A Long Way Home

by MashiarasDream

Summary

Dean sees a lot of people come and go. He and Charlie are running a soup kitchen / shelter after all. He always feels compassion but he also always respects the boundaries he and Charlie have set for their private lives. Always, that is, until one winter night, a quiet man with dark hair and blue eyes comes in, wearing nothing warmer than a hoodie and obviously intent on going back out into the cold.

Notes

While I was writing this story, the state and federal laws in the US changed several times. There is no guarantee that they won’t change again in the near future. There is a reference to state laws in the story that might not be completely correct. Please bear with me on this.

Thanks to WatchingOne for beta-reading and keeping me sane through this, and to keepcalmanddonotblink and ViviTargaryen for having patience with me on this one! Love you! <3
He doesn’t smell. That’s the first thing Dean notices. Most people who come here smell.

The second thing he notices is the guy’s clothes. A dark-red hoodie over a faded t-shirt. Threadbare but clean, by the look of it. That’s a minor miracle but it isn’t the main thing about the wardrobe. Dean looks the guy up and down but there’s no duffle, not even a plastic bag. So he came in with nothing but the clothes on his back. Cause no one here leaves their stuff unattended.

“Dude,” he ladles a generous portion of soup into one of the bowls, “you need a coat. That hoodie ain’t doing jack against the cold.”

The guy almost looks up at him but only almost. Dean doesn’t mind. He is used to that. People not quite meeting his eye. He understands, too. He was embarrassed as well when they lived out of the Impala.

“We have a room with donations in the back. If you stay until after the dinner rush, I can show you. Maybe you find something that fits.”

The guy is fidgeting nervously, his hands clenching and unclenching at his sides. He hadn’t been this nervous a second ago, Dean thinks.

“Look, it’s just an offer for clothes. And it’s not a dark scary back room or anything. Just a room at the back. Charlie can go with you if you’d prefer that. She’s a nerdy redhead, you could take her out no prob.” Not true probably but the lie serves a purpose. Wouldn’t be the first time some poor bastard thought Dean was preying on them, offering to take them to the back. Living on the streets, at some point, everyone starts to expect the worst.

“Save yourself the effort, Winchester. That one ain’t talking. Just give him his soup so I can get mine.”

Dean looks up disapprovingly. Marv, the next in line, almost shoulders the shy guy out of the way already. He is a regular and Dean doesn’t have to look too closely to see the stains on his coat. Instinctively, he wrinkles his nose, even though the smell is only wafting over in quiet little waves right now.

“Here,” Dean hands the bowl to the new guy. “Stay until after dinner. It’s no use to anyone if you freeze to death tonight.” Somehow he doesn’t think bringing up the fact that the bunker has a sleeping hall is a good idea right this second. The guy is rattled enough by the proximity of so many humans.

The man flinches when Dean’s fingers accidentally brush his and he sloshes hot soup all over the both of them. Dean hisses in pain but when the guy curls in on himself, shoulders hunched forward protectively, Dean gets his face and his voice under control quickly. “Careful there, stranger. I wouldn’t want to see you hurt.”

The stranger freezes at that and Dean wonders how long it’s been since someone had enough decency to show the guy some kindness.

“Tables in the back are less packed, because they’re further away from where you can get seconds. Should be quieter over there,” he tells him.

A quick nod is all the indication he gets that the guy’s heard him. He shuffles off and Dean grabs a towel to clean the soup off his hands.

“Honestly, Winchester, that guy’s mute or something. He’s been lurking all day, not saying a single word.” Once he’s in front of the line, Marv’s smell is more noticeable.
“Ain’t no reason not to show him the same respect as anyone else.” He ladles another portion into a bowl and hands it to Marv. “You leave him alone, alright?”

Marv shrugs. “Ain’t got no time to hang with losers like that.”

Dean rolls his eyes and goes back to the line.

The dinner rush holds for a good 20 minutes or so before finally calming down.

“Hey Kev,” Dean shouts when he catches a glance of shiny black hair, “how about getting your prophet-of-the-lord-ass over here and relieving me?” It’s a joke that Kevin hates, but he can’t stop himself. Ever since Charlie had mused (when she was completely smashed) that their clientele was all fallen angels, the religious nicknames stuck.

“How about you, Winchester,” Kevin hollers but beelines over to the soup counter.

Dean chuckles. For a straight A student, Kev is quite foulmouthed. “Is that a prophecy?”

“You’re aware that I’m underage, Dean, right? You and me, that’s illegal,” Kevin deadpans and Dean has to concede the point.

With a shrug, he fills a bowl for himself and hands the ladle over to Kev.

Armed with the bowl and a spoon, he makes his way through the tables, nodding a Hi at a few of their regulars but not really in the mood to sit down and talk to anyone. Until he spies a tuft of dark messy hair, that is. The new guy is alone at his table, sitting with his back to the wall. Always a good choice if you want to keep an eye on the comings and goings in your vicinity. Though the way the guy stares a hole into his bowl, Dean isn’t sure he actually notices any of his surroundings.

In a split-second, the decision is made and Dean moves towards the stranger. He clears his throat when he’s right in front of him. From the lack of surprised reaction, it’s clear, though, that the guy had already noticed his approach.

“Mind if I sit down?” Dean asks. He purposefully stands very still. If there’s one thing he’s learned in this place, it’s to differentiate when he needs to be fast to break up a fight before it’s started, and when to go very slow as to not startle someone into flight.

“You won’t be in any trouble if you say No,” he adds and it says sad things about the state of the world that it has to be added.

He patiently waits when there is no immediate answer. It is a test of sorts, he thinks. To see whether he’ll cross boundaries and sit down unasked after all. He doesn’t, even though he has to switch hands at some point because the hot soup is burning his palm.

Finally, there’s a nod. It’s slight but unmistakable.

“Thank you,” Dean says and means it.

He takes the chair opposite and makes sure he doesn’t crowd into the man’s space. He lets the silence spread, eating his soup while watching the other man.

The first reaction when he sits down, permission granted or not, is unsurprisingly negative. The guy leans back and away from him, takes his hands, which had been wrapped around his bowl, off the
table and most likely clenches them into fists somewhere at his side. But after a minute or two, when Dean isn’t making any move forward, the tight line of the man’s shoulders relaxes by infinitesimal degrees.

Dean takes it as a good sign. He keeps his own posture as relaxed as he can, even though ‘unconcerned’ is not a mode that he operates at. But he can make it seem that way at least.

Something catches his eye and he frowns as he tries to find the source. A glimpse of silver. Something metal. A chain around the man’s neck. There is a shape under his shirt that hints at a pendant. A keepsake from better times maybe? But then the guy moves and Dean catches the slight jingle and that’s a sound he’s heard before. His dad used to wear his dog tags, too.

“You’re a vet,” Dean states, more out of reflex than because he wanted to say it out loud.

He doesn’t know what reaction he expected, but what he gets is a scramble backwards, chair scraping over the floor boards. As if that bit of information is already too much, too personal, too close.

“Whoa, it’s alright, I didn’t want to pry,” Dean holds his hands up in a pacifying gesture but reins in his urge to move forward with the motion and instead leans away. Makes it a point to be as non-threatening as possible. He’s got a feeling that this guy has some serious PTSD going. “Also, this is a bunker. It’s about as safe as you can get around here.”

The backwards motion stops, a slight head tilt indicating that he got the man’s attention.

So he keeps talking. “It’s been built during the Cold War. Some kind of command central, too, not just a place to hide until the worst is over. It’s got pretty extensive security features.”

“Ne-r t-t-ted.”

It’s said so low that he almost misses it. It takes a moment to figure out what it might mean.

“Never tested? Yeah, I guess you’re right, it never really got tested. Pretty glad about that one, to tell you the truth. But there’s generators in the basement and we’ve got our own water supply and everything. They meant this thing to last.”

There’s no answer to that, but the guy’s still listening, so he keeps going.

“Guess they didn’t mean for it to become a shelter. But hey, it can house a bunch of people during war, it can house a soup kitchen. Don’t you think?”

“Dangerous.”

The voice is gravelly and rough from disuse but it’s easier to understand this time.

“The soup kitchen?” Dean asks.

The guy clenches his hands together. “Humans.”

Dean half-turns to watch the array of human nature on display. They’re all somewhere on the down and low. Some are crazier than others but he never felt particularly threatened by any of them.

“I guess,” he shrugs. He turns back to the guy who still hasn’t brought himself to look up and look Dean in the eye.

They’ve got a few vets around. Most of them are quiet. But he’s seen a few of them snap when
things got too rowdy and something in them got triggered. It turns ugly really fast.

“Humans can be pretty annoying. And some of the guys here are loud. I get it, why you’d rather sit to the side. But the bunch here? They aren’t dangerous as such.”

Another half-inch turn towards him. He’s sparked interest, even if it’s in the form of dissent.

“You can’t know. No checks.”

“Background checks you mean? Or do you mean do we check for weapons?”

He interprets the shrug to mean both.

“Hey, everyone here got their issues. It ain’t my place to take offense at that. All I’m here for is to provide hot soup and maybe some warm clothes and a bed for the night. That’s all anyone wants here, too. They know better than to bring a gun to this place.”

Or if they don’t know better, they know enough to keep it hidden. The shelter has a policy about this. And friends at the police. And Dean and the others aren’t exactly helpless.

But he can virtually see the disagreement dripping off the other guy. He can’t help but smile at that. Seems that he’s stumbled upon an area of expertise.

“So, you’re a security guy or something?”

He doesn’t get more answer than another shrug but the guy’s not retreating, his body still angled towards Dean. So he feels like he can take a little risk.

“Name’s Dean by the way.”

He holds out his hand over the middle of the table for the other guy to shake.

He stares at it as if it’s a poisonous snake.

“Come on, man. I don’t bite.”

It takes another moment, but then the guy hesitantly brings his hand up to shake Dean’s. His fingers are slender and his skin is so white that it is almost see-through, winter having taken its toll. But the grip is stronger than Dean expected.

“Steve.”

The pause is a moment too long, the hesitation too clear.

“Steve it is,” Dean nods.

He doesn’t care that the name is fake. Main thing is, he has a way to address the guy other than ‘dude’ or ‘man’. Because that gets old really fast.

“Offer still stands. With the clothes, I mean.”

That was the wrong thing to say obviously because whatever openness had been there gets swallowed and the guy’s hands disappear under the table again.

Dean sighs. There’s several possibilities for the reaction, but he decides to go with the most common one.
“It isn’t pity, man. Just making sure you’re safe.” And because the security stuff had seemed to work before, he adds, “Also, if you’re interested in this kind of shit, command central is on the way. It’s from the 70s so it kinda looks like a big junk-pile of electronic mumbo-jumbo to me, but you might get a kick out of it.”

“Not a beg-r."

It’s back to being so low he almost can’t hear. But the meaning is clear enough.

“Never said you were. Last time I checked, you didn’t ask, I offered. Like a friend would, y’know?”

It’s putting it on a bit thick but it gets him his first glance through thick lashes, so it’s worth it.

“Are you my friend?”

There is no judgement in the question, just puzzlement.

Dean shrugs. “I can be. If you want me to be.”

And now he finally gets looked at. Head slightly tilted to the side, the man observes him silently.

Dean holds still under the scrutiny, turning his palms outward and angling his body towards the other guy. Still open, still non-threatening.

He takes his own quiet inventory of ‘Steve’ at the same time. And really, he could have chosen a name that fits better. He’s too thin, obviously, but there’s no bruises or scars that Dean can see. He’s too young to be anything but a vet of the recent wars in Iraq or Afghanistan. He’s got bags under his eyes, but the eyes themselves are clear. Somewhat red from being tired, for sure, but they aren’t glassy or unfocused. No signs of alcohol or drugs. Well, there might be prescription drugs he’s addicted to. Harder to tell than with the other stuff. Different circumstances, and Dean would say the guy was good-looking. Hell, feed him so that he gains a few pounds and he’ll call him attractive.

“I think I’d like to.” The statement is quiet but the hesitation is gone.

“To have me as a friend?” Dean smiles and cocks his eyebrow.

A miniscule answering smile plays on the man’s lips for a moment before he says. “To see command central. And – the clothes.”

“Well, that works for me, too,” he grins, “let me just get the bowls over to Kev. It’s his turn with the dishes.” Though really the dishwasher does most of the work.

He cuts through the middle of the room to get to Kevin.

“Got a guy in need of a coat. We’ll be in the back seeing what we can find. Call me if you need help, alright?”

“Got it covered,” Kevin nods.

“Awesome,” he makes his way back. “Come on, Blue Eyes, let’s go see the house.” But then he catches himself because he shouldn’t be flirting with a new guy who doesn’t know that this is his modus operandi. And definitely not when they’re on their way to the back-rooms. “Sorry about that. I meant Steve,” he apologizes.

“Green. Your eyes.”
And that isn’t the answer he was expecting, but he shakes the surprise off. “They sure are. Come along, we got to get over there.”

Dean makes sure that they’re keeping to the edge of the room, avoiding the hustle and bustle of the center. It’s gotten quieter after dinner, the ones who have no money for food but still got a place to sleep already leaving.

“Up for a game, Winchester?” a voice calls out.

“As usual, absolutely not, Marv,” he declines and ignores the catcalls that follow.

“I don’t like him.”

Dean almost jumps at Steve’s voice. He’s expected everything, but not an unsolicited opinion while this close to so many people.

Still. He shrugs. “No one does, really. He likes himself enough to make up for it, though.”

He can’t be sure, but he thinks that elicits a quiet chuckle.

They make their way through the side-door.

“We got the soup kitchen set up in the entrance area,” Dean explains. “And this used to be the library. Well, we still have some of the bookshelves.”

He points to the walls where a few shelves are still crammed into the corners. Mainly, the room is crowded with mattresses.

“You ever need a place to crash, we’ve got space.” He shrugs. “It ain’t the most comfortable place in the world and too many people snoring next to you to be entirely relaxing, but it’s warm and it’s dry and that’s more than you can say of a lot of other places. Oh, and it’s got bathrooms. With showers and warm water and everything.”

He points in the direction.

“And now we’re through the library and in command central. Also called the war room. Because, you know, the table and all.”

The table takes up most of the space in the room. It’s got a gigantonomorious map painted on it and they’ve even found the toy armies that go with it in a drawer somewhere.

“We’ve got a ham radio, telegraph and switchboards, none of them functional anymore, though. Oh, and the monstrous computer thingies of course. With the punch cards.”

Steve takes a hesitant step forward.

“Don’t be shy. Inspect it to your heart’s content.”

Dean leans back against the table while Steve slowly makes a round of the room. He squints at the different inscriptions and once or twice he stretches out his hand as if to push a button or move a lever. But he never does. Finally, he makes his way back to Dean.

“Satisfied?”

Steve glances up at him quickly before looking away again.
“Alright then, on to the treasure chamber.”

Dean fishes his keys out of his pocket.

“Everything from here on out is private property. To get in, you need a key and I ain’t fond of anyone trying to sneak in.”

He unlocks the door and walks through.

“I won’t lock the door right now, cause I don’t want you to feel trapped. But usually, I would.”

It’s a routine speech and a clear warning. He lives here and he really, really isn’t fond of surprises.

From here, the bunker is all dark corridors and small rooms. It isn’t that big actually, it was never supposed to house the masses, just the elite few. But there’s space for a few bedrooms and enough storage to keep everything they need on hand. Also, a smaller private kitchen and another bathroom. It’s really all that anyone could need. As long as you’re not claustrophobic or want sunlight and windows.

“And here we are,” he opens the door with a flourish and turns on the ghastly neon lights. “Men’s clothes are to the right. We try to sort them by size, but we don’t always get it right. So best just look through them.”

Steve looks unsure for a second, but then he walks towards the clothes racks. He runs his fingers along the different fabrics, walking down the rack slowly, not really stopping at anything or digging in to see what might fit.

Dean knows his way around this room, so he starts somewhere in the ‘L’s because the guy is tall, even if he’s thin. “What about this?” He holds up a neon green coat, the color garish, but the fabric thick.

He earns a short disgusted look and a headshake for his troubles.

His next three choices get about the same reaction.

Then Steve suddenly stops and pulls out what he’s found. It’s a tan trench coat.

“Dude, not warm enough.”

But Steve stubbornly tries it on. It’s too big.

“This one is warmer,” Dean tries to convince him to look at a fake leather jacket.

But Steve looks down at the trench coat that is falling around his body in wide waves and seems enchanted by it.

“You’re going to still freeze to death in that thing.”

Protective arms come up around Steve’s waist, hugging the trench coat to his body.

Dean sighs. He knows a lost battle when he sees one. So he kneels down to get to the boxes stacked under and behind the racks. He searches for a minute, then tosses a bundle at Steve. “Here. And no arguing.”

Steve unfolds the fabric. It’s a thick sweater.
“Shetland wool. Wear it over your hoodie because the wool is scratchy as all hell. But it’ll keep you warm. Do you have gloves?”

A short headshake.

“Alright.” He goes to another box. “Fingerless gloves to always keep on. Mittens on top. A scarf and a woolen hat.” He tries to find items that fit together semi-decently. Fortunately, most people choose muted colors for their winter wear.

“Here,” he holds his hand up so that Steve can take the items from him. “That should help with the cold.”

Steve cautiously comes closer. Still kneeling in front of the box, Dean has to look up at him. He has the distinct impression that Steve isn’t happy about that and tries to make himself smaller in an attempt not to tower over him. Dean appreciates the gesture, even if it isn’t necessary.

“So, we got you a decent meal and a few warm clothes. We can offer you a warm shower and a bed for the night. Or a mattress, but, you know. Almost the same thing.”

Steve presses the new clothes to his chest and doesn’t meet Dean’s eyes. He looks torn. Then he shakes his head ever so slightly.

Dean is unconvinced. He’s reasonably sure that the new clothes are enough that the night will be uncomfortable but not dangerous, even though the weather forecasts predicted temperatures in the low 40s. But he doesn’t like the thought of Steve in the cold. If you’re underweight and on the streets, one good infection can kill you.

“You got a place to stay? And I mean a place that’s decently warm, not just a corner out of the wind somewhere.”

Yeah, no chance that Steve’s going to meet his eyes again anytime soon. Not with the embarrassing questions and the admissions that have to follow.

A different approach then. “Do you want to stay here?”

Hesitation, but a glance upwards. Ah yes, he’d thought so.

“Rephrase: Would you like a warm place to sleep and maybe a warm shower on top of it? I can see that you’re doing your best keeping yourself and your stuff clean. We’ve got the means to help with that.”

The advantage of his vantage point from below is that no matter how much Steve tries to hide his face, Dean can still see it. That includes the blush that is creeping onto his cheeks. Dean has stopped being sensitive about topics like personal hygiene a long time ago, apparently Steve hasn’t.

Still, the blush is enough indication for Dean. “So, to summarize: A warm bed and a shower would be welcome. But you still don’t want to stay. I’m going to take a wild guess here and say that it’s the humans. If you had to choose between sleeping nice and comfy and warm but in a room full of people, and in the cold but on your own, you’d choose the latter. Am I right?”

Steve fastens him with an unexpected intense stare.

“Hey,” Dean placates immediately, “you ain’t the first one who’s got that problem. I for myself am not that big on sleeping in the same room with strangers, either. The few times I ended up in a crowded shelter, not my best memories.”
Steve squints his eyes and tilts his head, as if trying to figure Dean out or catch him in a lie.

“We had a car, mostly. So we slept in there, my brother and I, when my Dad didn’t have the money to get us a bed somewhere. Safer. For children anyway.”

Something like understanding blooms in Steve’s eyes.

Dean tries a small smile. “Yeah, I know, you didn’t sign up to hear my life story. And I don’t usually go around telling it to strangers, either. But, y’know, I know where you’re coming from. That’s all I’m saying.”

He peters off when Steve insistently shakes his head.

“Not strangers. Friends.”

That makes Dean smile, because yeah, he’s said that. “You’re right,” he nods, “friends.”

It doesn’t even feel like a lie. There is trust in Steve’s eyes that hadn’t been there before, and if Dean is honest, he has a modicum of trust in Steve, too. Not something that usually happens for him this fast.

“Alright,” Dean sighs, “so, what am I going to do with you?” He rubs his hands over his face, suddenly very tired. The answer is right there of course, but it’s against all of their rules and Charlie is going to give him shit about it.

Their usual policy in these cases is to let the people go who can’t deal with the hall. To give them the numbers of other shelters, who are better equipped and have better facilities to deal with individual traumas.

They are just a privately run soup kitchen with a space for sleeping attached, after all.

But it’s late already and the other shelters are miles away. And it’s frikking cold out. And Dean has said he’d be Steve’s friend.

He sighs deeply and makes his decision. He’ll defend it against Charlie later.

“I can make up a guestroom for you. It ain’t something we do often. Or ever. But hey, warm bed, no other humans. You’d even have a door that you can lock behind you.”

“Guestroom…” Steve draws the word out as if he’s testing it for possibilities or maybe as if he has forgotten the meaning of it.

“Where the guests stay,” Dean nods. “We live here, Charlie and I. We have guestrooms for when we have guests.”

“I’m a guest?”

“I guess so. If you’re staying, that is.”

Steve seems to think intensely about that before he finally nods. “I’d like to be a guest.”

“Alright,” Dean puts his hands on his thighs and uses the motion to propel himself up off the floor. “That’s settled then. We’ll find you a spot.”
Steve is trailing behind him while Dean goes to get fresh sheets and thinks how to go about this. They use the empty bedrooms for storage because they don’t actually have guests that often. He’s reasonably sure that Sam’s bedroom is in good shape, but somehow it doesn’t seem right, putting a stranger up in his brother’s room. Not that he thinks his civil rights attorney brother would mind too much, especially with how often he actually uses the room, but it still doesn’t sit right.

The first door he opens, he finds a stack of Charlie’s boxes all over the place. Looks like she’s reordering her comic book collection. No way to get all of this stuff out of the way quickly. “Shit,” he curses, “looks like her Highness the Queen is using this one.”

The next room isn’t any better. It’s getting close to Christmas, the only time of the year that their supplies come in faster than they go out. He had forgotten that he’d told Kevin to stack them wherever he found space.

Dean stays put for a second then, rubbing his neck awkwardly. Not that many options left.

“I’ll go.” It’s said quietly, already resigned.

And oh fuck it, he’s going to regret this, but “No, man, I got you. I know a place that’s guaranteed to be free.” Even though free is a matter of definition in this case.

He walks to the middle of the hall before opening a door. He turns on the light in the room and walks in. “Home, sweet home.”

He throws the fresh sheets down on the bed. “Just let me change the sheets real quick and get some of my stuff from the closet.”

He notices only then that Steve is still standing in the doorway, looking at the sparse décor, at the jeans thrown carelessly over a chair, at the half open closet.

“What’s up, buddy?”

“This is your room.”

“Yup,” Dean agrees with the observation. “Best we got.”

“This is your room,” Steve repeats stubbornly.

“Yeah, I know. But look, we seem to be out of guestrooms. So I’ll bunk in my brother’s room tonight and we’ll declare this room a guestroom.”

He throws the old pillowcase over the chair with the jeans and puts the new case on.

He’s already working on the second pillow when there is movement from the door. Steve is carefully placing his stack of clothes on the floor before coming over and taking the blanket to unbutton the cover.

“Thanks, Steve.” Dean smiles, happy about the degree of normalcy that they’ve reached in such a short time.

“Castiel, actually,” Steve mumbles without turning towards him.

“Castiel,” Dean repeats because it’s a complicated name and he doesn’t want to mess it up. “I like it better than Steve.”

“I don’t,” the other guy answers.
“Why’s that?” Dean asks while tucking the sheets in.

He doesn’t get an answer and that’s not really surprising. But it was worth the try. Always is.

“Maybe it just needs to be shorter. How about Cas? Anyone ever call you that?”

“There was… something similar… A long time ago…”

There’s something like longing in the way the words are murmured.

For the first time, Dean isn’t sure what to say. He’s sorry for whatever happened to Steve – Cas, but if he says that out loud, it’s going to be taken as pity and that’s not going to go over well and it’s not what he means, either. It makes his heart hurt that bad stuff happens to good people.

“Well, the bed is made,” he flees back into the practical, “so I’ll go get you some towels. Alright?”

There’s a nod, so Dean leaves. He makes quick work of stacking what he needs. Towels, of course, but also an extra toothbrush and a cheap single-use razor. They’ve got extras of most stuff.

When he comes back, Cas is still exactly where he left him, staring at the fresh sheets on the bed.

“Got you some stuff,” Dean announces himself from the door-way before crossing to the bed and laying the stuff down. “Bathroom is the door right across. Kitchen is down to the right. Just follow the hallway, kitchen door is always open. Help yourself to whatever is in the fridge if you get hungry or thirsty. Otherwise, breakfast is at 8.”

He moves over to the chest of drawers.

“I’m going to get some fresh clothes, then I’m out of your hair.”

He rummages through his clothes to find a fresh set of everything for the morning. He packs some sweatpants and a shirt for the night on top. He hesitates, then gets out a second pair of sweatpants and another shirt.

“Here,” he places them next to the towels, “in case you want them for the night. They’re mine, but they’re clean. And you’re about my height, so…” He shrugs. “Charlie and I are going to be puttering about for a bit. You can find us by following the noise, I guess. And Sam’s room is two doors down to the left, so in case you need anything during the night, you’ll find me there. I don’t lock my room usually, so just knock and wake me.”

He doubts it’s going to come to that, though. Not the way the guy has been hesitant to ask for any help. Well, it’s a lot of pride to swallow to go to a shelter. He knows his Dad almost choked on it every time.

