope graphics (gif warning woah). Thank you for writing fic and making art and even fanmixes! And super thank you to the people who baked things and told us about it and shared their creations with us and with other readers.

And thank you to all the people who joined us for breakfast or sat down with the fic while having a snack. Because that is like totally what we are about.

This was a fucking seriously cool adventure and **those baked goods are awesome**, goddamnit. Orange and Major love you <3
Chapter Summary

I wrote this up for Orange a while ago. I came upon a follower milestone on Tumblr and decided maybe I could tack this on to PWP. I hope it actually fits and I hope you enjoy it. Thanks for keeping me company, everybody.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Dean's sleek old black car leads the food truck down the street and Tracy's hands fly to her face, not knowing whether to cover her burning cheeks or her wildly smiling mouth or try to do something about the tears suddenly stinging her eyes.

"Hey, that looks like a food truck, right? Is that the one?" she hears Alice say, distantly. Tracy can't respond to her roommate. She's waiting for the moment when they'll clear out of the sun's glare and dip under the trees and she'll be able to see one or all of the Winchesters through their windshields.

She sees Sam, first, pointing his brother in the direction of a parking spot, and now Alice's hands are wrapped around her elbow and she's getting tugged toward them. "C'mon."

Suddenly Alice's hands fall away as Tracy darts across the lot and, in a flash, finds herself drowning in Sam's arms.

There's a laugh in Sam's voice when he's rubbing her back and saying, "Hey, Trace."

Then it's, "Alright, you yeti, give her over," and she turns and Dean's got his arms out, too.

Dean hauls her up when he hugs her and gives a half-spin. It's all so ridiculous and it's all too good. She's pretty sure she's just saying "omigod, oh my god guys" over and over again. When Dean lets her go, Sam swoops in again and plants a big kiss against the side of her face, grabs her hand.

"C'mon, Cas has got the truck. You gotta see what we did with your art."

She can see it already; it's a little rough around the edges. It's imperfect and glorious. The lettering and the little pictures are all her hand, all bright colors that flash across the highways wherever the boys will go.

It takes up three spaces back toward the emptier part of the lot and Cas is careful parking before he cuts the engine and hops down. There he is, his mild smile, approaching like he's unsure about it. But Tracy lets go of Sam and comes up to squeeze Cas in her arms, too.

"Hello, Tracy," he says in her ear. "It's good to see you."

"God. You, too, Cas. All you guys."

Tracy had spoken to Sam a lot since the school year started. He'd always pass the phone to Dean when he was around, but she heard from Cas the least when she was worried about him the most. With him in front of her, now, that worry settles completely. Cas looks so contended. He blinks back
at the truck and he's got pride in his eyes as he draws her all around it to look at their carefully transferred designs.

When they come back around Sam is introducing himself to Alice.

'Sorry,' Tracy mouths to Alice. She'd nearly forgotten about her, but Alice shrugs it off.

"Guys, this is Alice. Alice, this is Dean. Cas--"

"And I just met Sam," she shakes each of their hands. "You guys are all awfully big. I feel, like, dwarfed standing here."

Sam kind of sinks into his shoulders. "Yeah, we get that a lot."

"So you guys are bakers?"

Dean raises his hand and then points at Cas. "We are. But we've branched out."

"Yeah," Tracy says. "The bakery was where I worked for a while. That was the place that-- that burned down. So they're on the road now."

"Tracy said the baseball opener is this weekend, so we came to see if we could rock some faces," Dean adds, all swagger.

"And because we missed you," Sam adds.

Tracy smiles.

Alice melts.

"Oh my god, that's almost disgustingly sweet," her hands kind of flutter around. "Okay. Alright. I'll leave you to it, Tracy. I'm confident these giant goofballs aren't here to, like, defile you or anything."

She rolls her eyes at her roommate. "Thanks, Alice. I'll text you around dinner?"

"Yeah, yeah. Unless I work late. See ya later."

Dean raises an eyebrow at Alice as she heads back to the dorms. Alice goes for this weird sort of hardcore housewife look in her retro ruffled skirts, tattoos, with giant plugs in her ears. Once she's out of earshot, Sam asks, "She a Wiccan?"

"Uh. Agnostic, I think?"

"Hm," Dean nods.

"We didn't mean to run her off by being... big," Cas says with concern.

"No, it's alright. She has to work today."

"Anyway, that means we get you to ourselves for the day," Dean says. He grabs her hand and brings her around back of the truck again. "We'll show you around, then you show us around, huh?"

"Sure," Tracy smiles and squeezes his hand.

They are all huge, next to her, but it never bothers her. They get looks for it around campus, her wedged between these three big guys. At one point she gets to walk across the quad with Cas swinging her left hand and Dean swinging her right because they're big, ridiculous softies even with
their size and their dangerous-looking car. Sam thinks the campus is beautiful and she insists they let him poke around the library a while. He's always looking for books on ghosts and monsters and local lore, Dean tells her. A hobby or something. Sam has to borrow her copy card because he finds something really exciting. Him and Cas go off to babble about it while she goes with Dean to get coffee.