“Cas?” he asks softly. “You good with that?”

When Cas looks up at the name, Dean sees that his eyes have turned bright and watery. Okay, it’s a bit much, most like. Shouldn’t be too much, being warm and having a bed for the night, but sometimes it is.

“Okay, buddy, I’ll leave you to it. You know where to find me,” he smiles and packs his stuff. Every scrap of dignity is hard earned in a life like this, he ain’t about to take any of that away by acknowledging that he has seen the tears.
Dean throws his stuff on Sam’s bed before heading off to find Charlie. He is not necessarily looking forward to that conversation but she’s going to understand because she always does. A quick glance into the office reveals it to be empty. So she’s helping to set up for the night. They have a rotating staff of volunteers manning the phones at night and making sure that emergencies get handled or Dean and Charlie get woken up at least. He’s glad for that. In the beginning, when they also took turns at the nightshifts, Dean was definitely worse for wear.

There’s already some folks claiming mattresses. He smiles at a mother with two young children who is taking a mattress way off to the side. Always makes him uneasy, seeing kids in this place. They have security cameras and everything, but Dean knows he can’t guarantee that nothing bad will happen to them, even here, in the relative security of the bunker.

In the entrance area, it’s louder. Marv’s card game is still going on. Charlie and Kevin are packing away their gear, everything of value being locked up for the night.

“Who’s on duty tonight?” Dean asks while he makes himself useful.

“Jo. She should be here in half an hour or so.”

He nods. He had been firmly opposed to letting the petite blonde alone with a bunch of rowdy guys at night. Up until the point when he had seen her break up a fight. After that, the issue was settled. Also, Jo is a nurse. That comes in handy every so often.

“There’s a mother with two girls back there. If they’re up for it, maybe Jo can give them a once over.”

“Way ahead of you, dude,” Charlie grins and rattles her cell phone. “Already told her. So she can bring her supplies.”

“You are aware that needles make people jumpy, right? Maybe not harass the first timers with them.” It is Jo’s never-ending mission to get every kid in the country vaccinated, but jeez.

“Aww, Dean, still scared of a little prick?”

He rolls his eyes at the innuendo. “You’re lucky that you’re my best friend, you know?”

“What? You’re not telling me to fuck off? Okay, fess up, what have you done?”

It’s meant as a joke but Dean can feel the heat creeping up his spine.

He must look as guilty as he feels, because Charlie follows it up with, “Oh shit. You’ve actually done something. What is it this time?”

“Uh,” he rubs embarrassedly at his neck.

“Ah, my powers of prophecy are giving me a vision… wait… wait… uhh it hurts… let me see this clearly… oh yes, he’s picked up a stray,” Kevin says dramatically and then looks expectantly at him.

Grudgingly, Dean nods. “Kind of.”

“Like Mr. Sparkles?” asks Charlie.

Dean groans. It had taken him a good two weeks to convince Charlie that cats need sunlight and no, she cannot keep Mr. Sparkles in the bunker. She is still upset about it every so often.

Kevin snickers, though. “More of the fallen angel kind if I’m not mistaken. I haven’t seen that guy
Dean was taking to the donations come back out, anyway.”

“Your powers of perception are outstanding,” Dean sighs.

“I know. Everything about me is outstanding,” Kev replies with that smug smile that he can adopt at will. “Anyway, I’m leaving you two to your domestic dispute. See you on Saturday.”

“Thanks, Kev,” Dean mutters because he is grateful for any help they’re getting even while Charlie is glaring at him.

“Want to explain?” Hands on her hips she looks every inch the angry queen demanding an explanation for why her army lost the battle.

Dean tries to keep from grimacing and draws Charlie away from the other people in the room so that their conversation won’t be overheard.

“Guy’s a vet. He’s got some issues. PTSD I guess. Doesn’t really talk much. Can’t be in a room with this many humans. So I offered him a bed in the back.”

“Dean…” Charlie shakes her head, obviously too stunned to even reply.

“Look, Charlie, I know. I should have asked you. You live here, too, and we have a policy about strangers. But… the guy needs a friend.”

Charlie’s eyebrows shoot up. “Did you just say friend? Cause I’d have sworn he was in need of a bed, and you just said friend.”

“Well, kind of both?” Dean replies sheepishly.

“Dean…” Charlie seems speechless again.

“Just… I dunno, meet him, give him a chance? I put him up in my bedroom for the night. Didn’t want to disturb your comic collection.”

Charlie looks at him with an open mouth. “Dean, this is… This is bad. You’re giving him your room? You don’t even like people going into your room! You are – you are attached. How? How are you attached to this guy? You know better!”

He’s pretty sure he flinches at every single sentence. Because he hadn’t really thought about it this way, but… It really isn’t much like him to give away his bedroom, is it?

“He’s a nice guy, Charlie. Decent. It ain’t his fault,” he defends.

“It never is!” Charlie hisses exasperatedly. “Look around you! It never is! We still keep our private space private. Because we have to.”

“Sorry,” Dean mumbles. Not much else he can say.

“Yeah, well, damage done.” Charlie shakes her head. “God, Dean, sometimes you’re such a macho asshole and sometimes you’re too soft for this world. Pick a side already.”

He gives her a halfhearted flirty smile and shrugs. “Hey, you know me, picking sides - kinda not my thing.”

She groans. “I wasn’t talking about whose pants you’re getting into. Goodness, Dean, you’re not trying to get into that guy’s pants are you? Because…”
“Fuck’s sake, Charlie,” he interrupts, “you know me better than this. Guy needs a friend not a creep who takes advantage of his situation.”

“Just making sure,” Charlie grumbles before sighing heavily. “So, I’m guessing you can wait for Jo and I’ll go meet mystery man so that I at least know whether I need to lock my door tonight.”

“Charlie, wait,” Dean holds her back, “guy is pretty spooked by humans. According to Marv he didn’t talk at all before. Let me go with you later.”

“You’re unbelievable, Winchester, unbelievable,” Charlie mutters, but she waits with him.

Ten minutes later Jo is there and they give her a short run-down of current events and show her towards the Mom with the kids before they say their good nights.

Like every night, they make straight for the kitchen. Charlie hands him a coke before surveying the rest of the fridge’s contents.

“Well, at least we’ve got nothing that needs to be locked away,” she sighs.

It comes with the territory. Seeing the effects of alcohol as frequently as they do, they never have anything stronger than root beer at home.

“Don’t think it would have been necessary, anyway. “

“You can’t know that, Dean.”

“No, I can’t. But you know as well as I do that we spot it most every time. And that guy is clean.”

Charlie doesn’t want argue, he guesses, because she changes topic. “So, what do you say, want to introduce me now or should I just lock my door tonight and act surprised when he’s bailed in the morning?”

“You think he’s going to bail?”

“I don’t know, Dean. I don’t know the guy.”

Yeah, that’s a good point he guesses. “I told him I was going to be out of his hair for the night, though. Don’t want to go back on that promise.”

Charlie sighs, though her voice holds a sharp edge. “If I didn’t know any better, I’d say you sound smitten.”

“Charlie.”

“Alright, alright. Your call. Can you lock up so that we can watch some Dr. Sexy?”

“Sure,” he nods and makes his round.

He locks the door to the other side of the bunker, but where he’d normal pocket the key again, he leaves it in its lock tonight. He isn’t going to lock anyone in.

He doesn’t agree with Charlie. He isn’t smitten. He’s trying to help. Doesn’t mean he can’t kind of hope that Cas doesn’t bail. There’s something about the guy that is intriguing in a way that Marv and his friends will never be.
Sighing, he makes his way back to the kitchen. He stops in front of his bedroom for a second but doesn’t hear anything either from there or from the bathroom. He quenches the urge to check up on Cas and instead goes back to the kitchen to plonk down on the couch that they’ve stuffed into a corner.

Charlie’s already got the DVD running and for the next few hours they lose themselves in the power of the cowboy boots, a much needed escape from the sadness and defeat all around them.

“Do you hear that?” Charlie suddenly asks.

“What?”

She mutes the DVD and now he hears it, too. A cry that quickly progresses into screaming.

“Fuck,” Dean is up on his feet in a second and running towards his room. The scream is getting louder.

He prays to every entity that might be listening that Cas didn’t bolt the door from the inside.

And someone must be listening, because the door opens when he pushes against it.

Immediately, the scream gets that much more terrifying. And that much more terrified.

“Fuck fuck fuck,” Dean mutters again, moving forward a lot more cautiously now.

The light from the hallway is illuminating the room only dimly but it’s enough to make out that Cas is sitting upright in bed. Dean doesn’t think he’s awake, though, even if he’s still screaming and by the look of it trying to fight a whole army of invisible attackers.

“Cas!” Dean calls out while approaching very slowly. “Cas, man, you gotta wake up!”

He is torn between yelling Cas’ name really loud to get through to him and not wanting to startle him.

Fuck.

He knows enough to know he shouldn’t get any closer than where he is, just out of arm’s reach. He can hold his own in most hand-to-hand-combat, but if Cas thinks he’s in a life-or-death-situation, his knowledge is much more active than Dean’s, so Dean’s chances of getting out of that uninjured are pretty much zero.

“Cas!” Dean tries again, forcing his voice down a notch to sound deep and soothing instead of frantic. “Cas, come on, wake up.”

The force behind the scream is lessening somewhat. He can make out something like “no no no” somewhere in the middle of the wordless agony and it shouldn’t break his heart but it does.

“It’s okay, Cas, it’s okay,“ he moves forward after all, dodging Cas’ arms and approaching him from the side. “It’s just a dream, man. You’re safe.”

He waits for an opening and then puts a hand on Cas’ shoulder. Cas jumps and swivels but Dean anticipates the motion and gets his other arm around Cas’ back.

“It’s alright, man, I’ve got you. The danger’s passed. You can calm down now.”

The flailing gets less with Dean’s hands heavy on Cas’ upper arms. He uses the opportunity and
slides his arms all the way around Cas, hugging him from behind, weighing him down, grounding him.

“You fought them off, Cas. You made it. You’re safe.”

The scream dies away to whimpers.

Dean moves his mouth close to Cas’ ear. “You can sleep now. It’s alright. I’ll watch over you. No one’s going to hurt you.”

Cas smells like Dean’s shower gel and because he’s wearing Dean’s shirt and sweatpants, he also smells a little bit like Dean.

“I’ll be here. Just sleep. It’s all well.”

Slowly, ever so slowly, the rigidity leaves Cas’ muscles, his body slumping heavily against Dean.

He keeps holding him and mumbling quiet words about Cas being safe until the whimpers have died away and Cas’ breathing becomes regular.

At some point, he becomes aware of Charlie standing in the doorway, blocking out a part of the dim light. She’s observing quietly but he can imagine her frown too well and turns away to keep his body from going tense in anticipation of the scolding he’s about to get.

Finally, he feels satisfied that Cas has returned to a less troubled slumber.

“Don’t bail on me in the morning, okay?” he whispers in his ear, too low for even Charlie to hear, before carefully lowering Cas back down on the bed and drawing the covers over him.

He nods at Charlie to get out of the way and softly closes the door behind them.

Then he makes his way back to the kitchen without looking at Charlie once. It won’t stop her, but at least they’ll be safely out of earshot. Once in the kitchen, he leans on the counter, draws a deep breath and turns around to face her.

He expects her to be angry but Charlie looks shaken and the overwhelming emotion that hits him is worry. “Dean… Do you know what you’re doing? Do you have any idea what you’re getting into?”

“He didn’t wake up, Charlie. He won’t even remember,” Dean says softly.

“Maybe he won’t, but you will.” She lets herself sink to the floor. “I know I will.”

Dean reaches for their drinks and hands her hers before sliding down next to her. “Yeah.”

“Dean, what happened to him? What…” There are tears in her eyes and her voice breaks.

He wraps his arm around her shoulder and draws her close until she buries her head in his side. “I don’t know. You can’t let him know, either. That you saw that. He’s ashamed enough of everything as is.”

“I’m not stupid, you know?” Charlie punches him in the side, but there’s no force behind it. “Dean, you can’t… we can’t… we don’t have training for this.”

“What do you want me to do? Turn him away? You think he’s going to find himself a shrink with the appropriate training if we send him back out?” He shakes his head. “You know how these stories end as well as I do, Charlie.”
And that’s another reason why he was so insistent about helping the guy. Because the quiet ones, the ones that never ask for help, in his experience are the least likely to make it.

“Look, I’d just… I’d like a winter without any trips to the morgue to identify a body, okay?”

Predictably, that shuts her up. It’s by far the worst part of their job.

“You’re bat-shit crazy, Winchester. You know that, right?”

“But you love me for it, don’t you?”

“I can’t even…” She sighs. “He can’t stay in your room, though. I’ll clean up my comics tomorrow, alright?”

“Thank you,” he says quietly.

“Yeah, I’ve been told that I’m bat-shit crazy, too. So, do what you have to do, Winchester.”

Of course the fact that he’s decided that Cas can stay doesn’t mean Cas wants to stay. It’s a dilemma that can’t be solved without Cas’ actual input, and so Dean is up for a restless night in his brother’s bed. Doesn’t help that he keeps straining to hear whether another nightmare is clutching at the guy two rooms over.

Charlie’s right about that part, he’s in way too deep already and he has no idea how he’s gotten there. Replaying their conversations up to date doesn’t make any difference either. It’s mostly been Dean talking anyway.

God, he hates it when he can’t do anything. He’s good with practical shit. He has solutions to day-to-day problems. But he can’t kid himself enough to believe that there’s an easy solution for this.

One thing he does know, though, is that Cas won’t stay if he perceives it as an offer out of pity. He rolls that one around in his brain for a while and it’s only when he’s gotten an idea, that he’s finally able to fall asleep.

When his alarm sounds, it’s way too early and he’s tired. But where it would usually make him grumpy, it makes him antsy now. He takes his new set of clothes and slips into the bathroom for a quick shower. There’s no movement from his room, but he guesses if Cas has bailed he’s going to find it out soon enough.

After he’s clean, he feels a bit better. He starts the coffee maker and goes through the fridge for some toast and eggs. He’s never been a big breakfast person but he still starts humming when he makes French toast.

The toast is already sizzling in the pan when there’s a slight shift in the air. He hasn’t heard anyone come in but when he turns around, sure enough, there’s Cas standing at the far side of the room watching him.

He lets out a breath that he hadn’t known he was holding. The smile comes unbidden but it’s wide and honest.

“Find yourself a seat, Cas. Toast is almost done. Do you want coffee?”

He tries to make it sound as casual as he can, but it’s hard because Cas is already wearing his full set
of clothes again, including the trench coat, and pressing the rest of the new stuff against his chest. He’s ready to leave, that much is clear. Question is whether it’s because he wants to leave or because he expects Dean to throw him out.

Which they do with the rest of the overnighters. They give out whatever food got donated that they don’t need for dinner and shoo everyone out by ten. The day is spent with administration and cleaning and fundraising and then they open back up at 5. Not ideal, but it’s the best they can do.

“I can give you a duffle for that later,” Dean says because he’s noticed that he has been staring too long, and turns around to his pan. “Fuck,” he snatches the pan up and off the heat. “Shouldn’t let yourself get distracted while cooking, Winchester,” he mutters to himself. Louder, he adds. “Coffee cups are in the counter above the sink. Could you fill two cups for us? Oh, and take out a mug for Charlie, too. She’s helping Jo with the morning stuff, but she’s going to want some coffee when she’s back.”

He concentrates on salvaging the toast but smiles when he hears the clatter of the mugs after a moment. He slides the toasts on two plates and carries them over to the table.

Cas has taken the chair with the back to the wall again.

“Hope you like French toast.” He grabs the maple syrup, sugar and creamer, as well as what they need in cutlery and puts everything on the table before sitting down in his usual chair.

Belatedly he notices that he is sitting 90° from Cas, a lot closer than yesterday. But getting up again would be awkward, so he just pours a generous dose of creamer into his coffee.

Cas has his hands wrapped around the hot mug but makes no move to eat or drink.

Dean decides that it’s best not to comment and let him do stuff in his own time. So he takes a long sip from his own mug and starts in on his toast. He feels Cas’ eyes on him for a few minutes, before Cas finally takes the first sip of coffee and brings his plate closer to start eating. Dean raises his eyebrows at the fact that Cas doesn’t drench his toast in maple syrup, not sure whether Cas likes it that way or is too shy to take anything that isn’t directly given to him. But he decides to let that slide, too, because Cas can make his own decisions about how he wants his food.

They settle into the silence comfortably, more comfortable than Dean thinks he usually is with sharing silence with anyone, even Charlie.

Speaking of the devil, Charlie comes in. She bounces pretty much up until the moment she sees Cas at the table. Then she comes to an abrupt halt.

Cas immediately stops eating, shoulders hunching inward to make himself small.

“Umm, Cas, this is Charlie. She’s my partner in crime. I mean, not literally, of course. Charlie, this is Castiel – Cas. He’s my friend.”

Unsurprisingly, Charlie recovers faster. “Nice to meet you, Cas.”

She makes a beeline for the coffee, though, instead of trying to shake Cas’ hand. Dean appreciates it.

“Want some toast?” he asks her.

“Nah, I’m fine. I’ve eaten already.” She plunks herself down next to him, away from Cas’ side of the table. “I hope I wasn’t interrupting.”
“Actually,” Dean lunges right in, “it’s good to have you both here. Cause I have a proposition to make to the both of you.”

He earns an arched eyebrow from Charlie and no apparent reaction from Cas, who still looks like he wants the ground to swallow him.

 Doesn’t matter, he’s got to do this now or never. “Cas here told me yesterday that he’s a security expert.” Technically, ‘told him’ is a bit of an over-statement but it was implied anyway. “So I was thinking, we have these cameras and stuff, but we never really went too deeply into the security issues. So maybe, Cas could rig us up with something better than what we have right now.”

He lets his words settle for a moment. He can virtually see Charlie’s thoughts, that she’s been telling him about security for years now and he’d never made it a priority because they’ve always managed to handle things somehow. He admits it with a shrug and turns to Cas.

He already knows the head-tilt and so, even though Cas’ body language is still more towards the flight than anything else, at least he’s listening.

“Look, man, we don’t really have the funds to pay you back with anything but a bed and whatever semi-decent food I manage to cook up. But, I dunno, maybe it still beats whatever you’ve got right now. And I for my part, I’d feel better about leaving our volunteers on their own or about the people in the sleeping hall if I knew that we had no glitches in our system.”

He lets the sentence stand. He’s said his piece. Now he has to wait how it’s going to be taken.

“I could walk you through the electronics,” Charlie finally says. “I’m great at software but only decent at hardware. Dean’s useless with both.”

“Ey!” Dean protests.

“Oh shut it, Dean, you know that you haven’t got the slightest idea.”

“Not true,” Dean grumbles. “I can repair shit pretty well, thank you very much.”

“I meant microchips and stuff, not splicing cables.”

“Whatever,” Dean dismisses the argument.

“Anyway,” Charlie turns back to Cas. “I have no idea what kind of security is your specialty, but I could show you what we’ve got and you can decide whether you’d be interested then.”

Cas is biting his lip, glance flickering upwards to them before it falls back on his hands. “Would I… Humans?”

It sounds like it’s still a pretty desperate undertaking, forcing any words out, but it makes Dean smile because Cas is talking and because that was most definitely not a No.

Charlie looks at him helplessly, but Dean has an idea what Cas wants to know.

“Me ’n Charlie. One or the other volunteer probably. But, y’know, we’d be there for that. We close the place down during the day, so you wouldn’t have to deal with anyone else.”

There’s a slight nod to that.

“Well,” Charlie downs the rest of her coffee. “I gotta go close said place up. So you finish your breakfast and think about it. I’ll be back to give you the tour if you feel up to it.”
In leaving, she gives Dean a pat on the shoulder that he interprets to mean ‘good luck with your basket-case’, so he isn’t sure whether he’s grateful for the support or annoyed at her. He decides on the former, because she has had his back even though he sprung this on her.

“Charlie’s my best friend,” he explains and goes to get himself a second cup of coffee. “People who don’t know us, they tend to assume we’re a thing, what with the living together and organizing the shelter together and everything. But we’re not. Not that I’d be her type,” he chuckles. “Wrong chassis.”

And why the hell is talking about all of this shit? He was comfortable with the silence before. With a sigh he sits back down.

“Not hungry?” he asks with a nod in the direction of Cas’ plate that is still half full.

“Ate. Yesterday. Keep it?” The voice is very small.

“Dude,” Dean shakes his head. “I try not to interfere, you know, but you gotta eat. You’re way too thin. And the fact that you ate yesterday is not enough.” ‘Yeah, like hell you’re not interfering, Winchester. But nice try.’

Cas stares at the toast as if he’s going to have to try to wrestle it down and feels sick even thinking about it.

“Alright,” Dean gives in. “We’ll put in the fridge and you can grab it whenever.”

That gets him a hopeful look, and fuck, those eyes are blue in the bright kitchen light. He notices that he’s staring only after the fact, as usual. So he clears his throat awkwardly and wraps his fingers around his mug.

“Dean?”

The unexpected sound of his name in Cas’ voice makes him jump enough that he almost repeats yesterday’s performance, but he catches the mug at the last second before the coffee spills over.

“Yeah?”

“Tonight… Were you… there?”

“Oh,” Dean says and tries to keep his face emotionless. “So you woke up after all, huh?” There is nothing else forthcoming so he follows it up with. “What do you remember?”

Cas’ hands curl protectively around his waist, almost an imitation of the hug Dean used to calm Cas down.

“Yeah,” Dean nods, even though he doesn’t know whether it’s a conscious gesture. “That happened. I kind of – held you, for a while. I’m sorry, man. I don’t usually touch without permission. But I didn’t know any other way to calm you down.”

“I didn’t even…” Cas’ voice gathers a little more strength and he actually looks up at Dean. “Didn’t even remember how it felt to sleep.”

And that’s not only the longest sentence he’s strung together so far, Dean now also notices that it’s not just the light in the kitchen. Cas’ skin has a little more color and the bags under his eyes have retreated. They aren’t gone, but he looks healthier than he did.

“You can’t sleep, huh?”
Cas shakes his head, eyes sinking back to the table. “Fall asleep sometimes… but then…”

“Then you have nightmares,” Dean finishes the sentence for him. “Cas, it’s…” He isn’t sure whether he should say this, he’s still scared of startling Cas into flight. But not talking about this is close to negligence, too. “It’s a pretty common side-effect of PTSD. Not being able to sleep. And it’s pretty debilitating. I… Have you seen someone about this?”

The way Cas retreats into himself says enough.

“Alright, you’re not particularly fond of humans,” Dean gives himself his answer. “It’s just… Cas, that was pretty bad tonight. So, if you’re staying – would you mind if I – if I tried to help? Calmed you down? Because I – I’m not sure I can just let you scream.”

It’s a risk he’s taking and he’s aware of it, but at the same time it’s the truth. He can’t live through that scream and not help.

“I – scream?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “You sound pretty goddamn terrified, too.”

Cas processes that silently. “I’m sorry.”

Dean shakes his head because Cas has got nothing to be sorry for. “So, if you didn’t know that you scream, that mean you’ve never been to a shelter? Or anyplace else where someone would have noticed?”

“No.” It’s barely more than a whisper.

So, no human contact whatsoever. It makes so many questions burn on Dean’s tongue. ‘If you avoid all human contact, why come here? Why now? Do you have family somewhere? Friends? Is there a life that you’re still attached to and have fallen out of?’

But he doesn’t ask, because it’s intrusive and no one knows better than Dean Winchester that questions about family can make people clam up like oysters.

So Dean simply says, “But you came here.”

“Yes,” Cas answers and it sounds like a sigh.

“I’m glad that you did,” Dean smiles.

Cas looks up at him again, searching his face for a lie maybe, but he won’t find one, because Dean is glad that Cas came here. After a moment, Cas tentatively smiles back.

It’s possibly the most beautiful sight Dean has ever seen. Not because it is the prettiest smile in the world (he’s quite sure that award will forever go to Julia Roberts), but because it transforms all of Cas’ face, brightening it up like the sun brightens a cloudy day.

It’s little wonder that the smile just about does Dean in. Because it’s for him. He’s put it there. It warms everything inside him.

“Stay, Cas. Please.”

It comes out pleading and it’s too much and he shouldn’t be saying it, but he’ll be damned if he can help it.
“Sorry,” he apologizes immediately. “Shouldn’t try to make you. Your choice, not mine.”

Cas’ eyes are still fixed on Dean like he is a puzzle to be figured out.

“Hey, man, I…” but he has no idea where he wants that sentence to go. He sighs and goes for the most neutral ground he can find. “We need help with the security. It’s not an excuse.”

But it’s hard to keep talking when Cas just keeps staring. So he shuts up and holds his gaze. Whatever Cas is trying to figure out, Dean’s okay with it. As far as conscious input is concerned, he is an open book anyway.

“You can always ask, you know,” he says softly.

Cas squints his eyes. “But you don’t. Ask. About me.”

“I don’t,” Dean agrees. “But not cause I’m not interested. Do you want me to ask?”

It stays silent for a moment while Cas is weighing the question. “What would you ask?” he finally asks back while worrying his lip.

Dean thinks about it for a second. There’s quite a few questions to choose from. All of them are personal, so he’s unsure about them. Finally he settles on, “Why the trench coat?”

Cas makes a surprised noise. Dean thinks he probably expected questions about the nightmare and what’s happened to him in the war. Not a place Dean is willing to go right now. He wants Cas to feel safe and stay, not put him through the wringer. “Hey, that was obviously love on first sight, you and that thing. So…”

Cas clenches his hands into the fabric of the trench coat, drawing it close. “Had one. Just like it. Before.”

And that makes sense to Dean. “A rekindled flame, then.”

“There was… a suit and a tie, too. Not…” Cas points vaguely at the threadbare clothes he’s wearing.

Dean tries to imagine Cas in a suit. “I’m not usually the fancy duds kind of guy, but I betcha you look stunning in a suit.”

Cas blushes a bright red and Dean realizes only through that how flirty the compliment had sounded. He doesn’t feel like taking it back, though. He’d not even tried to flirt, just said what he was thinking.

“What did you do? Before?” Dean asks.

But Cas shakes his head slightly. “Complicated. Not enough words.”

“Alright,” Dean says at the same time that Cas adds, “Not yet.”

They smile at each other, a little insecurely, but more in sync than before.

“You?” Cas asks.

“What did I do before?” Dean makes sure he’s gotten the question right.

Cas nods.
“There’s no ‘before’ for me, Cas. Not really. I mean, there’s been a before this place obviously, but I was 4 when my Mom died and everything went to hell.” He shrugs even though it still hurts. “My brother and I, we were in and out of the system pretty much all of our childhoods. This here, this is the first stable home I’ve ever had.”

Cas leans forward, a frown on his face. “You gave me your room.”

It sounds almost like an accusation.

Dean laughs softly. “Yeah, Charlie had about the same expression on her face when I told her. She’s going to clean up her comic books so that you can have your own room, by the way.”

“Why?”

It’s a blunt question, more forceful than anything Cas has said so far, and Dean is sure it doesn’t mean why is Charlie cleaning the guestroom.

He sighs and stares off into space to find an answer. He has avoided thinking about it like he always avoids thinking about stuff too deeply because it tends to fuck him up.

“It didn’t feel like I was losing anything,” is the best he can finally come up with. “If that makes any sense. Also, my brother’s bed, not actually that uncomfortable.”

He’s deflecting from the meaning of what he’s just said and he knows it. By the way Cas keeps watching him, Dean thinks he might be figuring out more about him than Dean knows about himself.

“He’s not his home?” Cas asks after a moment’s deliberation, where Dean thinks he decided on the easier option, asking after his brother instead of after Dean’s motives.

“Nah, Sammy’s living it up in sunny California. He ain’t setting foot anywhere where there’s snow. He might show for a week or so in summer, but never in winter. He said he’d been freezing enough for three lifetimes when he was a child. It’s probably true so I can’t really be mad at him for it.”

“‘You were freezing.’ It isn’t a question. ‘And stayed.’

Dean shrugs. “I ain’t freezing anymore. Others are. Can’t really help when I’m in Cali, can I?” He decides to risk the dreaded family question after all. “You got any siblings?”

Cas looks at him suspiciously, like he might jump up and deliver him to his family immediately, but after a moment he answers, “Brothers. Three. Or…” He pauses and his face turns a shade paler than it was, “just one. Now.”

“I’m sorry,” Dean says quietly because the meaning of that is pretty clear. “Were they soldiers, too?”

But Cas doesn’t answer, he stares a hole into space and his hands are clenching each other so hard that the knuckles turn white.

“Cas? What’s up?”

“I forgot that.” There is terror in his eyes when he looks at Dean. “How could I forget that?”

The urge to reach out, to touch and to console is overwhelming. Something to make the terrified look disappear from Cas’ face and replace it with a smile. And fuck’s sake, there’s no blood left in Cas’ fingers, he’s clenching them so hard, and that must hurt.

“Come on, buddy, you’re hurting yourself. If you need something to hold onto, here,” he offers his
own hands.

Cas stares at them and then back up at Dean.

Dean leans forward ever so slowly, and carefully pries Cas’ hands apart. After an initial moment of resistance, Cas lets him do it, watching him as he slides their palms together.

“I’m not a doctor, Cas, but I’m pretty sure you’ve got PTSD. Means your brain didn’t get sorted right. That and the insomnia, explains why there are a few holes in your memory.”

Cas’ hands are rough, the skin dry from too many hours in the cold. Dean doesn’t rub over them, doesn’t do any of the soothing little motions he’d use with someone he knows better, just holds them, tight enough that it’s grounding, but not tight enough for it to hurt, and hopes that it’s enough.

“The holes are in me…” Cas whispers.

“No, they aren’t,” Dean shakes his head. “You’re still a whole person, Cas. You’ll find the parts of you that are missing.”

“Ahem. May I ask what you are doing?”

Dean flinches at Charlie’s stern voice which he is sure is directed only at him, and Cas physically jumps.

Still, Dean doesn’t let go of Cas’ hands, not immediately. “You okay for now?” he asks him.

Only when Cas nods does he let go.

Dean turns around to Charlie then. “We’re exchanging life-stories. Want to share yours, too?”

It’s a mean question because he knows Charlie can’t share her story. Not with a stranger. But she brought that one on herself, implying things in her tone that definitely weren’t happening.

Charlie frowns. “Dean Winchester, you’re out of line and you know it. So I won’t even dignify that with a response.” She turns to Cas. “We got the place secured for the day. If you want to see the electronics, I can be yours for the next hour. Dean can do the supply run in the meantime.”

Cas shrinks back slightly at the speech, though it’s not the scramble backwards that it was yesterday, so Dean still counts it as a win.

“Charlie,” Dean holds his hand up to stop her,” go slow, will you? Cas here doesn’t know you at all. And you come over like a pushy redhead steam-train.”

Charlie sighs, some of her pent up energy dissipating. “That’s because I am a pushy redhead. Alright, let me think, what is there to know about me. I can debug code like no one else but I scream when I see a spider. I still make Dean carry them out and not kill them. I got no troubles being in charge, but if my life depended on flirting with a guy, I’d hope to hell I’d have earbuds so Dean could coach me through it, because otherwise I’d be dead. Oh, and yeah, Charlie is not necessarily my actual name, but that doesn’t mean I’m not real or that you shouldn’t use it. Is that good enough for now?”

Dean whistles low through his teeth. “Actually, that’s more than I expected.”

Charlie gives him a little mock curtsy. “I like to surprise.” Then she looks back at Cas. “Look, if you want the oaf to come, he can come. He can do the supply run later. But I can assure you that I have
no evil plans. At least not for you.”

It shouldn’t be reassuring. It really shouldn’t. But somehow, Cas looks less tense and then he nods. He takes his plate and brings it to the fridge, and then goes a few steps in Charlie’s direction before turning back to Dean once more.

“I’ll see you later, man,” Dean smiles and nods encouragingly.

“Later,” Cas agrees.

“Alright, blue eyed mystery man, let’s start in the office. Later, Dean.”

He stares after them until they’re out of the room. Then he sighs and gets up to clean away their dishes.

He spends the morning compulsively checking his phone. If something happens, if Cas bails or has a panic attack or whatever, Charlie will call him. She can be somewhat brash, and he isn’t sure if Cas is up for that, but on the other hand, Charlie knows her shit. She knows the feeling of being alone from a whole different perspective than he does, but she knows it at least as deeply. Probably more.

He sighs. Not good to let his distraction keep him from getting his work done.

The supply run is quick. They need to buy what people don’t donate. Usually, it’s all unsexy non-perishables. Food? Supermarkets give them their surplus. Blankets and mattresses? You’ll find a charitable person to sponsor. Toilet paper and women’s hygiene articles? Nope. No one donates those. The people at the cash desk know him, though, and not even the pimply teenage boys snicker at the collection in his cart.

He stacks the stuff he’s bought and goes over to cleaning. They have help with that, too, but what is done is done and he doesn’t feel like doing administration or begging rich people for money right now. There’s always the afternoon to spend locked in the office.

He sends a quick text to Charlie at some point.

Dean: How’s it going?

But there is no immediate answer. He refuses to let his mind go over all possible scenarios how all of this can go really badly, and throws himself into cleaning the bathrooms. At least the volunteers will be happy that that’s already done.

He only stops for a break when it’s already past noon. He’s sweating and could probably use a second shower. But he’s the designated chef, so if they want lunch, he should get going. He won’t be making anything special, just a quick round of pasta. But it’s still better than waiting for Charlie to remember that they should eat. They’d be living of granola bars in no time.

He goes to the back area, leaving the door unlocked and open for now. Cas and Charlie weren’t anywhere in the front, so he guesses they’re in the office. But when he walks down the hall, the door to the guestroom is open.

Charlie is kneeling in the middle of her comics and Cas is sitting next to her, Indian style. Charlie is searching for something, and she brightens up when she finds it. “Look, here it is! The Flerken cat! She’s grumpy and lovely and loyal and awesome and these are all her little kitten-hatchlings. Dean won’t let me have a cat, he made me give Mr. Sparkles away and we found him a good home but
look at all the happy little kittens!”

Dean clears his throat. “For one, Mr. Sparkles hated his name. For two, is that what you call cleaning up?”

Charlie doesn’t even have the decency to sound flustered. “You have no idea what Mr. Sparkles liked or disliked! He was a very proper little kitty. And… you’re not listening to me at all…”

“I’m listening, I’m listening,” Dean says automatically but he can’t quite bring himself to turn his head away from where Cas is looking up at him, looking for all the world like an overgrown boy, in the middle of a pile of comics, an issue of Captain Marvel in his hands and an expression of such wide-eyed wonder on his face that it melts Dean’s heart.

“Like hell you are;” Charlie snorts. “What brought you here anyway? Is lunch ready?”

“Gimme 25 minutes,” Dean sighs and rips his eyes away from Cas. “But try to actually get some stuff cleared up, okay?”

“Spoilsport,” Charlie mutters but she turns to put a few issues away in a box. Dean wonders how long that will hold before she gets distracted by something that she just has to show Cas.

He gets his answer, or something close to it, when he sets the water for the pasta on the stove. His phone vibrates in his pockets.

_The Queen: He seems helpful and dreamy. Let's keep him._

Dean rolls his eyes but it also makes him smile.

_Dean: His choice, not ours._

It isn’t even ten seconds before the answer comes in.

_The Queen: But you want to keep him._

He slides the phone back into his pocket without answering, because they’re treading on dangerous territory here. And he’d rather not fuck this up for Cas.

Cas and Charlie wander into the kitchen at about exactly 26 minutes after he’s left them in the guestroom.

The table is already set and he sets to filling their bowls.

“Pasta,” Charlie sighs happily.

Dean chuckles. “You’d eat anything as long as you don’t have to cook it.”

“But I like your pasta!” Charlie protests.

“Yeah, yeah,” he dismisses it, even while he basks in the compliment. “Hope it’s okay for you, too, Cas. There’s meatballs in it. You’re not vegetarian or something, are you?”

Cas shakes his head.

“Alright. Makes it easier for me. My repertoire of non-soup rabbit food is limited to the maximum time that Sam ever spends here. Which is about 8 days a year or so.”
He deals out bowls to everyone. There’s a pitcher of water already on the table, so everything is good to go.

Charlie looks at Cas curiously, then she asks. “Want to say Grace or something?”

Dean looks at her with raised eyebrows and Cas seems surprised, too.

Charlie just shrugs. “There’s a reason why I always win the trivia quizzes. You said your full name was Castiel, right? Names ending in –el, ‘something something God’. So I’m guessing someone was religious in your family. If you are, too, go ahead and pray.”

“I’m… no, thank you but I’d rather not,” Cas answers and now it’s Dean’s turn to look surprised because Cas’ voice is still dark and gravelly, but it’s so much smoother than it was, the roughness of disuse dissipated.

“Alright then. Hungry!” Charlie attacks her first meatball with a vengeance and predictably splatters sauce over half the table.

Dean shakes his head. “So, how is it going?” he asks Cas because he knows it’s useless to try to talk to Charlie before her plate isn’t at least half empty. She might not remember she’s hungry before she’s actually at the table with a steaming plate in front of her, but then she’s ravenous and unstoppable.

Cas looks from Charlie to Dean and then to his plate. He doesn’t look like he wants to bail, but he fidgets worriedly again. “I don’t… I can’t eat all of that.”

“Just start and see how far you get.”

“But if I don’t… One of you can eat this if I don’t touch it. And I still have the toast.”

Seems like it’ll be the normal state of things with Cas that Dean is happy at the same time that he wants to crush him into a hug because it makes him so sad how little Cas expects of life. He’s happy now because that was like two and a half sentences in a row. But, “Cas, man, just eat as much as you can. We eat the same stuff as everyone else at night, so you can eat whatever you got in leftovers then if you don’t want to deal with the soup kitchen. But there’s no way you’re eating stale toast for lunch when you could have pasta. Not on my watch.”

He’s skimming the edge of too much again and he could kick his own ass for it, but something about Cas makes him uber-protective.

“I’m assuming you are staying for dinner, right? And also, umm, staying? I mean, you started clearing out the comics and everything…” He adds somewhat nervously even though he doesn’t see any other reason why they should have done that.

“God, Dean,” Charlie chuckles around a mouthful of pasta, “you sound like you’re asking Cas to prom.”

He glares at her because she was toeing the line with her text message already but at least Cas didn’t see that, while he definitely heard this.

“I… Yes. If you really… Yes,” Cas saves, well, either Dean from being embarrassed or Charlie from getting chewed out. It isn’t really clear.

Dean can’t help the smile that spreads over his face. “Awesome.”
He tries to make it sound like it normally would, manly and in charge. But it doesn’t come out quite right.

Cas blushes and ducks his head.

“Oh my God,” Charlie looks from one to the other, “I can’t take this. I don’t do cute. So I’m out of here.” She takes her plate and gets up. “I’m sorry, guys, nothing personal but I can’t keep my food down while you’re doing - this.” Her vague gesture almost spills pasta everywhere again. “I’m in the office if you need me. Dean, want to switch duties? You and Cas pack away the comics, I do admin?”

He isn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, even when he’s embarrassed as all hell by it. “Sure,” he nods.

“Right. Be good. I’ll see you later.” She trudges out of the room without turning back.

“Umm, sorry for that,” Dean apologizes.

“Was that – me?” Cas asks, worry lining his face, voice shy and quiet again.

“No, man, that was all her. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“What happened?” Cas has his hands clenched at his sides again, apparently wanting to fidget but keeping himself rigorously still.

“You don’t have to do that, you know?” Dean answers to that rather than to the question asked. “Keeping still. If you feel jittery, stay in motion. I don’t mind.”

Cas frowns at that but then seems to make a conscious effort to relax his hands. “Military,” he mumbles. “Engrained.”

Dean nods. “I get it. My Dad was a Marine. Got drilled early on.” He shudders.

“But you haven’t…”

“Served? No. My Dad woulda have been proud if I went, I guess. He was in ‘Nam.” Dean fidgets uncomfortably. “Sorry, man, my Dad ain’t my favorite subject.”

Cas nods.

“What about you, then? Why’d you join?”

Cas thinks about it with a concentrated frown as if he actually doesn’t remember and has to dig the answer out of the recesses of his mind. When he finally finds the words, he brightens up a bit. The answer is short, though. “Military brat.”

“So your Dad’s a soldier, too, hmm?”

Cas shakes his head. “My mother. My father is - gone.”

“Sorry, man.”

Cas looks away, his hands making small aborted movements as he fights against clenching his hands at his side.

“Family ain’t your favorite topic, either, huh?” Dean asks.
“Naomi… my mother… she was… is…” But the words don’t come.

“Hey, it’s okay, man. We don’t have to.”

Cas nods but judging by the way he’s still trying to get his movements back under control, he isn’t doing too well.

“Cas, man…” Dean says worriedly.

“Could you…?” Cas awkwardly holds his hands in front of him and after a second, Dean gets it.

He takes Cas’ hands and holds them tightly. Jitters are running through his body, more noticeable now that Dean can feel them. But after a minute they get less frequent and finally they pretty much die away.

Cas looks down on their joined hands. “Why does that help?” he asks, wonder in his voice.

“Nothing ever helps.”

Dean has no answer to that beyond that it’s always helped him, too, when someone he trusts does this for him when his anxiety spikes.

“I guess humans can be somewhat useful after all, huh?”

“Not humans,” Cas shakes his head. The ‘you’ isn’t said but it hangs in the air anyway.

Dean swallows hard to keep down the emotions that stirs up in his gut.

“Cas, you…” He already hates himself for what he’s going to do, but he’s said it to himself, this only helps with someone you trust. And the only way to trust is truth. It’s a lesson he’s learned the hard way. “You should know why I didn’t join the army. Make up your mind about me after.”

He doesn’t let go of Cas’ hands, even when he guesses he should. But Cas stares at him again and doesn’t move his hands away, either. So Dean’s going to take the small comfort.

There are no right words for this. Never have been. Not that he really says it out loud all that often. Mostly he doesn’t care what people think of him. Not anymore. But he cares now.

Cas squeezes his hands and Dean gives him a shaky smile of thanks for the encouragement.

“I’m bisexual, Cas. I had a problem with ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’. That’s why. Ain’t the way I wanted to live my life.”

He leaves it at that. Waits for Cas to lean back and pull his hands away. Not to outright reject him as a person or be disgusted, he doesn’t think that’s Cas’ style. But to make sure that they don’t invade each other’s personal space anymore.

But Cas doesn’t. In fact, there’s no physical reaction whatsoever. Which is what finally makes Dean look up. Cas has his head slightly tilted again, expression intense but unreadable.

Dean shifts uncomfortably, the scrutiny for once bordering on too much. But he holds on to Cas’ fingers and doesn’t move away an inch. He doesn’t think he can.

“It’s not… It’s not like I want to jump everyone’s bones or something, so I’m guessing it doesn’t make that much of a difference in practical terms, but…” he continues haltingly. “I can be myself here. Everyone knows that I flirt a lot and it’s never serious, and no one thinks any less of me for it.”

He laughs a small self-deprecating laugh. “Or if they do, they’re not saying it out loud. But you
know, I like to think that working here, organizing this place, helping people, I serve my country, too. Without having to give up a part of myself.”

There’s no answer and a quick glance upwards shows him that he’s still being silently observed.

“Look, Cas, if… If I make you uncomfortable, you just have to tell me. I’ll back off. I know that most guys don’t feel… I want you to feel welcome here, okay? Safe. I’ll do everything in my power to make that happen.” And can he sound any more miserable or pathetic?

“Dean…”

He knows his smile is little more than a grimace. He hates this part. He’s worked so hard to be okay with who he is but it still throws him, putting himself out there for someone new to see. For someone he likes. The sick feeling in his stomach intensifies because he isn’t thinking about this, he’s very much not thinking about this, but if the circumstances were different… He hasn’t ‘more than liked’ anyone in a long time. But Cas… He feels every bit of Cas’ emotions towards him so deep in his guts that if he let himself think, if he let himself...

“Dean!” There’s a tug on his fingers.

“Sorry,” Dean shakes his head to rid himself of his thoughts. “Spaced out for a moment there.”

He smiles sheepishly and looks up at Cas whose worried frown changes into a few small crinkles around his eyes when Dean finally focuses back on him. “Thank you,” he says.

That throws Dean for a loop. “What for?”

“Telling me,” Cas says.

“Well,” Dean resists the urge to scratch his neck because that would mean letting go of Cas’ hands. “Trust. This,” he squeezes Cas’ hands to show what he means, “only works for me when I trust someone. And trust means truth.”

“I trust you, Dean,” Cas says and it’s a much too simple statement for the enormity of its meaning.

The churning knot in Dean’s stomach dissolves into something that feels suspiciously like butterflies and goddammit he needs to get a grip on this but all his relief translates into his face anyway.

“Oh thank goodness,” he sighs, “I was worried.”

Which is stating the obvious he guesses but Cas’ expression turns so sweet, the puzzlement that has been a constant companion these past few days still there but now again closer to wonder than to confusion.

It’s giving Dean a hope that he should quench because it isn’t fair and he’s promised to be Cas’ friend and a thousand other reasons, none of which actually want to come to mind right now, because those butterflies might as well as bumblebees the way they tumble about his insides.

“Umm,” he tries to recover from the attack of his feelings, “I guess we should eat that pasta before it goes completely cold.”

He needs a moment though before he can get his fingers to comply and actually release their grip on Cas’ hands. Their hands linger together for a long moment. Then finally Dean clears his throat and turns back to his food. He takes his fork and sticks it into a meatball, but somehow, he isn’t really hungry anymore.
“Might join you with the leftovers thing. Not sure I can eat all that right now.”

“You should eat. Keep up your strength.” And if Dean didn’t know better, he’d say that’s a tiny smirk in Cas’ eyes.

“Hear, hear,” he chuckles.

They both eat a couple of bites.

“You do, you know?” Cas suddenly says. “Serve your country.”

He stops there but when Dean looks up at him, he’s staring into space.

Cas’ voice sounds almost lost again when he continues. “Better than I did, anyway.”

“Hey, if you’re taking up the job as our tech guy, you’re still helping. And less risk of getting shot.”

Cas fixes him with a hard glare. “Or shooting someone.”

“Or shooting someone,” Dean admits because he hadn’t thought too much about that, but yeah, it’s not only Cas getting hurt, it’s probably also Cas hurting others.

Enemy soldiers, he should say, he guesses. But they have a few groups here that are sworn enemies. That they turn away politely when they can and that they get the guns out to make them leave if they have to. Because the shelter is a safe place. It can’t become gang territory. Thing is, Dean never sees much difference between one side and the other. They all look like idiots to him.

“You ain’t got to do that here, either,” he says quietly. “Or ever again.”

“How do you know I didn’t like it?”

“Seriously?” Dean raises his eyebrows. “Have you seen yourself, man?”

It’s the wrong thing to say because he’s pretty goddamn sure that Cas knows how messed up he is and really doesn’t want to be reminded. Or possibly doesn’t want Dean to see only that part of him. Because that’s what Dean would want. For people not to see him as a freak.

“You’re kind and you’re decent,” he says decisively. “You’re brave and you’re honest. I’ve got a feeling that you’re scary smart somewhere underneath all that – trench coat. I do think that no matter what else, you’ll always be somewhat wary of humans. That quite often you’d rather be alone. Maybe you’re a bit socially awkward. So yeah, there’s no rose-colored glasses, but whatever you’re trying to goad me into with that question, it won’t work. I already know you too well.” He crosses his arms over his chest, daring Cas to say anything else.

“I’m not, though,” Cas says, though the fervor has left this voice, “brave or honest. So much you don’t know about me.”

“Yeah well, then you’re going to tell me in your own time. Or you won’t. I don’t care. I’ll be here for you either way.” His voice sounds tight and maybe he is angry because the world has screwed Cas over and that’s pretty clear for anyone to see. Apart from for Cas, obviously.

“How?” Cas asks. “How do you believe in me like that? Why?”

“Because you’re good people. I trust you, too.” It is so frikking obvious he doesn’t know how that could have slipped past Cas.
Cas snaps his mouth shut at hearing his own words echoed back at him. He swallows audibly. “You trust me…”

Dean smiles though it’s through gritted teeth because he still isn’t over it that the state of the world is such that they have to have this conversation. “Think I’d give my room to someone I don’t trust? That’s everything I own in this fucking world in there. I mean apart from the ratty couch and a few chipped dishes.”

“But why, Dean? Just look at me!” Cas sounds half-desperate but Dean notices with some satisfaction that his voice still doesn’t break.

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “I did.”

“But then how can you…” Now his voice gets lost but Dean thinks it’s more because he honestly doesn’t know what to say than because he lost his nerve to talk.

“Told you already, Cas,” Dean says, much softer than before. “You’re a good guy. Clothes don’t matter. Circumstances don’t matter. You’re still a good guy.”

“To most people it matters,” Cas grumbles stubbornly.

Dean chuckles. “I seem like most people to you?”

Cas doesn’t answer but pouts instead which of course makes Dean chuckle harder.

“You’re stubborn as all hell, I’ll give you that. But it takes one to know one, so better don’t have any illusions about getting away with it,” he grins. “Come on, we ain’t eating anyway. Let’s do something productive and get that room cleaned for you.”

He unceremoniously pours all the leftovers into one big bowl and stuffs them into the fridge. “Done. I can do the dishes later.”

“You cooked,” Cas says with a frown.

“You saying you want to help with the dishes? Cause Charlie never does.”

“I’ll help,” Cas says decisively.


They still go over to the guestroom first.

“Did she say anything? About how she wants these ordered? By title, by franchise, by year?” Dean asks.

“By quality,” Cas answers.

“Oh great,” Dean sighs. “You aren’t by any chance a comic book nerd?”

“No,” Cas shakes his head.

“Well I guess, then she just has to live with what we do.”

They spend the next few hours sorting and packing away the stacks of comics. They make sure to be careful and not dent them. They also try to at least keep the franchises together. Every so often, Dean takes one of the ones that look more out there, opens it at random and reads a few passages out loud.
for their amusement.

Dean is happy already that that coaxes a few smiles out of Cas, but then there is a particularly awful scene and Dean can’t even get through reading the thing without cracking up, and suddenly there is this noise from where Cas is sitting and Dean has to look up to make sure he’s heard that right. Of course by then it’s already quiet again and Cas looks like he’s puzzled at himself.

“Damn, Cas, was that an actual laugh? You’re turning soft in your old age. Wouldn’t have done that when we met,” Dean teases, though the joke is close enough to the truth.

“Read more,” Cas demands and Dean is happy to comply.

It sounds less like a surprised snort and more like actual laughter the next time it happens, though the same expression of being thrown stays on Cas’ face and Dean wonders darkly how long exactly Cas hasn’t had reason to laugh anymore.