"You know, in the French Quarter they've got ghost tours and things all the time. We could go on one tonight. It might make Sam happy."

Dean gives this really strange smile. "I donno about that."

"They're really touristy, but they are fun," she admits. "They also stop into different bars and tell you how they're haunted, so usually you're smashed by the end of the tour."

"Uhh..." Dean looks like he's half-considering it. Then he shakes himself. "I thought you were twenty. You can't drink yet, missy," he knocks sideways into her shoulder.

"Oh, yeah, uh-huh," she says dryly. "No drinking for me. Right."

"Woah, what a rebel," he pretends to marvel. "You gonna get facial piercings next? Tattoos, like your roommate?"

"Uh, no. And what do you guys have against Wiccans, by the way?"

"Nothing. Nothing against Wiccans. It's witches we don't like. There's a difference."

"Ookay." They're so weird sometimes. Between Sam's thing about monsters and Cas's thing about churches and now this. She's about to ask what it's all about when Dean abruptly changes the subject.

"So. You got any other friends you wanna introduce us to while we're here? Boyfriend or something? Girlfriend?"

"Uh. Oh. Oh, no," but her face flares red, she knows it does. "No, really."

"Uh-huh," he says, disbelieving.

"No!" she repeats. "We're not a thing. You know. He's just a really good friend."

"Alright. What's this 'really good friend's' name? When do we get to meet him?"

"You don't! I mean. Well. You'll get to see him. If you go to the game. He'll be at center field."

Her face is blazing red, so hot, it's ridiculous. Dean doesn't press her for a name, though, or make her elaborate. He just gives her this grin, one of those grins that makes her feel super silly, makes her wanna hide.

Dean sobers after a moment, though. "You know, we just wanna know you've got friends and all. We just wanna know there are people here looking out for you. Sam and Cas and me, we know how hard you work and how well you wanna do at school for your mom and brother. And we just want to know that you're having fun, too. And that you've got people who will look out for you," he repeats.

She doesn't get why she stumbled into this situation back home. Why it is that she happened upon such a good job with such good people. Perfect people, who seemingly fell in love and freaking
adopted her after the first week. People who came to visit her on campus and know how hard it is being away from Mom and Joey. How she doesn't have a lot of friends, really, and how she works herself ragged trying not to be some recluse, frozen in place, too anxious to do anything.

Like, they got in line here, and Dean ordered himself a coffee and he got her a peach tea. He just knew to do that. They shouldn't feel like family. It was a summer job. But they came all the way to Louisiana to visit her and Dean just wants to know she's safe.

They're tight together in a little corner of the cafe, Dean's chair right up next to hers. So she drops her head to his shoulder and curls her arm through his and he clutches her hand tight. Pops a kiss on the top of her head.

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She texts Alice to meet her in the parking lot when she gets out of work. They hang out, sitting around on the sidewalk while Dean and Cas throw together quesadillas for dinner inside the truck. When Alice finds out about Sam's interest in ghosts and goblins, she's wild for the haunted tour idea. Alice knows everybody so in just one Facebook post, she manages to get them onto a walking tour at 10 p.m. that starts at a voodoo shop and winds through the city all the way to the gates of the cemetery where Marie Laveau rests.

Sam looks just as doubtful about the idea as Dean had but Cas looks amused. Surprisingly, Cas and Alice are the ones who insist that they go.

After every single story about some haunted hotel or brothel, the tour just happens to take them through a bar. Alice chats up some tourist who buys her classy cocktails and Cas is the one who oh-so-casually slips a couple beers Tracy's way.

Sam and Dean laugh loud at some of the tales of ghosts and vampires, but every once in a while, they'll subtly flank her or tuck her into their sides like they're genuinely spooked. Cas gets her drunk enough that, eventually, she doesn't mind. They giggle at each other and Dean teases Cas for being a lightweight and Cas just laughs even more.

They stumble back a few blocks to Dean's car and the guys make sure she and Alice get back to the dorm okay. Dean grumbles how you would think that somebody would challenge them, this late at night, three big guys taking two girls back to their dorm. They could be creeps. They could be bad guys.

"Omigawd, no way could you be bad guys," Alice guffaws. She grabs Sam's big arm and hugs so hard she's practically dragging her drunk ass along. "He's so soft and his hair's so fluffy he's PRECIOUS!" she squeals.

Alice is atrociously hung-over and can't make the baseball game the next day.