Finally, all the comics are stashed and they’re carrying them off to the other guestroom to store them there for now. Dean tries to give Cas the lighter boxes but Cas is having none of that, so Dean gives in. Cas isn’t weak anyway. He might not have gotten enough food, but he’d somehow managed to scramble together enough to keep his muscles from disintegrating completely.

When they stand in the empty room, it’s a good feeling. Accomplished.

“That’s better,” Dean nods. “Want to get your stuff and the blankets and sheets?”

Though Cas’ stuff really only consists of the clothes that Dean gave him yesterday. He carries those while Dean snatches up the sheets from his bed and bundles all the bedding into that.

He sets it back down on the guest-bed and looks over at Cas who has drawn out one of the drawers of the dresser and stares sorrowfully into it.

Dean walks over to stand next to him. The array is pretty pitiful, he’s gotta admit that. Even spread out it wouldn’t fill the bottom of the drawer.

“I gather that we got to go shopping for a few supplies for the security stuff anyway. We can get you some stuff then.”

Cas is already shaking his head before the sentence is finished and from the tight set of his jaw Dean knows that arguing is futile right now.

“Alright,” he says but thinks that he’s got to talk to Charlie about this. Maybe there’s a way to get Cas an actual contract with actual pay, at least for a month or two. It’s almost Christmas after all, their mysterious benevolent patron might be in a good enough mood for that. And if he isn’t, Dean wouldn’t mind too much giving some of his pay on to Cas. It ain’t like Dean’s getting out much to spend the money anyway.

“Come on, let’s make the bed,” he gives Cas a quick pat on the shoulder, a sort of commiseration and encouragement at the same time.

They work silently and are done within minutes.

Dean carefully folds the sweatpants and shirt he’s lent Cas and lays them next to the pillow.

“There. All done. If we had little chocolates it’d be almost like a fancy hotel room.” Dean stops and frowns at his own sentence. “I still live like that, sometimes,” he says quietly. “Like this is just
another stop in the endless string of motel rooms. I keep my stuff neatly packed. Always ready to move on.” He looks at Cas with an awkward half-smile. “I’m guessing this is just a pit-stop for you, but, man, if you can make this room your home for a while, do it. Do better than me.”

Dean looks at his watch then and it’s already past 3:30. “Damn. I gotta get to the front and get started. You good here on your own? Not that you can’t come to the front with me if you want to. Volunteers come at 4, we open for the crowds at 5.”

“I’m good back here,” Cas says decisively and Dean chuckles.

“Yeah, I thought so. You know where everything is, so feel free to roam around. If you want to wait,” he shrugs and tries to make it sound casual, “we could have leftovers-dinner together later.” Yeah, that still sounded like he’s inviting Cas to a very cheap version of a date.

“I’d like to,” Cas answers and the way he sounds so honest and serious about it might make Dean’s heart jump a little.

He’s practically bouncing when he makes it to the front.

“You’re in a good mood,” Charlie eyes him suspiciously. “You also have good timing.”

She points at a stack of boxes near the stairs.

“The weekly donations from Bimarket came in. Did you kill my comics?”

Dean bends down to sift through the boxes. A lot of vegetables which is good. No bread, which is not good. Looks like they’ll be making stew again. “Nope, we were very careful with them. Even with the horrible ones.”

“None of them are horrible!” Charlie protests.

“Right,” Dean laughs and heaves up the first of the boxes. “Garth is going to love this, more washing and peeling.”

Charlie chuckles. “Well, he’ll impress any girlfriend with his abilities in the kitchen.”

Dean snorts because Garth impressing a girl doesn’t really compute for him. He’s seen it though, that Garth actually has people skills that no one would expect under his awkward exterior.

“So, what do you think of Cas?” Dean asks while unpacking the first batch of vegetables. He’s aiming for neutral but he isn’t sure how well that works.

“He’s got an idea what he’s talking about. When he’s talking.”

“But he was talking?” Dean asks for reassurance.

“Some,” Charlie nods. “He’s an IT guy of some kind, I can tell you that.”

“Yeah, he doesn’t really give the impression of a grunt.” Dean throws the kale in some water to rinse it off. Kale and squash stew. Ah well. “So you think he’ll be useful?”

“Does it matter?” Charlie asks.

“Hell yeah, it matters.” To Cas anyway.
“Well, in that case, yes, he’ll be useful. He’s making a list of the stuff he needs to upgrade our system. He’s trying to break it down to the bare minimum. I think you gotta go shopping with him, though. You’re drawing him out more than I do.”

Dean nods and guesses there is no better moment to ask. “He needs some stuff.”

Charlie raises her eyebrows. “He needs everything.”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “But he won’t let me buy it. Do you think there’s chance to, you know, actually hire him?”

“Uff,” Charlie leans back against the counter. “Not from our usual funds.”

“I was aware of that.”

“You want me to call Mr. Shurley.”

“Well, you wanted to call him about the Christmas party anyway…”

“Yeah. But he expects that.”

“We could send him an email beforehand…”

Charlie sighs. “Dean, are you really sure this is worth all the trouble? Just convince him that it won’t break our funds to buy him a few clothes and supplies. Not the way paying him an actual wage and social security and shit would.”

Because they have a policy about that. You either volunteer, or you get a decent job. None of that minimum-wage uninsured crap. Mostly, it’s been just them, though. They manage things fine between them.

“Weren’t you the one texting me that we should keep him?” Dean asks because turning this around on Charlie is pretty much his only option at this point.

“And I got no problem with him staying. But you know what happens when we push mystery man.”

“Yeah,” Dean hangs his head because he does.

Their mystery benefactor is their saving grace and their biggest liability at the same time. He’s paranoid as all hell and does not react well to surprises. They’ve got a phone number and an email and a name. That’s it. The email (free@will.org) gets pinged so often around the globe that Charlie lost its trail and the phone number goes directly to a burner phone without activated GPS. Because yes, she’s tried to track the guy down after the courier who brings their money every month swore that he had no idea who he was working for. And not only did she not manage to track him down, she also got caught. Because it was three months und eventual groveling before they saw that courier again. And those three months had pretty much shown them why exactly it wasn’t a good idea to piss Mr. Shurley off. They’d have had another months or two in them, probably, without finding an additional source of income, but that was only because they were burning through their savings.

“Shit, Dean, you’ve got it bad,” Charlie actually sounds like she’s commiserating with him, so he must look pretty awfully dejected.

“It’s alright,” Dean sighs. “I’ll find a way. Just gotta convince Cas somehow that it’s not charity and he’s not a beggar. Kinda problematic when you run a soup kitchen for a living.”
“Does he know?” Charlie asks.

“Does he know what?” asks Dean.

“How you feel about him.”

“Oh fuck you, Charlie,” Dean cuts the kale with somewhat more vigor than necessary.

“No, Dean, I mean it,” she insists stubbornly. “I know you. And the only one you ever get this protective over is Lisa.”

He pulls his finger away at the last second before slicing right through it. “Come on,” he complains, “at least warn me before you bring my ex into this.”

“Am I right or am I right, though?”

“You’re right,” he admits grudgingly because yeah, Lisa is kind of the only other person he gets this protective about. Well, and Ben of course, but he comes in a package deal with Lisa. “For the record, I’d get protective about you, too, if you ever needed it.”

Charlie chuckles. “Fuck yeah, bitches, I’m the Queen.”

He rolls his eyes. “And what a benevolent ruler you are, Your Highness.”

They work silently for a moment before Charlie says, “I’ll see how his mood is, okay? If there’s a chance, I’ll bring it up. But risking our livelihood isn’t worth it. Not when this is also the place where your angel finds a warm bed and maybe even enough safety to heal.”

“With the fallen angels again, huh?” Garth jumps down the stairs from the entrance. “Anyone bother to lock this place during the day? Cause it was open.”

“Just one angel this time and he’s not so much fallen as damaged by a holy war. Also, the door was open because donations just came in,” Charlie states matter-of-factly.

“Wanna take over the squash?” Dean asks before the topic can even settle in. “But wash your hands first.”

“You got it.”

Charlie is putting today’s food on the heater so that it’ll be nice and warm by the time everyone comes in while Dean and Garth work their way through masses of vegetables. It’s tedious and boring but also blessedly mind-numbing. Dean’s fingers know better what to do than his brain, so he can drift, leaving just enough concentration to keep from cutting himself.

The hour goes by fast and then the first hungry faces appear and Dean leaves Garth to finish the rest of the cutting. They try to use everything they get on the same day so that it doesn’t get a chance to spoil.

Dinner rush seems to last forever. Marv and his friends are as loud and obnoxious as always. The lady with the children does not come back. Jo and her damn vaccination shots. Scares people off more often than not. He looks for familiar female faces among their regulars. Daniel’s been in line already, getting two bowls as usual, so yes, there she is, Adina, her posture slumped, her face buried in Daniel’s chest. He uses a lull to go over to the two.

“You two alright?”
Daniel’s got his arm protectively around Adina’s shoulders. “She’s got a fever I think.”

Adina looks up and her face is very pale even though sweat glistens on her forehead and her eyes are watery. They don’t really seem to focus on Dean. Yeah, that’s a fever no shit.

“Crap. Jo’s not here today. If I call her at the hospital to let her know you’re coming, can you make it there?” The hospital’s a half hour bus ride away but he figures it’s their best shot. Jo’s not going to turn them away. “I can give you the money for the bus tickets if you need it.”

“Babycakes?” Daniel asks his girlfriend softly but she buries her face in his neck again, whimpering slightly.

“Yeah, you gotta get her to the hospital.” Dean fishes in his pockets for some small change, which is all he ever carries in cash anyway. “Here, that should get you there. I’ll call ahead.”

“Thank you,” Daniel says gruffly and pockets the money. “Come on, babycakes, we gotta get you to a doctor.”

He’s got to half-carry her outside, but Daniel’s strong, so Dean thinks he can make it. He sends Jo a quick text message and gets a very short reply only a few minutes later.

**Blonde ninja: K.**

That’s good enough so he goes to talk to a few of the others, mainly to make sure no one else is sick.

By the time it quiets down, it’s past ten already and his stomach grumbles. Charlie and Garth have actually joined a table and are playing some sort of card game that he hopes doesn’t devolve into strip poker. Because that has happened before. And since Charlie is competitive as all hell and also really good at calculating odds and numbers, whatever hopes the guys she was playing had got crushed epically. Dean had to come in just in time to stop the game before the last garments fell. He definitely didn’t want to see that dude naked.

He taps Charlie’s shoulder. “I’m going to be in the back, alright?”

“Yup,” she replies while sorting through her cards.

Dean grins. “Kill them, Your Highness.”

“Leave me now, Righteous Man, you’re disturbing my concentration.”

“As you wish, my Lady.”

He’s still quietly grinning when he makes it to the kitchen. His stomach rumbles again. “Ugh.”

Cas is sitting bent over a piece of paper at the kitchen table. But he looks up when Dean comes in.

“Sorry so late. Oh, you did the dishes! Awesome!” Because that really is a nice surprise. “Did you eat already?”

“Waited for you.”

And if that doesn’t make Dean smile even wider then nothing will. “Well then, pasta it is.”

He throws two portions into bowls and puts them in the microwave. Some cheese on top, and voila,
dinner is finished.

“Want to watch some Dr. Sexy?”

“What?”

“It’s a hospital show. Also, it’s Charlie’s and my happy place.” Dean punches the ‘on’ button on the remote.

Cas carefully sorts the tiny stack of papers in front of him before coming over.

“You want a soda or something?” Dean jumps back up because he’s suddenly noticed that he forgot to get drinks. He doesn’t wait for an answer, gets two cans out of the fridge and sets them on the couch table before settling back down.

“Take a seat and enjoy the emotional drama and pain of the Grace Hospital staff.”

Cas sits down at the far end of the couch from Dean, not that the couch has much of a far end. He takes his bowl from him.

“You don’t really have to know any of the shit that’s happened before. It’s all pining and affairs and relationships and blissfully void of reality.”

“Okay,” Cas says carefully.

Dean hits play and even though he already knows the episode, he gets engrossed after only a few minutes.

Only, when he laughs at the stupid interns and looks over to Cas to see whether he’d thought that funny, too, Cas is neither eating nor watching TV. His bowl is resting on his knees, precariously supported by one hand, and his attention is focused on Dean.

“Umm, Cas? Not for nothing, but the last time someone looked at me like that, I got laid.”

It’s not the brightest thing to say and Cas blushes furiously. He does not look away, though. If anything, the stare gets more intense and Dean’s pretty sure that blood is leaving his brain rapidly to travel to different places and he needs to rip away his eyes now before his higher brain functions disappear completely.

Only he seems to have forgotten how to move his head.

Then there is a sudden sharp pain and he yelps and looks down to find the fork that he’s had his fingers clenched around stabbing his arm. The pain restores his ability to think enough to stop stabbing himself and awkwardly readjust his position on the couch.

“I’m sorry,” Cas apologizes.

Dean takes another moment to get his voice back under control. “Wouldn’t know what for.”

“You stabbed yourself,” Cas points out.

“Yeah,” Dean clears his throat, “yeah, I kind of did.”

“I made you uncomfortable,” Cas follows the logic of his deduction to the end.

“No, you didn’t,” but he can’t look at Cas and he guesses that gives it away as a lie. “I just…” But
how the hell is he supposed to explain this? ‘My upstairs brain really likes you and my downstairs brain would like to fuck you’? Yeah, that’s going to go over well. “Can we just watch Dr. Sexy?” he pleads.

Cas keeps staring for another moment. Dean can feel it even when he’s not looking, it’s so intense.

“Of course,” he finally says and it sounds carefully blank.

They’ve made it through another half episode, sitting in awkward silence, attention frazzled and anywhere but on the show, when Charlie comes in.

“What’s up, bitches?”

Dean is immediately relieved. “Watching Dr. Sexy. Did you win that game?”

“What do you think?” Charlie smirks.

She makes to shoo him from what’s usually her spot towards the middle of the couch and that’s when he realizes that it was a mistake to be relieved so early. Because their couch seats two people. Three of them and he’s going to be brushing legs and hips to either side. He’s got no problem with Charlie, but the idea of sitting this close to Cas sends him into a panicked frenzy. Because that won’t work. That won’t work at all.

He jumps up off the couch as if there’s hellhounds after him. “I, uhh, I gotta… I’m too tired. I’m going to turn in early today. I… Umm, sorry,” he stumbles over the words and all but flees the room.

“Now that was weird,” he hears Charlie say before the door to his room falls shut and he is out of earshot.

He lets himself fall on his bed, now covered by Sam’s blanket. Not that it makes much of a difference. Fuck. How the hell is this supposed to work? When he’s this far gone after a day? If he can’t behave himself watching TV on a couch? When one of his usual flirty quips leads to an epic meltdown of this proportion? Or well, maybe not epic because he hopes that it was not quite as bad for everyone else as it felt in his head.

Dean starts pacing because all that nervous pent-up energy needs to go somewhere. And because he’s pretty sure that his hope is in vain. Cas isn’t stupid. He’s noticed.

Exactly four and a half paces, that’s how wide his room is. With every turn, Dean feels more like a tiger in a cage, nervous energy building instead of dissipating. Because he should have apologized at least. Or explained. Something. Something else but his go-to-answer of denial and ‘everything’s fine’ followed by fleeing the room. Because running away only works if you actually want to get away. Which he doesn’t. So he should at least explain that wanting to get away isn’t the problem. That the problem is that he wants to be too close. And that he’ll find a way to handle that.

Oh, fuck it, brooding is not going to do a thing. He storms back out of the room, intent on making things right.

He tries to calm his steps and his breathing before he enters the kitchen, not wanting to spook Cas. Dr. Sexy is still playing, but there’s only Charlie on the couch.

“Where’s Cas?” he asks without pre-amble.

“Went to bed a few minutes after you. Told you, he’s opening up to you more than to me.”
Dean turns on his heel and marches back towards the guestroom. The door is closed. He knocks.  
“Cas?”

No answer.

A louder knock. “Cas? It’s me, can you please let me in?”

But there’s no sound from the inside and suddenly, Dean has a dreadful feeling in his stomach. He breaks all of his self-imposed boundaries and pushes the door open.

The room is empty. The bed is still made, untouched but for the fact that the sweatpants and t-shirt are in a pile now, instead of folded carefully. As if someone picked them up and then let them drop back down.

The sinking feeling in his stomach picks up another notch. He all but runs over to the dresser, ripping open the drawer and fuck fuck fuck it’s empty.

Fuck.

How much of a head-start does Cas have on him? He checks his watch. 20 minutes, maybe.

He debates it for all of a second. Yeah, Cas is free to leave if he wants to leave. But Dean broke this. Because Cas didn’t want to leave before Dean had freaked. So Dean’s gotta fix this. Or try to at least. And if he waits until the morning, he’s never going to find him.

He runs back out, snatching his leather jacket in the process and jogs through the library to the front.

Garth looks at him with raised eyebrows.

“Did Cas come through here?” Dean asks a little breathlessly, a tiny spark of hope in his heart that maybe he is mistaken.

“Who?”

“Guy in a trench-coat? About my height? Dark hair?”

“Yep. About half an hour ago, maybe?”

“Fuck,” Dean curses even though he’d known the answer before he asked.

He takes the steps two at a time, not bothering to explain himself to Garth.

The air outside hits him like a wall of ice. It is snowing in tiny sharp flakes that immediately make him shiver. There’s a few inches of snow on the ground that hadn’t been there when he made his supply run.

Well, the snow is useful now. In the dim light of the streetlamps, he searches the ground. Dinner rush has been over for hours, anyone who’s left the bunker directly after, their footsteps are already snowed in. That narrows the possibilities down a lot.

Left or right at the curb is his first decision. Left leads to the bus-stop and towards more populated areas. There are a few tracks going this way. Right leads towards the outskirts of town. No one in their right mind would want to go there, away from any chance of food and warmth. But of course there is a track in that direction, too. A single track, roughly the same size as his own footprints.

“Fuck. Cas, you fucking idiot,” Dean curses under his breath, “do you want to freeze to death?”
The horrible thing is that he can’t be sure that Cas doesn’t want to do exactly that. He picks up his steps, checking every so often that the tracks indeed follow the street.

The track turns North at a crossing a few minutes later and Dean sends a short thank you to whatever deity listens that Americans are too lazy to walk, especially in this weather, making it reasonably easy to follow the trail.

Easy is still a relative term, though, because he is starting to regret that he grabbed nothing but his jacket. The tips of his ears and nose start burning from the cold and he tries to stuff his hands deeply into his pockets, but if he wants to keep up the fast pace on the slippery road, he needs them for balance.

The snowfall picks up and it seems to be getting colder by the minute. Even at his brisk pace, Dean starts shivering. His leather jacket isn’t insulated and he’s only wearing his usual plaid underneath. Not enough for a night like this. But turning back is not an option.

There are two more crossroads where he makes another right and then a left, and at least that looks like Cas wants to get someplace and isn’t running away to die.

Finally, when he already thinks he’s going to lose all feeling in his toes and fingers, he sees someone moving ahead of him. Huddled into his coat, walking steadily but not particularly fast.

Dean wants to call out but then just increases his pace from a half-jog to a run. He’s winded already, the cold night-air biting his lungs, but he got this far, he can do the last stretch.

He’s loud, too, his steps falling heavily on the concrete, his breath huffing and puffing, so it’s no wonder that Cas notices. He stops and tenses, not turning around for a long second, maybe trying to decide whether it makes any sense to try to make a run for it.

Abruptly, Dean skids to a halt. “Just me…” he huffs out. “Don’t run… just me…”

As soon as he’s not running anymore, the need to propel himself forward gone, his sides start burning and his lungs are screaming, so he has to lean forward and prop up his arms on his thighs for a moment to catch his breath.

As soon as he can see clearly again and his heart rate has slowed down to where he thinks he can talk, he straightens up a bit.

Cas is still rooted in place, but now he’s shrinking back, burying himself deeper into the layers of hoodie and sweater and trench coat.

“Please don’t,” Dean’s voice is raspy and breathless and almost breaks but Cas shrinking away from him hurts. A fucking lot more than it should after knowing him for such a short time. He tries again, willing his lungs to give him enough air. “Please,” he pleads, “please. You can still trust me. I won’t ever hurt you. I’ll keep my distance if that’s what you want. Or I’ll be close. I’ll do whatever. Please, just don’t go and die in the snow. Just come back with me.”

His voice finally gives out completely, so he stops. His body hurts from running, his heart hurts from everything that’s been happening and it’s too dark to see Cas’ reaction, his eyes hidden too deep in the shadow of the hoodie that he has drawn forward as far as it will go. Suddenly it’s all too much and Dean feels dizzy and his knees give out.

It takes a moment for the world to return from black to red splotches to normal colors.

Another moment to realize that he’s kneeling in the snow, shivering violently.
Yet another, and someone is falling to his knees next to him.

“Dean? Dean!”

There’s a hand on his cheek, lifting his face up, worried eyes peering at him.

The hoodie comes off as Cas grabs for his woolen hat and puts it on Dean’s head instead. Immediately, the warmth over his frozen ears makes them hurt. Warm fingers cover Dean’s, trying to rub life back into them.

“So stupid, Dean. That was so stupid.” Cas works furiously, taking his mittens and pulling them over Dean’s hands.

“Had to find you.”

“No, you didn’t! I live here.” He takes his scarf and wraps it around Dean’s neck. “Come on. You can’t stay here. You’re going to freeze to death.” He pulls at Dean’s arm to bodily drag him up.

“Come back with me,” Dean pleads again while he’s stumbling to his feet.

“No. You’re not even going to make it back. We’re going on,” Cas says resolutely. He grabs Dean around the waist. “Put your arm around me.”

“I can walk,” Dean protests even though, yeah, his knees hurt and his feet are blocks of ice, any feeling gone.

“Then walk.”

They slowly make their way along the road until suddenly Cas turns right into the nothingness of fresh snow. Dean can’t see why because he only sees white. What he does know is that every step is harder than the last, his feet hurting at each contact with the ground. So he uses what capacity for thought he has left to make sure he doesn’t stumble.

It’s getting darker the further away from the road they get but the snow reflects enough to get by. Finally, trees are starting to creep closer but they stay to the side, leaving a clear path for them.

“Not far anymore,” Cas huffs, the words crystallizing in a white cloud in front of him.

It still seems like an eternity until finally the outline of a cabin can be made out in the dark. It’s old and decrepit, obviously uninhabited.

Cas leads him round the back and up the porch. The door isn’t locked.

Inside, it’s only marginally warmer but at least they’re out of the wind.

“Through here.”

It’s dark in the next room but Cas finds his way around with sure steps. He deposits Dean on something soft and squeaky. “Stay here.”

Cas is shuffling around the room. Then there is the sound of a match striking and a soft warm glow lightens up the room. Another candle joins the first and then Cas is kneeling in front of a fireplace, stacking uneven wood logs. It takes a few minutes, and then another few before the fire catches. Cas nods, satisfied with his efforts, comes back to Dean and grabs the bundle of ratty old blankets that was lying next to Dean on what he can now see is an ancient couch, its springs already poking
through the dirty surface.

Cas brings the blankets over to the fire, as close as it is safe to be.

“It’s warmer over here,” he explains and beckons Dean over.

It takes a moment, getting up from the couch. He still feels frozen completely through. But it gets warmer closer to the fire, so he crashes down on the blankets thankfully.

“Mittens off,” Cas orders, “and shoes.”

Dean fumbles with the mittens while Cas goes over to a shelf and comes back with two pairs of thick socks. When he sees how little progress Dean’s made, he shakes his head and lets himself sink down next to him. His own boots are off in a minute, socks on in another. By then Dean has at least gotten the mittens off and is trying to work enough feeling back into his fingers to get to his shoes.

But Cas already leans forward to untie Dean’s shoelaces. “Sneakers in the snow. What were you thinking?” he grumbles and bats Dean’s hands away when Dean tries to help. The shoes come off one by one but instead of immediately pulling the thick socks over his feet, Cas does the same he did with Dean’s hands, vigorously trying to rub warmth and life back into them.

It starts hurting after a minute, a thousand little bites and pinches and needles. He keeps the whine back, though, because he was stupid and he doesn’t have a right to bitch. So he keeps his lips pressed shut and tries to wiggle his toes. Finally, it works.

Cas nods and pulls the second pair of socks over Dean’s feet. “Shoes were watertight. Lucky. Less chance of frostbite.”

“Thank you,” Dean says very quietly.

Cas nods before getting up and padding over to the door that goes to where Dean would expect the kitchen.

For the first time, he really looks around. Cas has pulled blankets over the windows, blocking out what little light might come in from the outside at night. The blankets sway softly where the glass of the windows is broken and it’s insufficient against the cold but it’s better than nothing. A few shelves and the couch are the only furniture worth noticing. There’s what looks like a three-legged chair and a little table on the other side of the room, but they don’t look to be part of Cas’ set-up. The space around the fireplace itself is clean, apart from where they’ve dragged in snow just now.

Cas comes back with a beat-up kettle and two mugs in his hands. He kneels and sets the kettle on the fire.

“It’ll just be hot water I fear.” He looks down at his hands, the shyness and embarrassment that had been absent returning.

“Thank you,” Dean repeats.

Cas nods but doesn’t look up at him.

“So this is where you live?” Dean asks now that his brain is thawing again, he is kicking himself for never having asked Cas about that. He hadn’t even thought about this any more than assuming he doesn’t have a place at all.

“Yes,” Cas admits.
“Could be worse,” Dean looks around again. “Roof seems solid enough. And it’s got the fireplace. How long have you been here?”

“A few months. Found it in summer. Easier to find food then.”

“So that’s why you came to us?” Dean asks. “Not enough food in winter?”

Cas nods.

“But you never intended to stay. Because you have this place to come back to. While I just assumed…” Dean stares into the fire for a long moment before looking back at Cas. “I’m sorry. I should have asked.”

Cas shrugs and gets his feet a little closer to the fire.

“Why’d you stay at all?” Dean asks. “You coulda have told me no, you know.”

Cas frowns. “I stayed because of you,” he says as if that is obvious.

Dean’s mouth is suddenly dry and he isn’t sure whether he feels too cold or too warm anymore. “Cas, I… I wanted to say that I’m sorry. For… for what I… for running away. I didn’t mean to… I didn’t mean…” He breaks off because the words won’t come.

There’s a moment of silence before Cas asks, “Why did you follow me?”

Dean bites his lips because that’s not any easier to find the right words for. But he’s got to fix what he broke. “Had to. Knew I wouldn’t find you in the morning. Or did you plan on coming back?”

Cas presses his lips together in a tight line and then quickly shakes his head.

“See?” Dean says with a short self-deprecating laugh. “Was stupid, but it was my only chance.”

“We won’t make it back tonight. You know that, right?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “I thought so.” His fingers have warmed up enough for him to fish in his pockets for his cell phone. The reception is weak but it should be enough for a text to Charlie.


It takes a few seconds to send but it works. “There. As long as I’m back sometime tomorrow, no search party will come crashing your place.”

“Appreciated,” Cas nods and looks back into the fire.

Dean only sees his profile, but still, there is a sadness there that he tries to hide but that shines through loud and clear.

“Cas? What’s up?” Dean asks softly.

Cas stares into the flames as if all the answers are hidden in there.

“Talk to me, buddy.”

Cas’ shoulders tense at the word ‘buddy’ and he softly shakes his head. “I was good with this. With leaving you behind. But that was before. Before you were here. I didn’t want memories of you here.”
Cas doesn’t turn, doesn’t move at all, and Dean is left stunned and alone and unable to process. “Why?” he asks stupidly

“Because now I don’t know how to leave you behind.”

And that doesn’t make any sense. “Why do you need to?” Dean asks and doesn’t even recognize his own voice it sounds so rough.

There is a long pause. Long enough that Dean thinks he won’t get an answer. But then with a voice soft as a sigh, Cas says, “Because I don’t think I can be with you and not be with you.”

He looks at Dean then, eyes huge and almost black in the darkness, the shadows of the flames painting patterns on his skin. There is such sadness in his expression, such loss, that Dean wants to scream in pain.

With a deep breath, Cas nods and turns back to the fire, having found an answer apparently where Dean hadn’t even known that there was a question.

“Cas,” It’s hesitant, his voice still rough. So he tries again, a little louder, a little steadier, “Cas, please…”

But it isn’t enough because Cas is still not acknowledging Dean.

“Please,” Dean repeats and leans forward into Cas’ space to get his attention. “Cas…” This time it’s a whisper, soft and unsure but full of the things he doesn’t have the words for.

And something in his tone seems to get through because Cas’ head snaps up and suddenly he’s searching Dean’s face like a hope he’d already lost has suddenly returned to him.

“(Cas), the name is gentle as a caress now, a hope of its own in it, because Dean hasn’t dared to hope, but obviously maybe that was wrong and there is something to hope for because there is this expression in Cas’ eyes, this longing and this want – and suddenly they’re kissing and Dean has no idea how it happened or who leaned in but there are warm lips pressed to his and they are chapped and rough and wonderful.

His brain short-circuits, narrowing down to the taste and smell of Cas’ skin, to the stubble under his fingers when he brings up his hand to cup Cas’ face, to the way Cas’ breathing is fast and shallow – until a moment later it is too fast and shallow and Dean notices that his fingers are wet where they are touching Cas’ cheek and that Cas trembles.

Dean lets go, tries to straighten away, but Cas holds on to the lapels of his jacket, clings close even while the tears are falling, so instead, Dean leans in, wrapping his arms around Cas’ back and crushing him into a tight hug.

Cas buries his head in his shoulder, sobbing for real now but Dean just holds him tighter. He buries his own nose in Cas’ shoulder, too. The trench coat is still wet and the sweater scratchy, so he noses closer until he finds hoodie and skin to rest against. Where the trench coat smells damp and the sweater dusty, both skin and hoodie smell like Cas and he lets it envelope his whole being.

It’s only when the hoodie turns damp that Dean notices that he’s been crying, too, silently and without apparent reason. It’s okay, though, for once and only right here and right now because right here and now, he feels safe.

Huh. Weird.
Because he’s always on guard, always ready to come to the rescue. Even with Cas, that’s been his default mode. But not now.

Cas’ arms snake their way under his jacket and around his back, apparently finally secure enough in the knowledge that Dean won’t draw back, that Cas can let go and won’t be pushed away. Dean shivers for a moment when the cold air finds its way under the jacket with Cas’ movement before Cas’ body heat makes up for it. Dean gets pressed closer against Cas and it feels like that’s all he wants in the world.

It’s the insistent rumble of water boiling in the kettle that finally draws them apart.

Cas sighs and lets go first. Dean follows hesitantly. They look at each other for a moment, eyes red and puffy, noses snotty, and share a small smile while wiping their tears away. Doesn’t suck so much, crying, when you can do it together.

Cas pours them a cup each. “Careful,” he warns Dean, because Cas is still wearing the fingerless gloves, palms protected, but Dean’s hands are exposed.

He nods and holds the cup gingerly by its top, the handle long gone. He waits until the heat is a little less scalding, then sips the hot water cautiously. It feels good, the heat spreading in his stomach, even if he is mostly warmed up already.

Cas’ layers offer more protection than Dean’s jacket, but from the way he has his palms wrapped around the mug, he savors the warmth, too. Or maybe he just wants to hold onto something that isn’t Dean.

“You ok?” Dean asks him, very definitely leaving out the ‘buddy’ this time.

“No,” Cas answers without taking his eyes from his cup.

“My fault?” Dean asks because he needs to know the answer even if he doesn’t want to know it.

“No.” Cas turns back to him, eyes still red, but he is composed now, calmer maybe than Dean has ever seen him. “Dean, I haven’t been ok for a very long time.”

“Yeah,” Dean says because he’s noticed.

“Very not ok. For a very long time.”

“You trying to scare me off? Cause it won’t work,” Dean replies.

“I scared you off before.”

“Not because…” Dean takes a deep breath because it’s words again and he sucks at words. “Gimme your hand,” he asks.

“What?”

“Just do it.”

Cas lets go of his mug and reaches out a hand. Dean takes it and lays it over the place where his heart is beating slowly and steadily. Then he looks at Cas. At the way his eyes are wide in the firelight. At the way his cheekbones curve and throw shadows. At his lips, painted in yellows and red by the flames. He can still taste them. He lets his gaze linger and imagines the warmth of Cas’
skin and how it would softly give way under Dean’s hands until Cas shivers and the softness is replaced by the muscles underneath. Until Cas’ spine arches upwards, desperately needing to be closer, wanting more. Until there is nothing else in the world but giving all of himself to Cas and getting all of Cas in return.

Where his heart beat was even before, it is now rapid and fast. And that’s all the explanation he’s got.

“That’s why I left,” Dean whispers. “Not because you scared me off. Because I wanted it so fucking much. Because I wanted you so fucking much.”

“Why didn’t you…?” Cas asks, his eyes straying to Dean’s lips.

He keeps Cas’ fingers wrapped in his, presses them to his chest. “Because you’re not okay, Cas. What kind of crap move would that be, offering you food and shelter and then making a pass at you?”

“I did.”

It takes a moment for Dean to catch up. To see the tiny smirk in Cas’ eyes. To notice that, yes, this was indeed a joke. He starts chuckling and because it’s there and because he can, he brings Cas’ hand up to his lips and kisses the palm. “You sure did. Though technically, you offered me shelter and water, not food.”

“I have MRE crackers. Wanted to keep them for breakfast, though. Wasn’t expecting visitors.” Cas’ hand is rough where he lets it glide over Dean’s face.

“Ever had any? Visitors?”

“No,” Cas shakes his head even while his gaze is following the trail of his hand over Dean’s skin. “Don’t like humans. Do like you.”

Dean wants to answer but he’s also incredibly distracted by the path Cas’ fingers trail down his neck. He leans into the touch, searches out the warmth, but he also wants to give Cas access to as much skin as he can, so he leans his head back. He is aware of the way that he’s pretty much baring his throat, giving up any semblance of control in the process because he doesn’t even see what Cas is doing, is only feeling it.

He can feel Cas’ movement stutter, the gesture obviously not lost on him, before he picks up his expedition along Dean’s skin again. He follows the lines of Dean’s neck down to his collarbone and then back up until his thumb softly brushes against Dean’s lips. He opens his mouth slightly, giving Cas any option that he might want.

But he doesn’t push, just stays where he is for a moment. Then the hand is gone from his lips and in Dean’s hair instead, pulling him forward until their lips crash against each other. Cas is pushing now, the kiss harder than it was, tongue sliding between Dean’s lips. Not that he puts up any resistance.

Cas tastes sweet and hot and better than anyone Dean has ever kissed. He lets Cas roam and explore and figure out where he has to lick to elicit a moan from Dean, where a whimper, and where Dean just tightens his hold on Cas’ thighs, which is where his hands have ended up in their search for support.

They are both breathless and panting when they break apart for air. The room doesn’t seem quite so cold anymore somehow.
“You should get rid of that,” Cas says, voice darker even then usual, and he pushes at Dean’s jacket.

“But cold,” Dean protests.

“Blankets,” Cas points out.

Dean is okay with that, so he lets Cas free him of his jacket. Cas places it carefully at one end of a blanket. His own trench coat and sweater and hoodie follow, leaving him shivering in a t-shirt and fingerless gloves.

“The plaid is your choice. I’d take it off, though. You’re going to want layers to put back on in the morning.”

Cas stacks a few thicker logs on the fire and puts the kettle to the side where the fire has already burned down. He places the mugs in front of it.

It’s about then that Dean catches on that Cas is actually talking about laying down and possibly sleeping. He shrugs out of his plaid and hands it to Cas, who puts it with the other clothes and swiftly rolls the whole bundle into the blanket, resulting in something that looks similar enough to a long pillow.

He arranges that and the rest of the blankets, so that most of the blankets are on the floor. What looks like an old sleeping bag, thick and nicely insulated, is left out to be on top.

Cas hands him a smaller blanket and wraps a second one around his shoulders. Dean mirrors him. The blanket is somewhat scratchy and not as warm as it could be, but it doesn’t smell horrible and it’s probably better than the plaid.

“You take the place closer to the fire,” Cas instructs.

“It’s your home,” Dean argues.

“And you are my guest. Also, I am used to this, you aren’t.”

Dean nods, giving in because he knows he’d do the same and Cas isn’t any less stubborn than he is. Already freezing, he scoots down, head on the makeshift pillow. Cas is drawing the blanket over him before slipping under it, too. It’s still cold where the blanket had not been warmed by the fire and his nose is icy. But it isn’t altogether horrible.

“Do you always sleep on the floor?” Dean asks. “Or on the couch?”

“The floor. In winter anyway. It gets cold away from the fire.”

“Doesn’t it go out?”

“Not when I feed it.”

Right. Cas can’t sleep. Not through the whole night anyway.

“If you need to, umm, go to the bathroom, it’s over back there,” Cas points. “No running water, but there’s a bucket next to, umm. Pipes still work, so it’s almost like normal. Cold, though. Take the blanket.”

Dean nods and decides that he’s going to leave that adventure for when it is absolutely necessary and not a minute earlier.
“Cas?” he asks.

“Hmm?”

“Can you come closer?”

The sleeping bag is shifting and rustling when Cas scoots over until he can wrap his arm around Dean’s waist. Dean lays his arm around Cas, too, drawing them close until they’re almost flush against each other. Immediately, Cas’ body heat warms him up.

“Thank you,” Dean mumbles, nose buried in Cas’ hair, tiredness overcoming him after all, even with everything that has happened. He places a kiss on top of Cas’ head and lets his eyes drift close.

Cas sighs in his arms, snuggles as close as he can get, and then Dean sinks into slumber.

He wakes up disoriented. His back hurts and his limbs feel stiff and heavy.

Oh. He’s on the floor. And there’s a warm body wrapped around him, weighing his legs down where their limbs are tangled. Cas. He went to find Cas and ended up in an abandoned cabin with him. With him.

And Cas is still fast asleep.

Dean doesn’t dare move because he thinks that this is probably half a miracle for Cas, a night of uninterrupted sleep. And judging by the way his breath turns into mist, it’s been uninterrupted, because the fire is most definitely out and has been for a while.

So Dean tightens his hold on Cas and lets himself drift back into half-slumber.

It only works for a while, though, because finally his bladder urges him to move. He really doesn’t want to. He wants to even less when he pokes his toes out of their comfortable blanket fort. But there’s no helping it so he untangles himself as quickly and quietly as he can. Which is neither very quick nor very quiet, so by the time he’s upright, Cas is stirring. Dean wraps their shared blanket tightly around Cas and his own small blanket around his shoulders.

He’s already shivering by the time he makes it to the bathroom. The fact that the bucket with the water has a thin layer of ice on top is not encouraging, either. Temperatures must have dropped again.

He goes about his business quickly to get back under the covers as fast as possible. Still, Cas is already up and moving, rebuilding the fire, hoodie back on, when Dean comes back.

Dean slips under the thick blanket and digs for his plaid. Because they had it rolled up as a pillow, it isn’t quite as cold as the rest of the room.

As soon as the fire is crackling, Cas disappears towards the kitchen, kettle in hand. He comes back minutes later, puts the kettle on the fire and lays a small package on their blankets, before padding off towards the bathroom.

Dean can’t resist and inspects the small tinfoil-wrapped package. MRE crackers. It contains exactly two of them.

When Cas comes back, Dean holds up the package. “When you said you had crackers, I didn’t think
they met the requirements for plural quite that exactly.”

Cas sits down Indian-style next to him. “Told you. No food. Had no choice but to go out.”

“Without even a coat,” Dean remarks because Cas got more layers than him right now, but he didn’t when he came to the bunker.

“No choice,” Cas repeats. “And it wasn’t snowing. It still is, by the way.”

“Are you coming back with me?” Dean doesn’t beat around the bush.

“Dean…”

“You still got no food,” Dean points out. “But you have me.”

Cas stills.

“If you want me, that is,” he adds.

“Dean, I’m…” Cas sighs deeply and unhappily but he looks Dean in the eyes when he says, “I’m married.”

“What?” Dean shakes his head, not believing what he’s hearing.

“Or at least I assume I’m still married. I haven’t seen them since…”

“Them?”

“My wife Amelia. And my daughter Claire.”

“What?”

“She was 10 when I left. She’s turning 13 in spring.”

“Fuck.” Dean has no idea what to answer or what to even think.

“Told you. Not honest or brave,” Cas says bitterly.

“And you haven’t gone to see them? Even once?” Dean still has trouble wrapping his head around this.

“Look at me, Dean! Would you want to see me?”

“Yes! I’d want you back. Don’t you think they want you back, too?”

Cas turns to the kettle, setting it another few inches closer to the hottest burn in the middle of the fire.

It would be his clue to back off. He has no right to tell his clients what to do. But Cas is not a client. Not anymore. This is personal.

“Cas, you… do you? Want them back? Do you love them?”

He gets no answer.

And that should be answer enough for him, shouldn’t it? Cas is ashamed of where he ended up, ashamed of how screwed up his mind is. That’s why he couldn’t go home. But he’s starved for attention and human contact. Dean was nice to him. Respected him. Liked him. Cas clung to that
because he had no choice. Like with the food. He came to Dean because he had to. Not because of Dean.

A tight ball of pain forms in Dean’s stomach. Because fuck, he knows better but he has still thrown all caution in the wind. Has let himself hope, has let his heart get engulfed. Fool. He’s such a fool.

He grits his teeth against the pain. He had known that this was not a good idea. He had known that he shouldn’t fall for Cas. It was hardly Cas’ fault that his rational brain had deserted Dean last night. He never wanted to take advantage of Cas’ situation and that hasn’t changed. Even when… But he doesn’t allow his mind to go and replay to him in detail how Cas’ skin had felt under his hands, how his lips had tasted and how he’d thought that they had both been there in that moment.

Hell, he still hopes that they’ve both been there in that moment. Because fuck’s sake, everything else is scary.

“I can still help,” he finally says. Because there is no reason for him that isn’t petty and mean not to help Cas. Just cause Dean is losing, doesn’t mean Cas needs to lose, too. “Come help with the electronics like we planned. I’ll find some funds to pay you. Enough that you can get a new outfit and a real haircut and a ticket to wherever you need to get to, and won’t go hungry or sleep on the streets until you’re there.”

Cas pokes the fire with a long stick. It’s impossible to get a read from him.

“C’mon, Cas, help me out. I don’t know what else to say.” Apart from ‘I fucking hate the way this morning is going after it started out so nice’. But that’s hardly a viable option.

“Why aren’t you angry? It would be easier to say no to you if you were angry.”

“You got a little girl, Cas,” Dean says because that’s easier than thinking about the wife. “How can I be angry at you for wanting to be with her?”

Cas presses his lips into a tight line.

“Look, Cas, I get it,” Dean says. “You don’t want to scare your family. You want to be not crazy when you go back. You’re not the only one with this problem. And to tell you the truth, I’d have been happy if my Dad had thought about this the same way. If he’d actually been considerate enough not to pull us out of foster families while he was still on the soup and drunk-driving us through the whole country, hell-bent on revenge.”

“Revenge?”

Only when Cas asks does Dean notice how much of himself he’s actually shared with this rant. The bitter taste of bile is rising in his throat, as usual when he thinks about this topic. “My Mom didn’t exactly die of natural causes. Serial killer. She was his type.”

Thankfully, Cas is quiet. There isn’t really anything to reply to that, anyway. Dean doesn’t like the people who try.

“My Dad made it his mission to find the guy. He didn’t, of course. Managed to fuck himself and us up something good, though.”

Cas makes as if to reach out and lay a hand on Dean’s knee. An innocent gesture of comfort, but he stops midway and lets his hand sink back down.

And yeah, that’s probably for the better. Dean isn’t quite sure he’d be able to let go of Cas again
Once he started clinging to him.

“If I come with you now,” Cas says. “This part of my life will be over. I will not come back.”

“Then better make sure you know what you want.” It isn’t meant as harshly as it sounds.

Instead of answering, Cas pours the boiling water from the kettle into the mugs. He gives Dean the mug and one of the crackers. It almost physically hurts when their fingers brush.

“That’s your last two crackers,” Dean says.

“Yes,” Cas agrees and Dean knows that he’s made his decision already.

“I’m glad,” he replies, though he can’t keep the pain out of his voice. It doesn’t make the words less true, though. Because at least he’s going to be allowed to make sure that Cas is okay. That the winter doesn’t kill him and that he’s going to see his family again. He can be glad for that.

After the crackers, which Dean doesn’t want to call breakfast because that’s way too generous a description for them, they pack what Cas wants to take. It isn’t much. They roll whatever small stuff Cas owns into one of the blankets, Dean gets to keep another one to help against the snow. Everything else, Cas folds and stacks neatly. For whoever else might stumble upon this place, Dean guesses. As a last task, Cas douses the fire, and they’re good to go.

The wind has picked up overnight, biting sharper and colder than it did and Dean wraps the blanket tightly around his head. He probably looks ridiculous but he’s not keen on repeating yesterday’s mistakes.

Unless they’re talking about the mistake of ending up alone with Cas and kissing him. That one he’d do again. It’s a good thing that a gust of wind drives tears into his eyes just then, because that way, at least it’s clear that it’s the cold why his eyes water.

It goes better than yesterday, but only marginally. He’s still shivering violently by the time they’re back at the bunker.

It’s early enough that Charlie and Garth are still in the front, cleaning away the remnants of breakfast.

“Fuck, Dean, where the hell have you been?” Charlie starts but when she sees the state they’re in, she points towards the back. “Hot shower, the both of you.”

Even if Dean wanted to protest, his teeth are chattering too much.

“M-m-min-nd?” he asks Cas when they’re in front of the bathroom.

Cas shakes his head and motions for him to go ahead.

The shower helps instantly, much faster than yesterday’s fire. And yet, if Dean could choose, he’d rather go back and freeze longer if that means he gets all the other stuff, too.

But he can’t, so he turns off the water and steps out of the shower, dries himself off and wraps his towel around his waist.

And he shouldn’t, he really shouldn’t do this. But Cas is freezing, too, so telling him the shower is free is necessary.
Maybe he expects Cas’ door to be closed so that he can knock on it and shout. Or maybe he hasn’t thought this through. Or maybe his mind thinks it’s a good ploy, showing off the fact that, yes, he’s actually got muscles.

Only, once he’s there and finds Cas’ door open, he doesn’t feel like he’s showing off anything anymore. He only feels like he’s half-naked and this is bordering on sexual harassment and he should really have gotten fresh clothes first.

Cas has already seen him of course, from where he was adding his possessions to the drawer he’s occupied. So there’s no way around the embarrassment.

“Umm, shower’s free. Just wanted to tell you that,” he trips over his words and then basically trips over his own feet when he turns too quickly in his attempt to flee.

He doesn’t give Cas the time to react, just curses, catches himself and runs off to his room.

A fresh set of clothes later, he feels somewhat more composed. He’s behaving like a frikkin’ 15-year-old with a crush and he shouldn’t. He hangs his old set of clothes to dry. They got soaked in the snow.

Cas has his trench coat of course but his clothes are probably no better. Dean sighs. Cas doesn’t want him to buy him a new outfit. So does that mean he doesn’t want him to help out with clothes at all? Cause Dean remembers the times when he had barely had more than two sets of clothes and those times sucked. And Cas has only one and that’s soaked.

Well, he can offer, and Cas can refuse if he needs to.

So Dean goes through his closet to find a few things for Cas. A pair of dark jeans that have always been slightly too short for him, so they should fit Cas fine. A few t-shirts in greens and blues that will bring out his eyes. And yeah, he really just thought that, didn’t he? Dean sighs and adds a light blue button-down shirt that Dean never wears anyway. But Cas said there was a suit with the trench coat once upon a time, so maybe he’ll like it. Dean digs around in the drawers until he unearths an unopened 3-pack of boxers. Cause giving Cas some of his clothes because he knows they will fit is one thing, giving him some of his underwear, no matter how well washed, is going back to sexual harassment territory.

He takes the whole stack over to Cas’ room and lays it neatly on the bed before making his way to the kitchen.

Charlie has been an angel and has brewed a fresh can of coffee in the meantime. He gulps the first cup before even thinking about breakfast. Or lunch. Whatever it is, it needs eggs.

He scrambles the eggs, adds some onions and cheese and stirs the whole mash in the pan.

The image of the sad little tinfoil wrap on the blankets comes unbidden. One small package of MRE crackers.

He’s forgotten. How good they have it. How much it actually means to be able to go make breakfast when you want breakfast. How weird it must feel to Cas.

Dean’s already at his second portion of scrambled eggs when Cas comes in. His hair is still damp.

“Away, no trench coat,” Dean grins, his tone much lighter than he feels.

Cas looks down at himself. He’s wearing Dean’s jeans and the button down over a green t-shirt.
He’s rounded the ensemble off with his normal hoodie.

“Take whatever is left in the pan, I’m pretty much full,” Dean tries to get them over the awkward moment.

Cas shuffles forward but then stands in front of the pan without moving. Dean’s already left a plate out for him, so that can’t be the problem.

“Don’t even try to tell me you’re not hungry, Cas,” Dean says. “Cause you are. And since you’re staying, you better get used to getting some food when you’re hungry.”

Cas frowns, Dean can see it even where he’s sitting.

“You want to get ready to go home? Well, taking part in the normal life of a home is a stepping stone. That includes getting your own food and drinks.”

That seems to sway Cas, since he starts moving and ladles some of the eggs on his plate.

“Coffee?” Dean prompts. “Or OJ?”

Cas decides on OJ and even manages to take it out of the fridge and find the glasses and everything.

When he finally sits down with his portion, Dean is tempted to tell him ‘well done’ but decides to pretend that this is somehow normal for them. And well, in a way it is normal. More normal than it was anyway. Cas takes the same chair he did the other day, his knee almost touching Dean’s, and that’s normal, right? Always taking the same chair? Only in Dean’s head, Cas is still Cas-who-kissed-him not Cas-who-wants-to-go-home-to-his-wife.

“Tell me about them, about your family,” he says abruptly. Either he’s a masochist or his fucked up brain thinks if he hears enough about them then maybe it’ll sink in and he’ll be okay with this. He doubts it, though. But it seems that he still had to ask.

“You were young when you became a father,” he adds to start Cas off.

Cas fidgets, using his fork to push the pieces of egg around the plate instead of eating. “I was 18.”

Dean whistles through his teeth, because yes, that is really early. “Did you get her pregnant and had to marry her?” That’s probably hope talking.

“No. We were high-school sweethearts.”

The girl he had wanted to take to prom had had wavy brown hair. She had been sweet. Nicer than the girls that usually wanted to hang with him, the perpetual troublemaker and outsider. But of course he hadn’t actually gotten the chance to go to prom.

He shrugs the sadness that clings to that memory off and focuses on Cas again. “So how is she? Your wife?”
The angry glare is gone but Cas still observes him silently before he nods to himself and turns his eyes back to his plate. He chews a few bites thoughtfully, as if it’s hard for him to even remember. “She’s a good person. Very devout. Takes ‘love thy neighbor’ seriously. She gives money to the homeless.” He grimaces. “But she wouldn’t want to live with one.”