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They get permission to set up the food truck in the event center parking lot. Dean is ridiculous so they're there super early and Tracy is equally ridiculous so she's with them, helping them set up. Only after she samples everything from the po'boys to the red beans and rice, do they try to send her off to go enjoy the game. But they're only here for the weekend and she's reluctant to leave them. So she wedges into the truck, too, and works the register, until Cas sends both her and Sam away so he can breathe in there. Sam assures her they can handle it on their own.

After the game, there's another rush on the truck now that word has spread about how good the food
is. When Tracy and Sam approach, Cas leaps out of the truck and hauls her back over. "I forget how much I hate the register. Never leave us again, please." And throughout the rush he never fails to refill her cup of iced tea.

Near the end of the rush, Darryl finds her and calls up to her in the truck. Dean notices and it's him who kicks her out this time. Sam takes over the register until they wrap up and she loses track of time talking to Darryl about the game, how he did, and where she and Alice took the Winchesters last night.

When Cas comes up to her she realizes the parking lot has emptied out and Sam and Dean are wrapping up inside. She introduces Darryl and Cas.

"I have a request to make, Tracy. I almost forgot about it," Cas says. He produces a chunky permanent marker from his pocket and hands it over. "We wanted you to sign your work."

She looks at him strange.

"The truck," he clarifies. "Your art. We wanted you to sign it."

Darryl's looking at her funny, now.

"You did all that?" he comes closer to run his hands over the bright lettering. "Cool, Tracy."

She knows she's gone scarlet again, but takes the marker from Cas and crouches by the back wheel to sign her name large.

Sam comes out to congratulate Darryl on the game and introduces Dean. And they talk her up while they eat beignets. Embarrassingly. Like a lot. Until she seriously has to call them off and tell Darryl it's totally okay to go away now and leave her with these bread bus psychopaths.

Darryl laughs and pecks her on the cheek and says he'll call her later.

When she turns around, Cas and Dean and Sam each have one all-knowing eyebrow up. And she wants to just crawl under the truck and never come out.

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Sunday is lazy. They set up the truck outside a park with a few chairs and take turns cooking and working the register and talking. The first three months they had the food truck they went to some interesting places. They wanted to come down and visit her earlier but some... stuff. Some vague things got in the way before the Spring.

Sam still talks to Marta a lot. He's visited her on his own and she's doing well. She's been growing and distributing flowers but has been leaning more towards fresh herbs to sell to restaurants and markets. She still hasn't set up a new, permanent storefront.

And Dean and Cas are still, clearly, quite happy. In love. Even if the only way they show that to the world is by knocking elbows in the truck and the way one of them will say, "taste this," and shove food into the other's face.

They feed Tracy all day. Because they love her, too. And box up stuff to send her back to her dorm with. And some to give to Alice. And some to share with Darryl, because, "seriously, just invite him over Tracy, he likes you."

And, too soon, it is time for them to go. Sam gets a phone call that somehow hurries them along and
they all look kind of sad about it. Tracy hears Cas protest when he thinks she can't hear. "Dean, we don't have to take every case. That's what this is about." But wherever they're going, it seems like it's the right thing to do. She's not sure what they get up to, but she thinks they help people. She knows they used to be in law enforcement, so maybe they're doing private investigating or something now? Whatever it is, they dance around the subject with her. She's not delicate. She's sure she could handle knowing whatever sort of criminals they encounter. But she's also very aware that the truck, like the bakery had been, is their happy place. She kind of likes filling in the happy spaces in their lives.

They bundle her back into her dorm in the early evening. There are long farewell hugs, and Dean stresses that she should call if she ever needs anything. "No matter how weird it is, alright? You call if you ever need us. You know. Even if one of those Garden District ghosts stumbles over here," he rambles. "You've got our numbers. You call us, Tracy. Promise?"

She only laughs at him a little and promises.

Cas asks for her mailbox address so they can send her postcards from wherever they end up with the truck, and he squeezes her tight when she tells him to have fun on the road.

Sam was the first and is the last to hug her goodbye. Sam's as tall as two of her and she's so comfortable at his side. She spent so many hours over the summer next to him, behind the counter in the bakery. He's so familiar; she couldn't stand for him not to be. "You know Quidditch, right, Sam?"

"Like from the books? The Harry Potter books?"

"Yeah. Well, they do it in real life. With brooms and everything."

He laughs. "Wow. Seriously? I'd like to see how they manage that."

"You can, though. There's a Loyno Quidditch team and Alice is on it and they start back up in the fall. So. You know. If you guys don't come see us back home over the summer. Well. You should come back down for the Quidditch season."

Unexpectedly, Sam grabs her and pulls her in tight again. "We'll be back, Trace. We'll come back to see you soon."

They don't need enticements and intrigues. They don't need a big ball game weekend to rake in money. They'll see her when they can.

Tracy understands.

Chapter End Notes

Update: 11/09/14, the chapters have been edited over recent weeks to fix a few errors and some formatting.

Works inspired by this one: The Weary World by meanderingsoul
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