Dean knows the type. The pity is always clear in their eyes, so he usually dislikes them even before they start trying to push their religious views on him. At which point he pushes right back and the donations inevitably go to a different shelter. Charlie is better at handling them, even though her views align no more with them than Dean’s. But her temper is a lot more even.

“You won’t be. Homeless. When you meet her again. I promise,” Dean says because he knows he can keep that promise. At the very least, Cas has a home here. And as soon as he has a steady address, they can work on all the other crap that you need for a modern life, like bank accounts and phone numbers. Which reminds him. “Cas, I saw a wallet when we packed your stuff. Do you have papers? Driver’s license? Some other form of ID? Anything?”

When Cas hunches his shoulders, Dean adds, “If you don’t have anything, we’ll work with that. But if we want to get you back in the system, it’ll be easier if we can prove who you are.”

“I didn’t want to be found,” Cas mumbles.

“That’s a no, isn’t it?” Dean sighs. “It’s just the dog tags, huh?”

“Burned the papers,” Cas admits.

Well, that’s that then. Jody owes him a favor anyway. They have the dog tags and they have Cas’ fingerprints to match the name on them. It’ll take some time but they should be able to get somewhere with that. And that’s enough for right now, so Dean says, “alright,” and asks, “and your kid? How’s she?”

It’s the first time in the whole conversation that Cas smiles. “Smart. And kind. And talented. And wonderful.”

The love is evident in Cas’ voice, strong and unwavering.

“Wish I could get to know her,” Dean smiles and finds to his own surprise that it is true. He wants nothing to do with Cas’ wife, but he’d like to see Cas’ kid. He’d like to see how he is as a father.

“Maybe you could…” Cas ventures very quietly. “You could come.”

Dean presses his lips together tightly. He shakes his head. “No, Cas. I’m sorry but I don’t think I can. You’ll need to make that trip on your own.”

Cas nods, no further reaction.

They sit in silence for a few minutes, Cas eating and Dean drinking the last of his coffee. It’s pretty clear that the conversation is over, and Dean doesn’t have the will to ask questions anymore. So he sighs and gets up to put his dishes away.

“I’ll go check on Charlie. See what she needs me to do today.” He doesn’t wait for an answer, just leaves the room.

Charlie is still putting around in front, though it doesn’t seem like she’s doing much more than
“Hey,” he greets her. “You waiting for the mail or just playing candy crush?”

She levels him with a look. “You look like shit, Dean.”

“Thanks,” he huffs. But he hops up on the counter next to her.

She takes a closer look at him, sighs, and packs the phone away. “So what happened with Prince Charming? You brought him back, so I took that as a good sign. But it isn’t, is it?”

And that’s how Charlie is, she always knows.

“He’s got a wife and kid.”

“Ouch,” Charlie flinches. Then she asks softly, “You really liked him, huh?”

“Yeah, the past tense ain’t quite appropriate,” Dean sighs. “Would be easier if it was.”

Charlie lets his words settle in for a moment. “What now?”

Dean shrugs. “Now we try to get him to an acceptable social standard where he can actually go back.”

“Any plans on how to do that?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “It’ll take some time, though.”

“Care to share?”

“Go to Jody, get him papers. Find out his social security number. Hire him so that he has a steady job and address. Get him a bank account. Get him a cell phone.” Dean rattles off the immediate list.

“Dean…” Charlie looks pained. “You know that a bank account isn’t going to solve whatever got screwed up in his brain, right?”

“Yeah, I know,” Dean sighs. “I’m kind of hoping that being here will help with that a bit. He seems to be getting somewhat better. He’s talking more. He slept through the night.”

Charlie looks like she wants to comment on that but bites the words back. Instead she says, “Get me his social security number and I’ll get him employed. Deal?”

Dean nods. “Thanks, Charlie.”

“There’s one condition,” she says.

He raises his eyebrows at her.

“You make sure that you get out of this unscarred.”

“You know me, Charles. I’m always good.”

She shakes her head and they both know that it’s bullshit. She only doesn’t call him out for it because they’ve been through this discussion before and it never changes anything. “It’s your turn with the list. So make yourself useful.”

Dean sighs heavily but he nods and trots back towards the office.
He spends the next few hours going through their list of potential donors, anyone who ever signed up with their number at one of their fundraising events, anyone who ever donated money before, any business that’s known to be charitable. It’s weird how he never stooped down to begging when he didn’t have a home but now that he does he’s reduced to it. But he isn’t begging for himself, he’s begging to make other people’s lives better and that makes a difference.

He’s in the middle of a call with the secretary of one of the city council members when he becomes aware of Cas lurking in the doorway. He waves him in.

“Yes, Ma’am, I’m aware. But we serve plenty of women in this shelter and… No, of course it’s not a project for solely women but… Yes. Yes I understand. Her priorities have shifted. You need to focus your donations…. Yes, well, thank you for your time anyway.” He hangs up with a frustrated sigh and marks the name with a red x and the words ‘new campaign profile’. Election years suck. Then he turns to Cas. “What’s up?” His smile is edgier than he wants it to be but the fundraising shit gave him a headache.

“I finished the list.”

Dean sees the paper that’s clutched in Cas’ hand only now. He holds out his hand for the sheet. It’s structured in several blocks and most of it reads like gibberish to him but he can read the prices that Cas attached in the end. He frowns. It’s a pretty big chunk of money. “You’ll have to explain this shit to me. I can’t read gobbledegook.”

Cas comes another step closer so that he can point at the blocks on the paper and clears his throat. “Upgrade to your video system. New cameras. And you’re not recording. You should be. In case something happens. Recordings will be stored for 48 hours and then written over.”

“Okay,” Dean says.

Cas moves on to the next point. “Panic buttons. For the areas the cameras don’t cover. So that if someone gets attacked in the bathrooms, they can alert you.”

“Alright, that makes sense.”

“A code system and an emergency unlock for the door to the back.”

“Is that necessary? We’re doing okay with the keys,” Dean argues because the retro-fitting of the door seems to be on the expensive side.

“Your sprinkler system in the back doesn’t work. That’s the next point, actually,” Cas says with a frown.

“So you’re saying we live in a death trap?” Dean asks.

“Pretty much, yes.”

“Hmm,” it is true that they only have that one emergency exit. “Probably should be fixed, then.”

“Yes,” Cas nods, “it should be.”

“Anything else?”

“Many things. But this is a good start.”

“Alright. I’ll talk it over with Charlie and if she gives her okay, we can go shopping for this stuff
“Just give them the list, they’ll know what to do.”

Dean looks at Cas’ slumped shoulders and back at the list. “Cas, I don’t get a word of this. I can give them the list, sure, but what if they don’t have the exact part you wanted? I won’t know what could be used as a replacement. They could sell me anything. Or I could come home empty-handed.”

“You want me to come.”

“Damn right, Sherlock.”

“I’m not… They’ll throw me out.”

Dean has to make a conscious effort to keep his face smooth, he gets so angry at the defeated tone in Cas’ voice. Who knows how often a store has kicked him out in the past. “They won’t. I’ll make sure of it,” he growls.

Cas takes a half-step back at the tone in his voice.

Dean closes his eyes and counts backwards from ten. “Sorry,” he says then. “I get protective. I know that you can fend for yourself.”

A look of surprise passes Cas’ face.

“What? You didn’t think I was angry with you, did you? Or did you not think that I…” Dean breaks off because how the fuck did a conversation about electronic equipment end in talking about his feelings?

Dean runs his fingers through his hair and studies Cas who studies him right back. He can try to pretend, of course he can. But it’s exhausting and he hates pretending. He can tell the truth and still make sure that Cas knows that he won’t cross any lines. “I can’t change who I am, Cas. I’d always protect you. Or try to, anyway.”

“I try to protect you, too, Dean.” The answer is so low he has to strain to understand it.

Dean smiles and nods his thank you, but he doesn’t actually get the words out. Because the one thing that he wants Cas to protect him from, is the inevitable moment when Cas leaves. And thus the one thing, Dean can’t ask him to protect him from.

“Anyway,” Dean clears his throat. “Shopping. You think about it. But I’d appreciate it if you came with me.”

“Okay,” Cas nods and turns as if to leave the room.

“Wait,” Dean calls after him and jumps up, “I’ve got something for you.”

He opens the cabinet and takes out the locked box in which they keep their valuables. He finds what he’s looking for quickly.

“He,” he holds his hand out and drops the keys into Cas’ palm. “The bigger one is for the front door, the other one for the door to the back.”

Cas looks at the keys without comprehension. “What for?” he asks.

“You live here, man,” is all Dean has to say to that. Should be pretty self-explanatory really. They
can’t leave the door unlocked and he won’t lock Cas in. So he gets a key.

The change in Cas’ expression is slow but Dean can make out the moment that the words ‘you live here’ sink in because it’s the moment that Cas stumbles backwards. Dean automatically holds out his hand to steady him but Cas looks at his hand like it’s going to bite him, so Dean lets go.

Cas closes his fist around the keys and it looks like he wants to say something but instead he turns and runs.

Dean rubs his hands over his face, suddenly tired.

Charlie’s right of course. Fixing Cas’ problems has nothing to do with bank accounts. At the same time, he doesn’t think they’re actually going to get close to the source of this until Cas isn’t stable enough to function in daily life.

It’s going to be a long road.

With a sigh, he picks up the phone and dials the next number.

After getting Cas’ list of electronics approved (with the stipulation that Dean’s going to pay from his own account until Charlie can secure the funds), he tells Charlie an abridged version of what has happened the other night. He leaves out the parts about the kissing but from the way her eyes soften and she lays a hand on his arm, she’s well aware that he had hoped for a while there.

When Jo joins them Dean breaks off and asks her about Daniel and Adina instead. Jo’s face scrunches into an unhappy grimace.

“I did what I could. But I’m not a doctor, Dean.”

He nods. Because yeah, he knows that. “So they couldn’t stay?”

“At the hospital? No. They didn’t come back here, either?”

Dean shakes his head.

“Maybe they went someplace else?” The hope in Jo’s voice is thin.

“Would she have made it? Outside?” Dean asks.

“I…” Jo shakes her head. “I don’t know, Dean. I’m… Her fever was pretty high. She needs bedrest and fluids.”

“Thanks for trying,” Dean tells her and goes off to a corner to send a quick text to Rufus, the coroner, to let him know if anyone of Adina’s description is found. He’s never seen Daniel and Adina not being together. If she doesn’t make it Daniel’s going to need help.

He sighs at himself for the detached way he’s thinking about this. For the way he makes plans for someone’s death without them being dead yet. But he’s been through this so often. It shouldn’t become routine but it does.

Because this is not getting him anywhere but into a funk and because he has a sudden urge to hear his voice, he presses Sam’s name on the display. The call goes through but after ten rings it goes to voicemail.
Dean chuckled even though he knew the death threat thing was half-serious. Sam’s had a couple of high-profile cases in the past few years.

“Hey, Sammy, it’s me. How’s sunny California? We’re freezing our asses off down here. So, umm, hope all is well with you and Jess. I’ll call back some other time.”

“Dean?” There was a breathless voice on the other end of the line.

“Oh hey. Thought you weren’t there.”

“I was doing yoga.”

Dean snickered at that.

“Hey, I’ve got a high stress-level job, I need something to relax.”

“Jess not doing a good enough job at relaxing you anymore?”

“Oh shut up, you jerk.”

“Bitch.” And since they’d gotten that out of the way. “That mean I’m still not getting any nieces or nephews?”

He can virtually hear Sam roll his eyes. “I promise you’ll be informed on time.”

“I damn well hope so.”

“You haven’t called to harass me about children, have you?”

“Actually no, I didn’t. I called to cancel for New Year’s.”

“What? Dean!”

“Yeah, yeah, I know, tradition and all. But something’s come up.”

“Is it a girl?”

Now it’s Dean’s turn to roll his eyes. “No.”

“A guy?”

Dean sighed.

“Oh, it’s a guy,” Sam chuckled.

“Something like that,” Dean admits. “But not the way you think. It’s just some guy that we’re helping out. And he needs stability right now. I can’t leave.”

The silence at the other end of the line was telling.

“Sam, I swear to God…”

“I didn’t say anything.”
“Right,” Dean groans. Because Sam has a way of not saying things and still getting his point across. “Anyway, I wanted to let you know in advance so that you can make other plans.”

“It’s two weeks out, Dean, that’s not enough time to make other plans.”

“My God, just treat Jess to a nice dinner and have wild monkey sex after, shouldn’t be that hard.”

There is a stunned silence and then Sam starts laughing. “Oh God, Dean, you need to get laid.”

Dean’s had about enough of this conversation, urge to hear Sam’s voice thoroughly gone. “Charlie’s calling me, I gotta run,” he lies, hangs up and most definitely does not think about the way Cas’ body had felt pressed against his.

His brother is an ass.

He eats dinner in the soup kitchen today. No more dates. Not even shabby ones in the kitchen. But he gets Charlie to bring Cas a bowl of stew because he’s sure Cas won’t make himself dinner. Charlie rolls her eyes at him for not going himself but she does what he wants.

In the end, he stays late and goes to the back together with Charlie. He half-expects Cas to be in the kitchen but he isn’t.

“Think he wants to watch Dr. Sexy with us?” Charlie asks.

Dean shrugs. “I’m not all that sure I want to watch Dr. Sexy with us. I’m kinda beat.”

Charlie frowns but then she shrugs. “Alright. Suit yourself. I’ll go chat with Dor then.”

“You’re still in contact?” Dean asks surprised because Charlie is really cautious about that.

“Not all that often,” Charlie says dismissively. “But I like hearing about her adventures.”

“Be careful,” Dean admonishes.

“You’re one to talk,” Charlie snorts.

As things stands, he doesn’t really have a comeback for that, so he shrugs and says, “Night, Charlie.”

“Night, Dean.”

Dor, or Dorothy, had gotten stranded at the bunker one night. She is an adventurer, always travelling, never in the same place long. He’s not sure, but he thinks she and Charlie shared a night. Which in itself is something that doesn’t happen all that often. But Dorothy is well connected. And she knows where they’re based. He’d have thought Charlie would have tried to let that encounter slip into the mists of the past to be forgotten.

Ah well, Charlie is allowed her life, just as he is.

He strips to boxers and shirt and lays down. He is beat. A tiredness that he knows is only partly physical. The better part of it is emotional. Which means it is exhausting but not actually conducive to sleep. He tosses and turns, falling into a half-slumber only to jerk awake again at the slightest sound.

Which is why he wakes up when he hears crying. It isn’t the agonizing screaming of the other night
but the sobbing is heartbreaking.

He debates it for all of two seconds. Because he has asked Cas whether he is allowed to help and Cas never said he couldn’t. As far as Dean is concerned, that still stands.

He pads over to Cas’ room. The door isn’t locked, so he slips in quietly and shuts it behind him. No need to wake up Charlie.

“No. Nonononono…”

It’s the only word that makes it through to him. There are a few others among the sobs but he can’t make them out. He isn’t sure they’re English.

“Cas,” he says softly, in case Cas is awake.

But there is no change, no hitch in Cas’ breath, no acknowledgement that he’s heard.

With the door closed, it is almost pitch-black in the room but the rooms in the bunker pretty much all have the same layout, so he finds his way easily enough. He feels along the edge of the bed until he touches Cas’ side. He perches on the edge of the bed and lets his hand follow the curve of Cas’ body. He’s rolled up in a fetal position, clutching his hands into his hair.

“Cas, baby, you’re hurting yourself,” he stumbles over the term of endearment that made it past his lips unbidden but relaxes when he remembers that Cas is asleep and won’t remember it. “Gimme your hands, come on.”

He softly loosens the grip of Cas’ fingers.

“See, that’s much better.”

Only Cas immediately grabs the next surface that is close enough to hold onto and that happens to be Dean’s shirt. He pulls on the shirt and Dean doesn’t have much choice but to follow the movement unless he wants to rip Cas’ hands away.

“That’s not a good idea, sweetheart,” he sighs because he really has to get up and get out of this room once Cas’ dreams have turned to something better. And he also has to stop with the pet-names. But he isn’t going to get to say them in the daylight, so… there’s no harm in trying out how they’d feel on his tongue, is there?

He’s let himself be dragged down enough that he’s half-lying anyway, so he says. “For a little while then, okay, baby? I’ll hold you for a little while until this has passed. Then I’ll go.”

The hands only grip him tighter, even though he thinks that the crying has lessened a bit.


“Don’t go,” the voice is wrecked and sleep-drunk and he isn’t sure whether Cas is awake at all.

“I won’t,” he answers and resists the temptation to place a kiss on Cas’ hair. “Just sleep, baby, just sleep.”

When he wakes up, the first thing he notices is that he’s not in his own bed. Again.
The second thing he notices is that a pair of eyes is staring at him. They are barely more than a reflection of white in the darkness of the room but they’re very close.

The third thing he notices is that he’s got his arm slung tightly around the body that belongs to the eyes, effectively holding them in place.

“Oh fuck,” he curses when he pieces the puzzle together, “oh fuck, Cas, I’m so sorry. I didn’t want to…” He lets go of him. “I just… You were crying and then…”

“Dean,” Cas’ voice is soft but it still seems loud in the dark and quiet of the room. It shuts him up as successfully as if Cas had shouted. “I remember that I asked you to stay.”

“You remember…” And suddenly Dean is glad about the darkness because at least the way his face is burning will be hidden. Because if Cas was awake enough to remember that, he’ll also remember… Dean swallows heavily. “I’m sorry, Cas,” he repeats and feels like a broken record.

But Cas lays his head back down on Dean’s chest. “Your heartbeat is very strong.”

“Umm,” Dean is at a lack for words.

He should move. He should most definitely move. But instead his hold tightens around Cas’ back, and Cas in response snuggles a bit closer.

This isn’t right. This is anything but right. Problem is that it’s his head telling him that. Not his heart. Because it doesn’t actually feel wrong. Only, that doesn’t mean it isn’t going to break him into pieces.

“This is probably not a good idea, Cas,” he says but his hand strays to Cas’ hair and slowly strokes through it.

“But it helps,” Cas replies and even through the shirt, Dean can feel the warmth of his breath against his sternum.

“Okay,” Dean says because he has no argument against that. “Do you think talking would also help?” he asks cautiously.

Cas goes rigid at the question, so Dean rubs soothing circles into his hair and neck.

“It’s alright. It was just a question. You don’t have to talk about it.”

“I don’t… I don’t think I can…”

“That’s okay, swee… Cas”, and goddammit he needs to be more careful. He can’t keep apologizing every other minute.

“Dean?”

“Hmm?”

“What if I had done something horrible? Would you still be calling me that?”

Dean freezes for a second because here’s his proof that Cas has indeed been awake enough last night to notice what Dean was doing but then he catches himself. Because this question isn’t even about him. This question is about whatever it is that gives Cas nightmares. “Yes, Cas, I would. Can’t seem to stop myself.”
“Even if it was…” But the sentence peters out into nothing.

“Yes,” Dean nods. “Even then.”

A shudder goes through Cas and his hand finds a tight grip in Dean’s shirt. Like he’s intent on never letting go.

The next time, they wake up, it’s to the door being ripped open.

“So that’s where you are.” Charlie has her hands on her hips. “I don’t want to bitch and I’m not even going to comment on this but it’s past 10 and you two have a supply run to make. So get your asses out of bed and get going.”

She shakes her head at them but she isn’t throwing anything, so that’s a good sign. Or maybe she’s more polite when it comes to Cas than when it’s just Dean.

“I guess she’s right,” Dean yawns. “You up for humans?”

“No. But I’ll come anyway.”

Between showers and coffee it takes them an hour to get ready. It isn’t as awkward as it should be, seeing that they have basically spent the night together. It worries Dean, really, how fast he’s getting used to having Cas around. How it hurts to even think about him not being there anymore. But he pushes the thought resolutely to the side. One step at a time.

“Charlie, we’re going!” He yells from the kitchen where he’s picked up their grocery list.

“About time!” She yells back from the office, and with that they’re on their way.

The first hurdle is the car. She’s big and black and he loves her but Cas is eyeing her warily.

“That’s Baby. She’s a 1967 Chevy Impala. I wouldn’t drive her in the snow but Charlie’s got a fucking hybrid and my whole reputation is going to shit if I’m seen driving that thing.”

But Cas is still staring at the car, so Dean comes around to the passenger side.

“Let me be a gentleman and open the door for you.”

He tries to make it sound like a joke but he can’t resist laying a hand on Cas’ arm and gently guiding him, so he guesses the joke effect is pretty much lost.

He closes the door after Cas and takes deep breath before he climbs into the driver’s seat, gets the classic rock station going and then reverses out of his parking spot.

The way Cas keeps his fingers cramped into the fabric of his jeans, he isn’t a big fan of driving.

“It’s warmer than walking, so that’s something, right?” Dean says over the music.

Cas keeps staring out of the window and maybe it isn’t the drive that is killing him, maybe it’s the places they’re going.

“We’ll go by the electronics store first. The owner is called Ash. He’s got a mullet and his clothes are older than yours. He’s also a genius and that’s why he and Charlie don’t get along. Too much competition.”
Cas is looking at him now, so Dean sends him a short smile, though he keeps his eyes on the road.

“He’s got a second job at Harvelle’s Roadhouse. You haven’t met Jo yet but that’s her Mom’s joint. I don’t go very often but when I go out for a drink, I go there. So anyway, that’s Ash. After that, we’ll have to go by the grocery store. Less personal than Ash’s. You can stay in the car if you want but you can also come and we can see whether we can pick out a few of your favorites for lunch. Otherwise you’re going to be stuck with pasta and burgers. And, uhh, after that, if you’re up for it we could do a quick detour and visit Jody.”

Cas doesn’t ask and for once Dean is glad about his quietness. Cause he’s not sure he wants to explain that before they’ve got the first two stops on their list out of the way.

He draws up in the parking lot in front of Ash’s store. “Ready?”

Cas nods tightly and gets out of the car.

The store smells dusty and it’s filled to the brim.

“Ash! Get your computer freak ass out here, you’ve got customers!” Dean hollers.

Cas flinches at the volume so Dean immediately turns it down.

“Sorry.”

“Now if that isn’t Dean Winchester! To what do I owe the pleasure?”

Ash comes out of the back room and looks like he has hastily readjusted his clothes after jerking off to some free porn.

“To Cas here, actually. He’s fixing our security. He’s got a list of stuff that we’re going to need.”

Dean shoves the list at Ash while Cas is doing his best not to make eye contact.

Ash reads the list and whistles through his teeth. “Someone knows his shit. I think we got most of this. Couple of questions, probably. But let me check first.”

He takes the list and rummages through his storage to find everything. The space on the counter quickly fills up.

“Okay, I have a question about this one,” Ash lays the list on the counter, “you put down the A4 but there’s an A6 now which is way better. It’s a bit more expensive but the encryption is so much more evolved, I can’t even begin to tell you.”

“Hey, don’t ask me,” Dean holds up his hands in defense, “I don’t know jack.”

Ash turns to Cas and looks at him expectantly.

Cas rubs his hand over his arm nervously but he takes a step forward. “Will it run with the B3? Because I need to get the circuit built.”

“Totally, man! This shit is completely compatible. What are you using this for anyway?”

“Retrofitting a security code to a door.”

“Uhh, okay. Are you using the B3 because with the A4 you can only get three degrees of backwards compatibility? Because with the A6 you could also switch to a different brand. I personally like…”
The technobabble goes right over Dean’s head, so he takes out his cellphone instead. He scrolls through his contacts until he finds Jody’s number.


It takes a minute until the reply comes.

Jody Mills: Dean Winchester, are you in trouble?

He chuckles.

Dean: No, Ma’am. But a friend of mine needs help.

This time, the reply is instant.

Jody Mills: Be here before 4.

He nods to himself and slips the cellphone back into his pocket. He’s got no idea how he’s actually going to get Cas to go into the police station with him. They’ve come a long way from Steve but they haven’t even gotten to his last name yet. But even with Jody’s help this is going to take a few weeks to process. So he’d rather get this started quickly.

“You guys done here?” he asks, gruffer than intended, but thinking about Jody made him nervous.

“Don’t be an ass, Winchester,” Ash reprimands. “We’re almost there.”

Dean huffs and crosses his arms but he waits patiently anyway. In the end, the total is above what Cas originally calculated but it’s not above the savings on Dean’s account. So he gives Ash his card while Cas stacks their stuff carefully in the few big bags.

They carry them out together and stash them in the trunk.

“That wasn’t that bad, was it now?” Dean asks with a smile.

“Ash knows what he’s talking about,” Cas concedes.

“Yeah, man, I believe it. I didn’t get a word of what you two were talking about.”

That even gets a small chuckle out of Cas which in turn makes Dean smile, too.

In front of the grocery store, Dean asks. “So, have you decided yet whether you’re coming?”

Cas looks worried.

“You’ve been thrown out of grocery stores before,” Dean voices what he already knows.

Cas nods.

“You won’t be today. We’re getting a shopping cart. We’re going to put stuff in. We’re going to the cash desk and we’re going to pay for the stuff. I’ll be right there the whole time. No one is going to mess with you. I promise.”

Cas still looks worried but he nods.

Cas stays close. Close enough that his shoulder brushes Dean’s more often than not. They’re getting their fair share of stares, too, which Dean thinks might be due more to the fact how nervously Cas
twitches than to his clothes choice. Though the trench coat over hoodie over button down combination is definitely unique.

Dean glares at a few of the more obnoxious starers and makes sure he keeps his own body between them and Cas. Seeing his aggressive stance, they move on without trouble.

After a few minutes, Cas begins to relax. The nervous fidgeting gets less and he starts to actually be interested in the produce. Dean nods at him and encourages him to get what he wants. Which turns out to be fresh oranges and marshmallow cereals. Dean shakes his head at the odd combination but Cas has a happy grin on his face, so he’s not going to judge.

He fills their cart with actual food for actual lunch, though. They don’t really need anything much for the soup kitchen today, so Dean adds a few beverages, a few bags of chips and an apple pie, and that’s it.

At the cash desk, Cas’ happy smile disappears, and he can’t seem to look up to meet Dean’s eyes anymore.

“It’s okay, Cas, we’re almost there,” he reassures him and quickly squeezes his hand.

Missouri, the lady at the cash desk, raises her eyebrows at him. “Your friend okay?” she says in her broad Southern drawl.

“Yes, Ma’am,” Dean smiles.

“Tell him to smile. I bet he’s handsome when he smiles.”

“He can hear you, Missouri, you know that, right?” Dean chuckles.

“Well, ya should smile, handsome fella.”

“Hear that,” Dean gives Cas’ shoulder a little nudge, “you should smile, handsome fellow.”

He hands Missouri his card and she smiles at him brightly. “Y’all still need help with the Christmas party?”

“Help’s always welcome,” Dean nods.

“I’ll bring some pie. Homemade, not that junk you’re buying.”

“Awesome,” Dean beams before he remembers that he can’t eat the pie on his own, “umm, awesome for everyone I mean.”

Missouri laughs a bellowing laugh and hands him their shopping. “See y’all at the party, then.”

“See you, Missouri.”

They’re already back in the car when Cas looks up again for the first time.

Dean smiles at him. “So I’m guessing you’re having oranges and cereal for lunch later?”

Surprisingly, he gets a smile back. “I’d like that.”

“Consider it done,” Dean nods.
But when he pulls out of the parking lot, he doesn’t take the road back to the bunker, he goes towards the city center.

Cas notices because he looks at him intently but Dean keeps his gaze fixed firmly forward until he’s reached the place where he wanted to go. He turns off the ignition and sits in the car for a moment, staring at the big police sign over the entrance of the building in front of them.

When he finally finds the courage to look over to Cas, Cas has gone pale. He’s wrapped his arms around his middle and looks like he wants to make himself small enough to disappear.

“Remember that I told you if you were up to it we’d go visit my friend Jody?” Dean starts hesitantly. “Jody Mills is our sheriff. She’s a tough woman with short hair. She makes an awesome casserole.” He sighs because that’s really not the point but like with Ash he tries to find little things that will make Cas see that Jody is a person, not a scary concept. “You need papers. She can help. You’ve got your dog tags still. So we can start there.”

Cas doesn’t react. He stares into nothing but he’s trembling, so he’s obviously frightened.

“I swear to you that she’s not going to do anything weird. She ain’t going to arrest you. I ain’t going to leave you here. We’re going to get you papers and find out your social security number so that we can employ you. So that when the time comes, you can go home.”

Cas looks down at that, like his knees in Dean’s jeans are the most interesting thing in the world.

“She’ll enter your data in the system, and in a few weeks we’ll know more. These things never go fast and especially not over Christmas.” Dean sighs. “And if you don’t want to, if you’re not ready, you don’t have to. I know that it’s a lot to ask.”

He falls silent and for a while, they’re both just sitting there.

When there’s still no reaction from Cas after the better part of ten minutes, Dean nods. “Alright. It’s too early. We’ll go home, okay?”

But when he wants to turn the key in the ignition, Cas’ hand is suddenly on his.

“Will you stay with me?”

“Of course.”

“And I get the oranges after?”

“Yeah, Cas,” Dean nods, “you get the oranges after.”

Cas takes a deep breath. “Okay.”

But even though he’s said he wants to do this, Cas’ steps still falter when they reach the stairway to the entrance. He looks utterly lost.

Dean grits his teeth against the pain and against the knowledge that he’s the one making Cas do this. “Come on,” he says instead and smuggles his hand into Cas’. “Okay?” he asks.

Cas looks at their joined hands for a moment and then holds on tightly. Tight enough actually that Dean thinks his hand is going to hurt after this. But Cas is moving again.
Dean knows most everyone at the station, perks or disadvantages of working in the social services. He nods his greetings and ignores the raised eyebrows and pointed stares.

“Hey Victor, we’ve got an appointment with Jody. Tell her we’re here?”

Victor isn’t his favorite person in the world and he gets a condescending look from him but Dean’s not willing to let himself be riled today. He’s here to help Cas, not to fight old battles.

“She’s waiting for you,” Victor says grudgingly when he comes out of Jody’s office after a few minutes.

“Thanks.”

Cas is deadly pale but he follows Dean without resistance. Dean squeezes his hand but he isn’t sure it really gets through anymore.

“Hey Jody.”

Jody Mills doesn’t raise her eyebrows when she sees them. But he can see how she’s cataloguing the situation in seconds. “Take a seat, boys.”

Dean nudges Cas towards the visitors’ chairs, making sure his own chair ends up close enough that he doesn’t have to let go of Cas’ hand. He isn’t necessarily sure that it’s a good idea to sit down. If Cas doesn’t recover, he’s not sure they’re going to manage to get up out of the chairs again. Because right now, Cas is completely unresponsive, not resisting what Dean is doing but not helping, either.

Dean tugs on his hand until Cas sits down in the chair, then he turns back to Jody. “I need your help, Jody.”

“I can see that,” Jody says.

“No, it’s not…” Dean starts. A little quieter he continues. “But I need to call in a favor. This is Castiel. He’s a friend. He’s lost his papers. I know you can help getting him back on the grid.”

Jody leans back in her chair and looks at them thoughtfully. “So, does your friend have a last name?”

“Pretty sure he does,” Dean nods.

But looking at Cas, it’s kind of impossible to get it out of him right now.

“Give us second, okay?”

Now Jody raises her eyebrows but she nods and starts shuffling a few papers. It’s mostly for show, Dean thinks, her whole attention still on them. But it’s going to have to be good enough.

“Cas, baby,” he whispers and lays his hand on Cas’ cheek. “Look at me, please?”

He doesn’t but at least he turns his head towards Dean. Dean strokes his thumb along Cas’ cheek and leans forward until he’s close enough that their foreheads touch. “Pretend it’s only you and me, okay? We’re in the bunker at the kitchen table and all is well. Can you do that for me?”

Cas nods against his skin.

“Okay, that is good, that is very good,” he says relieved.

He’s relieved enough, actually, that it seems like a good idea to press a quick kiss into Cas’ hairline.
Only, of course Cas uses this moment to look up, so it ends up being a peck on the mouth instead.

He can’t help the way his heart flutters, and when their eyes lock, he feels his heart expand until he’s sure it’s going to explode in his chest.

There is a tiny smile on Cas’ lips and he answers it with an insecure smile of his own. He knows this isn’t real, can’t be real, but for the life of him his heart can’t be convinced of that.

“Ahem,” Jody clears her throat. “You’re getting anywhere there? And with that I don’t mean anywhere that you need a room for.”

Dean ignores her and keeps his eyes on Cas. So they’re making a spectacle of themselves, who cares? Cas doesn’t take his eyes from him, either, but he brings up his free hand. He draws the chain over his head and presses the dog tags into Dean’s hand.

“Thank you,” he mouths and looks down at the tags, “Castiel Novak.”

Cas’ smile wobbles but he nods.

So Dean turns to Jody and hands her the dog tags. “Cas was in the army. In the war. Can you find his info with this?”

Jody nods and looks at the dog tags. “I’m going to need your fingerprints, Mr. Novak. To make sure these match your file in the national database.”

Cas nods.

“You’re probably going to have to let go of Dean’s hand for that,” she informs him.

Dean chuckles when Cas squeezes his hand tighter at that. “We can do it one hand at a time.”

Jody rolls her eyes but she nods. “Let me get the scanner.”

It’s easy enough from there on out. Jody gets the fingerprint scanner and they get all ten fingers done, Dean and Cas switching the hands they’re holding in the middle of the procedure. Jody notes down the information on the dog tags and gives them back.

“I’ll let you know when I have results.”

“Thanks, Jody,” Dean nods gratefully.

“It’ll be a while,” she warns.

“We’re aware,” Dean answers. “It isn’t all that pressing. Just, eventually, you know.”

He isn’t sure Jody knows but she shrugs. “Whatever you say, Dean.”

“You’re coming to the Christmas party?” he changes the topic. “Your casserole is always a hit.”

“When did I not come to the Christmas party, Dean Winchester?” She says indignantly.

“Alright then, just checking. Come on, Cas, let’s go home.”

He opens the car door for Cas again, though he isn’t sure he does it for any other reason than to have
an excuse to hold on to Cas’ hand for as long as he can. But finally, he has to let go and then they’re
headed back to the bunker.

Cas isn’t holding on to his knees anymore but he’s fingering the dog tags through the fabric of his
shirt.

“You were pretty damn brave in there,” Dean says.

Cas stills. “All I did was give them my name.” Now that they’re headed home, his voice is almost
back to normal.

“As I said, pretty damn brave, Steve.”

Cas bites his lips and Dean wishes he wasn’t driving so that he could check whether it’s because he’s
feeling guilty or to hide a smile. “Sorry about that.”

“I didn’t take offense. I knew it wasn’t your name. You’re a terrible liar, man. You have at least three
tells. You wait too long, your eyes twitch and you look to the upper right. It’s textbook. Why’d you
lie anyway? It’s not like the name is giving me any ammunition against you.”

“I’m not Castiel Novak anymore.”

Dean shoots him a quick look but otherwise waits for Cas to explain.

“Castiel Novak was a different person. I’m not him anymore.”

“You’re still Cas,” Dean says with a shrug.

This time, there is a definite smile on Cas’ face. “Dean, no one but you has ever called me Cas.”

“Lost opportunity if you ask me,” Dean grins because it’s really good to see a smile back on Cas’
face.

“I agree,” Cas says simply.

And that’s not the reaction Dean’s expected but it most definitely warms his heart.

“How’d it go?” Charlie asks carefully when Dean is fixing them lunch.

“Missouri is going to bring pie to the Christmas party. And Jody her casserole.”

“That’s not what I was asking.” Charlie grumbles.

“Dean helped me through it.”

They both turn around, not having noticed Cas come in.

Dean nods. “And Cas earned himself some oranges and marshmallow cereals. Hey,”” he adds with a
shrug when Charlie looks at him weird, “his choice, not mine.”

“The nutritional value of the oranges will counteract the junk-food quality of the marshmallows.”

It is mumbled but it still makes Dean break out in laughter.

Cas is unfazed, though, and stretches on his tiptoes next to Dean to get to the cereal bowls on the
top-shelf. He’s wearing too many layers for a stretch of skin to become visible but Charlie has to elbow Dean in the side anyway because admittedly, he’s staring.

He shrugs apologetically and goes back to the stir-fry he’s whipped up. “Cas, you want something of this, too?”

“No, thank you, Dean.”

“All right.” He fills plates for himself and Charlie, and they’re all sitting down, quietly munching.

It’s domestic as all hell and get-out, and there was a time when Dean thought he wasn’t cut out for this kind of thing. When he thought that he’d been a homeless drifter for so long that it was impossible to find any kind of peace in a steady home-base. Well, it ain’t the first time he was wrong, it won’t be the last. Because yeah, they’re all fucked up, all three of them, but he feels so content right now, just watching Cas inhale his marshmallow cereals and Charlie shovel her vegetables into her mouth, he didn’t think it was possible.

“So,” Charlie finally says when she’s torn through most of her food, “Cas, what do you think, how much time do you need with the electronics? Cause we usually start decorating for the Christmas party a few days early. So that leaves a day or two at best until you’re going to be swarmed with volunteers.”

Cas stirs the cereals in his bowl for a moment. “I wanted to repair the sprinkler system first. But I can start with the cameras. Or will you be decorating back here?”

Charlie looks at Dean who shrugs and says, “Not unless we want to. I mean, we could. Just us, I mean.”

“How many blinking Star Wars things are there going to be?” Dean asks suspiciously.

“How many will you let me get away with?” Charlie grins.

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“Me?” Cas’ eyes turn wide.

“How many will you let me get away with?” Charlie grins.

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“Hey, my Star Wars Christmas decorations are not defacing anything!” Charlie protests. “Just cause you are the Grinch every year, doesn’t mean…”
“I said I was okay with decorating, didn’t I?” Dean talks over her. “We do have a couple of boxes of more traditional stuff, too, though. Maybe we want that!”

“Dean Winchester having a traditional Christmas? When did that happen? Does that mean you’re not going to sneak out to Ellen’s and come back drunk as a skunk?”

Dean glowers at her. “Way to go, Charlie. Make me look as bad as you can, will you?”

“Everything!”

It is only one word but it cuts through their argument.

The next words aren’t quite as loud anymore and Cas looks down at the table but he keeps talking. “A mixture of everything, that would be nice.”

“A mixture of everything it is,” Dean nods.

“I can live with that,” Charlie agrees.

“That’s settled then,” Dean exhales deeply. “Thank goodness.”

“And you really aren’t going to Grinch?” Charlie asks but her tone isn’t quite as obnoxious anymore.

“Charlie, you’re fully aware of why I ‘Grinch’. I don’t have the same memories of Christmas you do.”

Charlie’s smile turns dreamy. “Yeah, the year I hacked into Homeland Security was the best…”

Cas stares at her wide eyed, so Dean feels the need to say. “Yeah, unfortunately she means that. But don’t worry, that’s at least two identities back.”

“Dean!” Charlie frowns.

“Hey, you started it.”

“We are still not talking about this. Cause I actually kind of like it here. I’d like to stay for a while. Especially now that you let me put up my Star Wars deco.”

“Hey, Charles, I actually kind of want you to stay, too,” Dean smiles because he did not mean to get in a fight with her or out her. But she already kind of told Cas that her name wasn’t real, so it’s not like he’s spilled the beans or anything.

“God, Dean, you’re such a big sap these days.” But she hugs him when she gets up before turning to Cas. “I can help you set up. If you need anyone for the grunt work, Dean’s going to help, I’m sure.”

Cas takes the last of his oranges with him when he gets up. He looks at the dishes and then at Dean but Dean shoos him out.

“Go, do your thing. I’ve got this handled. At least it means I’ll have no time for donor calls today.”

He works peacefully, first on the dishes, then on the food in front. He catches himself whistling random tunes, and every so often he listens to Charlie and Cas clattering around and it makes him smile. He doesn’t think he’s ever smiled quite as much as he has in the past few days.

He tries to rein it in. Of course he does. Christmas is close and Christmas is always atrocious. But today was a good day and he can take his victories where he finds them.
The day stays good, too, with the one exception that no one has seen Daniel and Adina. He worries about that but then gets distracted by Marv’s attempts to rile him. Which he actually prefers to the worry.

So he is still in a good mood when he comes back to the kitchen. Cas isn’t there, so he goes for a root beer and leans against the kitchen counter, heart immediately heavier. Because going to bed means being woken up by screams or crying again, he’s pretty sure.

He downs most of the bottle in one long gulp.

Then he has an idea. He makes his way back to the donations and rummages through the boxes of random stuff until he finds what he’s looking for. It’s pretty ridiculous, but then, he’s up for anything that helps.

He throws the little box on his bed and goes through his nightly routine first. He changes into sweatpants and an old shirt, brushes his teeth and then comes back to his room to pick the little box up. He throws it up and down a few times, catching it easily. He’s stalling. Cause he knows exactly how this looks like. The reason being that he’s not too subtle and that it is exactly how it looks like.

He sighs and scrubs his hand over his face.

It’s a friendly thing, right? He’s helping. But while he can bullshit his way through life like no one else, he’s never been particularly good at bullshitting himself. Selfless help is a nice excuse but it really isn’t what he’s doing.

With a deep breath, he finally decides that at least he’s going to deliver his little present. He can bail after.

“Cas?” he knocks on Cas’ door. “Can I come in for a moment?”

“Yes.” Cas is sitting cross-legged on the bed, one of Charlie’s comic books in his lap.

“Hey,” Dean says from the door.

“Hello Dean.”

“You’re turning into a comic book nerd now?” Dean asks.

Cas frowns at the book in his hands. “I don’t know yet. Charlie gave me a stack of them.” He points at the nightstand where there is a whole stack of books. “I started with the one with the cat.”

Dean nods though he has no idea which one had the cat in it. “If you want any actual books, I’ve got a few that I can lend you.”

“I think I’m good for now. But thank you.” Cas looks at him expectantly.

“Uhh, yeah, right. I had an actual reason to come by. This.” He holds up the little device he’s found.

Cas squints and frowns.

“I thought it might help. With, you know, the nightmares.”

That makes Cas frown more, so Dean quickly steps into the room and closes the door behind him.

“It’s a bit silly but… Let me show you. Can you turn off the light for a moment?”
Cas looks at him confused but he nods. It’s weird how easily he trusts. How he doesn’t question or second-guess anything that Dean does. He’s not sure he deserves that kind of trust.

Before his thoughts can go further down that direction he quickly kneels and plugs in the device. Immediately, the room is filled with a soft blue light, whitish little stars appearing on the ceiling. They are moving in slow circles.

“It gets really dark in these rooms because we don’t have windows and stuff,” he scratches at his neck, “so I thought maybe a night light might help.”

He looks up at Cas to judge his reaction and he sees immediately that he had no reason to be nervous about this. Cas looks mesmerized. “You brought me the stars, Dean.”

Dean laughs a little embarrassedly. “I don’t know about that, Cas. It’s just a little thing that I knew we had in donations.” But then he looks up at the night sky that’s painted in light on the ceiling and he smiles. “It is quite beautiful, isn’t it?”

“Yes, it is,” Cas agrees without hesitation.

Dean smiles and gets back up. He’s glad he’s done this right.

“Do you want to stay?” Cas asks.

It’s a plain question. Straightforward. No excuses tucked to the end of it. No ‘for a while’ or ‘just to talk’. Dean licks his lips. If he wants to bail this is his chance. But instead, he hears himself saying, “Yes, Cas, I’d like that,” and his naked feet are carrying him over to the bed.

Cas makes some space for him and he slips under the covers. They lie next to each other for a bit, gazing at the stars, until Dean feels hesitant fingers reaching for his. He takes Cas’ hand and it feels familiar and comforting.

“I wish you could stay forever.” It slips out without his permission and he regrets it the moment he says it. “I’m sorry, Cas. I got no right.”

But when he tries to let go of Cas’ hand, Cas weaves his fingers through Dean’s and holds on tight. “I’m not Castiel Novak anymore,” he says determinedly and as if that explains everything.

But it doesn’t because it isn’t true. Of course he’s still Castiel Novak, even if he has forgotten parts of him. Even if he’s scared.

“Hey,” a tug on his fingers brings Dean back into the present. Cas looks over at him now, not at the stars anymore. “I am Cas, though.”

“Dean?”

They’ve been lying quietly next to each other for a while, neither of them appearing to be anywhere near falling asleep, but both of them comfortable in their silence. They’ve watched their night sky cycle through blues and purples towards reddish-pinks and back again.

“Hmm?”

“Why are you the Grinch?”
He sighs because it’s not a good topic. Evading wouldn’t be too hard. But instead he scoots closer until his head ends up on Cas’ shoulder. “Because Christmas was pretty shitty when I was a kid. I kinda hated it. We were either in a foster family somewhere but then usually Sammy and I weren’t together. So that sucked. Or we were with Dad. Then he would be drunk or wouldn’t even come home, we wouldn’t have dinner or presents and Sammy was crying. Which also sucked.”

“Is that why you go drinking on Christmas?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “Among other things.”

“Will you go drinking this year?”

Unlike the others, this question is asked hesitantly, so Dean suspects that there is a request somewhere in there.

“You don’t like drinking very much, do you? Or drunk people?” he asks back.

“No,” comes the immediate reply.

“Then I won’t.” Dean sighs. “But fair warning. If you take away my chance to drown my Grinch you’ll have to suffer me, bad mood and all. Because it’s too cold to spend the night in the Impala.”

Cas turns his head to him, studying him. “You’d do that for me?” he whispers.

Dean’s smile turns out edgy. Because he’d do a fuckload more than skipping on Ellen’s at Christmas for Cas and he isn’t sure yet just how much that is going to fuck him up in the long run. “Yeah, Cas, I’d do that for you.”

Cas draws him closer, a wordless thank you. And Dean snuggles into Cas because he’s needy and pathetic and grateful that he’s granted this.

“Do you remember anything enjoyable about Christmas?” Cas asks.

“Hmm,” Dean thinks back over the years. Some Christmases had been better than others. “I liked it when no one cried. I mean, later, Sammy didn’t hold out any hope for Christmas anymore, either. So then it was usually just a pretty dull affair.” Come to think of it, he hadn’t liked that any better. That first year when there wasn’t a sparkle in Sam’s eyes because it was Christmas. When he’d realized that while everyone else got presents, they got a passed out Dad. And that Dean couldn’t make it any better. Though, “there was this one time. Sammy had started middle-school that year. He loved his new science classes so much. And I managed to get him this chemistry set. I mean, technically, I stole it, so I’m guessing it wasn’t quite the right Christmas spirit. But he loved it. Didn’t do anything else but grow crystals and whatnot during the whole winter. So yeah, that was the best Christmas I ever had.”

“You love your brother a lot.”

It isn’t a question.

“Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“But you won’t see him for Christmas.”

“Told you, he’s not setting foot into a state that has snow.”

“You could go to him,” Cas persists.
“And leave the Christmas party to Charlie? Nah.” But he doesn’t manage to make it sound as light-hearted as he had planned. He sighs. “Look, it’s... There’s several reasons.” He watches the artificial night sky turn back to purple. “There’s Charlie for one. Because she... I can’t tell you the details, she has to do that herself if she wants to some time. But that fake identity thing is not ribbing. There ain’t many people in the world she can safely contact. So I wouldn’t leave her alone on Christmas.” He clears his throat because the second part is harder. “And then there’s also Sam and me. I love him, yeah, and we’re good. But there’s – baggage. Christmas is hard on both of us.”

“I understand,” Cas says and Dean gets the impression that he actually understands.

“What about you? Christmas good or bad?”

Cas thinks about it for a while. They’re already at pink light again when he answers. “As a kid, I used to sneak out with Gabriel. Gabriel, he’s the one… The one who’s still alive.”

It’s Dean’s turn to hold on a little closer to Cas because Cas’ voice half-breaks on that. He pushes through it, though.

“He owns a confectionery. Never became a soldier.”

“Probably not a bad choice,” Dean shrugs.

“My mother thought differently.”

“Figures,” Dean sighs.

“After I got married... Couldn’t sneak out anymore then. Head of household and everything.”

Dean doesn’t think Cas can miss his cringe at the word *married*. Cas pauses, too.

“Go on. I want to hear it.” Though he isn’t sure he does.

“I... I didn’t care much about most of it. Church. Charity. Not that I... but it’s not like here... like you and Charlie...”

He doesn’t seem to find the words but Dean can help him out with this. “You don’t like charity, when it is for show. When it’s just Christmas.”

“Yes,” Cas sighs relieved.

“I understand. It still helps places like us. But I understand. So, what did you care about?”

“Claire. It’s – very much like you and Sam.”

“The sparkle in her eyes?” Dean asks with a smile.

But Cas doesn’t say anything anymore. And when Dean turns to him, tears are running down his face. He keeps his teeth grit, face tight and he turns his head away when he notices that Dean has seen the tears.

“Don’t,” Dean says but he makes it soft and almost a question. “Please don’t. You can always let me see you. I’ll never think less of you for it.”

“I... She’s better off without me.” He makes a valiant effort at keeping his voice steady and he does turn back to Dean even though the tears are still falling silently.
Dean doesn’t agree with the statement at all but he doesn’t comment for now. Instead he rolls over so that he can gather Cas in his arms. Any other consolation he has to offer is empty anyway.

They must have fallen asleep sometime after that because the next time Dean wakes up he feels rested. Too well rested actually. Cas doesn’t have a clock in his room and Dean makes a mental note to bring his alarm. And then he makes a mental note about not assuming that he’s moving in here.

Cas is stirring next to him. Blue eyes slowly blink open.

“Good morning, baby.” It slips out unbidden as usual.

“Good morning, Dean.”

He has no idea why Cas keeps letting him get away with this. Cause by now it must be impossible to even feign ignorance.

“Did you sleep?” Dean asks.

“Yes.”

“No dreams?”

“No dreams,” he gets the confirmation.

“I’m glad,” Dean smiles. Because that’s the second time in a row that Cas slept through with Dean next to him. “Should we get up then?”

Cas grumbles something that sounds like five more minutes and draws Dean’s arm around himself to curl into Dean’s side.

“Five minutes, then,” Dean chuckles because Cas probably has a year of sleep to catch up on. And yeah, he’s got shit to do, but this is nice and he can give them five more minutes.

Charlie doesn’t even raise her eyebrows at them when they finally stumble into the kitchen, both still in sweatpants and half-asleep. Dean gets the feeling, though, that he’s got another lecture coming.

He’s right about it, too. She waits until the afternoon, a lot longer than Dean thought she would. She’s helped Cas with tying new components into their computer system because since Charlie’s designed that it’s already pretty tight in its security and has a few particular quirks.

But then in the afternoon she joins Dean in front while Cas works on the sprinklers in the back, which he says aren’t actually broken but need rewiring and new sensors.

She takes a knife and starts cutting up potatoes.

“Charles? Didn’t know you were that mad at me.” Because it’s always dangerous when Charlie is wielding knives.

“I’m not,” she says tightly. “I am asking myself whether you’ve completely lost your mind.”

“Most likely,” he answers. But that’s not what she’s getting at, he knows. “Get over with it already. I know you want to give me the lecture.”

“Will it help?” she asks.
“No, probably not,” he shrugs.

“Then what’s the sense in it?”

“You’d feel better?”

She rolls her eyes at him.

“Well, if that makes any difference for you, we’re not… we’re sleeping next to each other, that’s all.”

“No, Dean, it actually doesn’t make much of a difference.” She sighs. “I’ve never seen you get attached this quickly. And Cas… Only times I get him to talk more than a few words is when he can talk about you… It’s like you hung the moon or something.”

“Well, I brought him the stars…”

She looks at him without comprehension.

“It’s a joke. Because of the nightlight. Not important.”

Charlie shakes her head at him. “Dean, I really hope you know what you’re doing. Also,” she adds as an afterthought, “think about what you want to give him for Christmas. Cause he’s planning shit.”

“What?” Dean asks stunned.

“Said something about making Christmas special for you again. As far as I understood. Asked me my opinion.” She bites her lip worriedly. “Dean, he’s… he’s been going through our private contacts.”

“What?”

“I granted him access to the system but not to the private files. But once you’re in, they aren’t guarded that well anymore.”

And that leaves Dean even more confused. “What the hell was he looking for?”

“Umm, he tried to cover his tracks but he’s either rusty or sloppy. So I can say with some certainty that he was looking for Sam.”

“Sam?”

“Sam,” she confirms. “Dean, what did you tell him about your brother?”

“That I love him. That we’re good. That he – I told him that my best Christmas memories were with Sam.”

“You think he’s trying to get him to come here?”

Dean snorts. “Hell’s going to freeze over before that happens. And Cas ain’t even talking to anyone but you and me. How’s he going to talk to Sam? On the phone nonetheless!”

“I don’t know, Dean,” Charlie shakes her head, “I get the feeling he’d do an awful lot for you. So if you don’t want Sam here you should talk Cas out of it. Like, now.”

“You think he can make this happen.” Dean looks at her disbelievingly.
“He’s a stubborn fucker. Reminds me of someone,” she smiles and claps him on the shoulder.

Dean keeps thinking about that for the rest of the night. Cas doesn’t know that Dean cancelled his New Year’s plans with Sam for him. All he knows are the snippets that Dean’s told him. They’re true, of course, but they’re not even half the truth. Having Sam here at Christmas – he isn’t sure whether the thought is exhilarating or terrifying. Yeah, his best Christmas was because Sam was happy. But his worst Christmas was also because of Sam.

His stomach clenches when his mind starts replaying that fight. Or rather, the end of it. There had been shouting and name-calling and altogether unpleasantness while their shit-bag of a father didn’t even wake up from his drunken stupor. Though in this particular case that was probably for the best.

“You’re ruining my whole life! You’re ruining everything! That’s all you ever do!”

He’s taken plenty of hits in his life and he’s never shied away from a fist fight when it was needed. But that had knocked the wind out of him more than any punch to the ribs ever could.

And yeah, they’ve made up. They’ve been good for years. But that got engrained deep. Cause with his Dad, he’s always expected it. But with Sam? Sam was his ally. Or had been, right up until that night.

“Dean?”

There’s a hand on his shoulder. Warm and grounding.

He takes a deep breath and wipes the few stray tears from his cheeks. “Whatcha doing out here, Cas?”

“Cameras. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah, I’m okay.” Dean takes another deep breath and turns to Cas. “I was thinking about the Christmas that I accidentally outed myself to my brother. And half his school.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah,” Dean chuckles dryly. “That didn’t go all that well. There were a lot of – bad words.”

“Still?”

Dean shakes his head. “Nah. We had no choice but to make up. It was hard enough to handle Dad as it was. And now, well, Sammy’s a civil rights attorney. That’s pretty much all you need to know.”

“But you’re hurting.”

He manages a half-smile. “It’s silly. But yeah. Sometimes it still hurts.”

“Not silly.” Cas looks at him, blue eyes soft and compassionate.

And isn’t that the strangest thing, how someone as broken as Cas can see so deeply into him and have so much compassion.

“Ahem.”

It’s only when Charlie clears her throat that he notices that they’re still staring at each other, and that
his hand has found its way into Cas’.

“Dean, you’ve got 30 minutes to finish this. And Kevin is coming in about 5. So you might want to get going.”

“You sure you’re the Queen and not a merciless dictator?” Dean tries to sarcasm his way out.

“Just get to work, Winchester,” Charlie gives him a slap on his ass for good measure and then pokes Cas in the shoulder. “And you come with me, my hacker friend. I’m revoking your computer privileges until I’m sure that you’re not sniffing out our private files anymore.”

And yeah, Cas is definitely blushing and looks like he’s been caught.

Dean chuckles and tightens his grip on Cas’ fingers for a second before letting go. “You had fair warning, man, I told you she was a genius.”

“The state of your security did not suggest that that assessment was correct,” Cas frowns.

“Ey!” Charlie objects. “Not my fault that Dean never coughed up any funds for that until now.”

“Children! What are you fighting about?” comes a cheerful voice from the entrance. Well, as cheerful as snarky can get.

“Kevin, my prophet and savior! Go help Dean! He’s been too distracted to finish the kitchen prep today.” Charlie drags Cas out by the sleeve.

“Is he wearing your good shirt? Under that hoodie and trench coat?” Kevin asks.

Dean resists the urge to hit his face against the wall. “No. It’s my second best shirt. And I never wear it anyway. Now go peel potatoes.”

They manage to get finished on time because Dean didn’t actually slack off as much as Charlie suggested, and the evening proceeds as normal. The one change is that at some point, after the main rush is over, Cas actually comes to the front to get his own bowl of food.

“Hey there,” Dean smiles at him and hands him a bowl.

He gets a shy smile back, discomfort in the loud hall already obvious.

It’s not made better when Marv shouts, “Hey, Winchester, you keeping the mute?”

It raises Dean’s hackles. “You wanna watch what you’re saying, Marv.”

“Or what?”

“Or we’re going to have a problem with each other.” He takes a step towards Marv and narrows his eyes.

“Dean.” There is a tug on his sleeve. “Not worth it.”

“Oh look, its mouth moved. I think it actually talked.”

Dean levels Marv with a stare though he’s talking to Cas. “Yeah, I’m sorry but I’m not sure it’s not worth it.”

“No. No violence.” Cas’ voice is somewhere between very firm and very shaky.
Dean keeps his eyes on Marv, who’s gotten up out of his chair, Dean’s willingness to fight this out all too obvious. But Marv hasn’t come any closer and his friends have disappeared to other tables. It’s eerily quiet in the hall.

“You really want to do this, Marv?” Dean asks. “Cause it looks to me that you got no backup. I do. And you know the rules. You lay a hand on me, you’re not welcome back.”

“You’re an ass, Winchester,” Marv grumbles.

“Yeah, I can live with that. But,” and Dean makes his voice even louder now so that it reaches everyone in the room, “if any of you feels the need to insult anyone else here, you can move your asses out of the door right now. Cause I’m not tolerating that. Not from you, Marv, not from anyone else. Clear?”

There’s a general rumble of acknowledgement even though Marv sneers. He doesn’t talk back, though, so that’s good enough for Dean.

“You good?” he asks Cas, who’s still got his fingers clenched into Dean’s sleeve.

Cas nods though he looks somewhat shaken.

“For the record, I was going to escort him out. Not in a friendly way, but I wasn’t going to bust him up.”

Before Cas can even react much, the next person approaches Dean for seconds, so he turns back to his work.

Dean expects Cas to go back to the privacy of the other kitchen, especially after that scene. But instead Cas leans against the wall somewhere close to Dean and eats quietly. Dean itches to find some time to talk to him, to make the bad aftertaste that the confrontation with Marv left in his mouth disappear. But with the snow out, they’re more crowded than usual and there’s actually still new people filtering in. So he doesn’t have the time to do more than send Cas a few smiles. He keeps an eye on Marv, though, making sure that he doesn’t even get anywhere near Cas.

When Cas is done with his dinner, he stacks his dishes with the rest of the used tableware and indicates that he’s going back. Dean nods in acknowledgement while he hands out another bowl. He’s simultaneously relieved because being in the back, Cas is going to be safe, and disappointed because he likes having Cas close.

Towards the end of the night, Dean spots JD. He’s an older guy, gruff as they come, and a regular only in winter. Dean has no idea what his real name is, everyone keeps calling him JD because he always wears a cap with the John Deere logo.

“JD?” Dean joins him at his table.

“Hmpf.”

“Yeah, listen. You’ve been coming here long enough that you know everyone. So I was wondering, could you keep an eye out for Daniel and Adina? Bring ‘em back here if you see them? They might be in trouble.”

“They got the pox or something?”

“Adina had a fever. But Jo got her treated at the hospital. So you should be fine.”
“Hmpf.”

That’s all he’s going to get out of him but it’s almost a promise anyway. “Thanks, man.”

Dean’s deadly tired by the time the night is done. He’s going to have to sort out more blankets tomorrow. With the cold being what it is, they seem to get ‘lost’ a lot lately. The winter isn’t doing anyone any favors. But if it keeps someone from freezing, he’s not going to complain about petty theft.

He’s somewhat apprehensive when he makes the detour to his room to slip into his night clothes and grab the alarm clock. There was no actual violence involved in the encounter with Marv but it’s the first time Dean had had to resort to looking threatening around Cas. It can’t have completely put him off because he stayed after. But still, he might not want him close tonight.

So he’s got mixed feelings when approaching Cas’ room.

The door isn’t even closed, though.

He knocks anyway, and waits in the doorway.

The nightlight is already on, and Cas is in bed. When he sees Dean, he scoots to the side, freeing some space for him. Turns out, that’s all the communication they need.

Dean closes the door behind him, puts the alarm on the nightstand and settles himself in close to Cas. He’s asleep minutes later.

They don’t feel the need to discuss it in the morning, either. They get up as if this is a thing that they’ve been doing for years, getting up next to each other, and Dean barely manages to remember that no, he is not supposed to kiss Cas good morning. He settles for a shoulder bump and a quick squeeze of his hand.

Charlie doesn’t show up for breakfast because she’s going through all of their boxes with Christmas decorations, the private ones for the back and the public ones for the front. Every so often, an excited shout emanates from her location but after she gleefully showed him a Darth Vader with a Santa Claus hat and beard and then an elf-Wookie, he ignores her.

He’s busy anyway, and even though it’s all menial tasks, washing blankets and scrubbing the place for the holiday cheer, it’s alright with him. Growing up with a Dad who’s constantly drunk, cleaning up after him more often than not, it’s been a long time since he’s been squeamish about things like this.

But even though getting lost in the rhythm of physical work is fine, his highlight of the day is when he comes to the back and finds Cas and Charlie deeply engrossed in the task of assembling a plastic Christmas tree. Cas has even managed to shed his trench coat and hoodie for the task. They lie carefully folded on Cas’ chair.

Dean watches Cas and Charlie motionless for a while, not wanting to disturb the image. It’s grossly domestic, the way they bicker, and it makes him happy. Because the Cas who’s grumbling at Charlie that she’s clearly doing this wrong seamlessly fits in. So much so that it aches.

He can’t resist the temptation to hold on to this perfect little moment and snaps a few quick shots with his cell phone before tiptoeing back out of the room.
His day stays good, too, up until the moment when he checks his phone. There are three messages blinking at him, two missed calls and a text. All three are from Jody.

*Jody Mills: dean call me back please.*

Dread forms in his stomach. This can be about any number of things, from Cas to Adina. But whatever it is, it won’t be good.

“Jody?” He doesn’t even give her the time to say Hi. “What happened?”

“Calm down, Dean, will ya?” Jody huffs, the anxiety in his voice probably clear as day to her.

He takes a deep breath and sits down. “Okay. Tell me.”

“Actually, I can’t tell you. Dean, we’ve… we’ve run Mr. Novak’s prints. Donna from the VA’s office owes me a… ah, doesn’t matter. Anyway I thought it would be nice to get it done before Christmas. Because – Christmas, y’know. But…” She breaks off.

“What’s wrong? Cas in trouble?” Dean’s heart is suddenly beating hard in his chest.

“No, no, it’s nothing like that. He’s got an honorable discharge. He’s just fallen off the grid after. But…”

“Jody, you’re killing me,” Dean groans.

“I’ll need you to come in. I mean, I mainly need him to come in but you two seemed… It’d be good if you were there, Dean.”

And that doesn’t sound good at all. Because that’s the voice she uses when someone died. “Shit. Fuck. Shit. Who is it? His wife? His daughter? He already knows about his brothers. Fuck. What happened, Jody?”

“I can’t tell you, Dean,” Jody repeats stoically. “Please bring Mr. Novak in tomorrow?”

“Yeah, okay,” Dean answers, wind punched out of him. “Yeah sure.”

“You okay?” Jody asks, still gruff but her affection for him shining through.

“Yeah. I just – he’s lost so fucking much already. I don’t know, I don’t know how to tell him this.”

“You tell him that I need to speak to him. I’ll handle the rest. Okay?”

He nods, even though Jody can’t see it.

“And Dean? He’s got you now. That’s good.”

“Yeah,” Dean says though he’s not feeling it. Whatever happened, Dean isn’t going to be an adequate replacement.

“See you tomorrow, then.”

“Tomorrow,” Dean repeats, and the line goes dead.

He stays where he is and stares holes in the air until Charlie finds him.
“Dean? We’re opening. You’re needed in front.”

“I… Where’s Cas?”

“What happened?” Charlie catches on that something is wrong.

He gets it together enough to say, “Call from Jody.”

“Shit,” Charlie sighs and lets herself fall to the floor next to him.

“She wouldn’t say. Just that I should bring him in tomorrow.”

“Dean,” Charlie lays a hand on his knee, her voice gone soft, “it might not be as bad as you think it is right now.”

“No, it’s bad. I know Jody. I know the tone she uses when…” He doesn’t even want to say it out loud. Not saying it lets him cling to a shred of hope that maybe he’s misunderstood this.

Charlie sits back on her heels, accepting what he’s saying with a heavy sigh. “What do you want to do?”

“I… God, Charles, I gotta tell him. I just don’t know how.”

She nods thoughtfully. “Yeah.” Then she slaps his thigh. “Come on, up you go. You’re in no shape to work. So go to the back, find yourself a soda, calm down. And then go and talk to Cas. Stay with him. Make sure he gets through the night. Okay?”

“Thanks,” he smiles weakly.

“Well, I’m the Queen and this is my realm.” She gets up and holds out her hand.

He lets himself be dragged up and pushed in the direction of the kitchen.

The soda doesn’t help. It doesn’t help at all. Especially not when he’s not even finished with it when Cas comes in from the office.

He looks at Dean confused. “You’re here. You’re not working.”

“Charlie gave me the night off.” He clenches the can between his fingers until he hears the metal crack. “Cas, we… we gotta talk.”

The only answer he gets is silence, and when he looks up Cas has gone pale. He’s grasping the doorframe for support.

“I… I’m sorry.” And God, Dean can’t do this. He doesn’t have the right words for this.

By the time, a motion from the door makes him look up from his hands again, Cas is already gone.

“Fuck,” Dean curses because he’s fucking this up already.

He finds Cas in his room, in front of the open drawer, pulling the thick sweater over his hoodie.

“Cas, what are you doing?” Dean is next to him with a few steps, stilling his movement.

“You want me gone. I’m going.”
“God, Cas, no!” He pretty much rips the sweater out of Cas’ hands and crushes him into a tight hug. For a long moment, Cas doesn’t reciprocate. Then he clings on, desperately, even while his legs give out from under him. They slide to the floor together. Dean is holding Cas and then he’s taking his face in his hands and he’s peppering his forehead and his nose and his mouth with kisses even while he’s telling him, “Never, Cas. You hear me? Never!” Finally, he clings on tight again.

It takes a while, a long while, until both their heart rates have calmed down and they aren’t shaking anymore.

He should be questioning it, Dean thinks dimly, why he felt like his whole life was falling apart when he saw Cas ready to leave at Dean’s word. He gets it for Cas because Cas thought he was getting the rug pulled out from under him. But it doesn’t explain why Dean ended up shaking just as badly as Cas did.

He can’t, though. He can’t question that right now because he has to find the words to tell Cas what actually happened. He has to get him through this. His own heart can wait until after.

He takes Cas’ face in his hands and leans his forehead against Cas’ because he needs to talk and he needs him to hear but this is easier if they’re touching and if they’re too close for their eyes to focus. He’ll still feel the impact of his words but they can hold on to each other.

“Cas, baby, this is still bad.”

“Tell me.” His voice is not quite steady and he grips Dean’s arms for support but there’s strength and resolve underneath all that.

“Jody called me. She ran your prints and she got results and that part is all good. But she wants us to come in and she wouldn’t tell me why and – I think something has happened, Cas. Something has happened to your family. I don’t know what or when or to whom. But, Cas, you – you gotta be prepared for the worst.”

The grip on his arms becomes painful when every muscle in Cas’ body tenses up.

“It’s not your fault, sweetheart, it is never your fault. Whatever it is. You have to believe me, baby, you just have to.” Because Dean wouldn’t believe it. Anything happening to Sammy while he wasn’t there? While he was dealing with his own shit? It would be crushing him.

It is slow, very slow, the shift in Cas as the shock wears off. Then he suddenly straightens away from Dean. His eyes are blown wide like they can see the world with utter clarity.

“Claire. I killed her. I killed my daughter.”

Then he’s shaking again, hard enough that Dean would check for a fever if he didn’t have skin contact and knew that Cas’ temperature felt normal.

“Cas, baby, no. We don’t even know... And you didn’t… You did all you can, angel. You’re such a good person.” He doesn’t think there are enough pet-names in the world to make up for whatever happened but he knows that Cas thinks he’s going to stop using them when he finds out all the bad. So he’s putting as many endearments as he can into his words, in the hopes that Cas sees that he’s not a bad person. That Dean believes in him.

“And you’ve become so important. So important to me in such a short time. Please, baby, you gotta believe me. We’re going to get through this. I promise. You’re going to get through this.”
Dean’s words turn meaningless in his own ears, random strings of sweet nothings, of praises and endearments, meant to do nothing else than have a voice to ground them in the present. To draw them away from the abyss of another death. From the despair of living when someone else died.

He hears the door open at some point, Charlie, he’s sure, checking on them, but he doesn’t turn and he doesn’t stop telling Cas in every way and form that’s possible without actually using the words that he loves him, that he fell in love with him on the first day and doesn’t think he will ever stop loving him.

It’s not enough, he knows it’s not enough, and he doesn’t have the right to use the actual words, but it’s all he’s got, so he keeps going until the shaking finally subsides, until Cas’ body slumps heavily against him and he has to hold the both of them upright.

“Okay, baby, we gotta get you to bed. Cause we’re not sleeping on the floor. Can you help me with this?”

Cas lets himself be dragged up from the floor like a ragdoll and Dean deposits him on the bed.

“We’re going to get you out of these clothes, okay? You just help me as much as you can.”

But Cas doesn’t help, and so Dean kneels in front of him while he carefully removes the hoodie and then unbuttons Cas’ shirt.

“I think we’re leaving the t-shirt on for today, hmm? What do you think, Cas?”

The button-down comes off and Dean carefully folds it. Shoes are next and socks and then, “Cas, honey, can you help me with the jeans? Please?”

But whatever place Cas’ mind is in, it isn’t here. So Dean takes a deep breath. “Okay, Cas, I’m doing this this once. But if we’re ever doing this again, then it’s because we both want your pants off, understand? Not because you went catatonic on me.”

He fumbles with the fly, the buttons too tight and the position awkward, made even more awkward by the fact that he tries not to feel anything that’s underneath.

“Okay,” Dean sighs relieved, “now we only need to get these off.”

He takes Cas’ shoulders and softly pushes him backwards until he’s leaning against the pillows. That way, some weight is off Cas’ hips and he actually manages to get the pants off without too much trouble.

“You’re a lot easier than my Dad when he was drunk, I gotta say. Well, I like you a lot more, too.”

He draws the covers over Cas and stacks his clothes carefully. Cas is so neat with everything he owns, he wouldn’t want them crumpled.

“Okay, I’m going to get ready for bed and then I’m coming back. I’ll only be a few minutes.”

He hurries like he hasn’t ever hurried before and skips brushing his teeth. He doesn’t want Cas on his own. He doesn’t think there’s anything in the guestroom that he could use to harm himself but he’d still rather not he wakes up from this alone.

One thing he takes the time for, though, is to get two tall glasses of water from the kitchen.

When he comes back to the room, he’s relieved to find Cas in the exact same position he’s left him
in, the only difference being that he’s got his eyes screwed shut and his fists tightly balled against his side.

“I’m back, baby,” he announces himself softly before setting his glass down on the nightstand. “I need you to do something for me. And I have full trust that you can do it.”

He sits himself down next to Cas, glass still in hand.

“But you need to open your eyes. Please? Can you open your eyes for me?”

For the longest moment, nothing happens, so Dean rubs his hand up and down Cas’ arm. “You can do this, angel. You can be in this room with me instead of in your head. Come on.”

When Cas opens his eyes, the blue is broken and dimmed by red where it should be enhanced by white.

“It’s so good to see your eyes, to see you look at me,” Dean smiles, “you’re doing so well. Now I need you to drink some of this water. I’m going to help you with the glass, okay? But water is good. Hydration is good. We didn’t eat dinner tonight so you at least need to drink something.”

Truth to be told, Dean’s own stomach feels tied into so many knots that he doesn’t think he could eat anything if his life depended on it. But a little water is different.

“I’ll drink some, too, I have my own glass over here. If I can drink, you can drink, too.”

He holds the glass to Cas’ lips, tilting it until the clear liquid almost spills out. It’s a bit of a miracle, Dean thinks, that Cas actually opens his lips and even swallows.

He gets about half the glass into him before the water starts spilling over and Dean knows that Cas is done.

“That was very good. Thank you, baby. That’ll help.”

Dean quickly downs his own glass of water and turns the nightlight on and the other light off.

“Come on, you can curl up into me.”

And that’s the first thing Cas does without being physically prompted. He curls up into a fetal position, his head tucked closely into Dean’s side.

Dean doesn’t remember falling asleep but it is his alarm that rips him out of a dark place full of monsters, which he needs a moment to classify as a dream. He’s groggy and exhausted and seeing how his eyes and his head pound, he might as well not have slept at all.

He sits up with a groan and notices only then that Cas is not lying on him anymore. His heart stops for a second but then he finds him sitting against the headboard, completely still but for the eyes that are following Dean’s movements. It’s enough to know that Cas is coherent again.

He tries to find something to say, anything, but there aren’t any words. So he holds out his hand, palm up. There’s a moment of hesitation but then Cas lays his own hand over it. They sit like that for a few minutes, until Cas finally nods.

“I’m ready.”
It sounds almost eerie, after all these hours of Dean’s voice being the only one filling the air in the room.

“Okay,” Dean replies.

And that’s all the words they find while they get dressed, while they get coffee, while they try to eat a piece of dry toast. They don’t manage, really.

Charlie looks from Dean to Cas and back, clearly worried, but apparently doesn’t know anything to say either.

And then Dean gets his jacket and Cas doesn’t need to because he’s already wearing the trench coat, and they go to the Impala and they get in and they drive into town.

This time, there aren’t as many raised eyebrows at the station when they walk in hand in hand. But there are looks of pity that Dean doesn’t like at all.

Cas holds himself stiffly upright and his steps don’t falter. It’s only in the way that he clenches his hand around Dean’s that the extent of his fear is palpable.

Not even Victor gives them snark when he ushers them through into one of the interview rooms. Not the ones for the suspects, but one where there is more space than in Jody’s office.

Jody comes in directly after Victor, who stays but stays in the background.

“Mr. Novak. Dean.” She shakes their hands, even though Cas draws his hand away quickly and she has to take Dean’s left, because Cas doesn’t let go of his right. “Please take a seat.”

She has a clipboard with information with her and she files through the first few pages. “Mr. Novak, I have a few questions for you first.”

Cas nods tightly.

“We have run your information through the national database.” She hands Cas a sheet of paper. “Is this your basic information?”

Dean looks over the paper with Cas. Name, birthdate and place, height, eye and hair color, last known address, social security number.

Cas looks up at Jody and nods.

“Okay,” Jody says. “Okay. Mr. Novak, are you married to one Amelia Novak?”

Another nod from Cas.

“And you have a daughter named –,” she looks it up, “Claire?”

“Yes,” Cas breathes and Dean didn’t think there could be this much apprehension in one word.

“Okay,” Jody says again and sighs. “Mr. Novak, I am so sorry but I have bad news for you.”

Dean thinks Cas is going to break his hand but he nods at her to go on.

“It’s 11 months ago now. Mr. Novak, your wife had a car accident. It was not her fault. A tire blew on a truck on the highway and he swerved into her. She was dead immediately.”
For a second, Cas does not react. Then he asks, “Claire?”

“Your daughter was not in the car.”

Cas crumples for a moment and Dean almost thinks he’s going to black out, but instead he starts crying. Dean draws him closer and holds him upright. Jody looks at Dean questioningly.

“Cas? Should we take a break? Or can you hear more?”

“Just tell me.” It’s barely audible but Dean nods at Jody to go on.

“Claire was placed with CPS for about a month. Then,” she reads through her files again, “a Gabriel Novak took her in. So far, it is foster care but he’s applied for custody. They’re in the final stages of approval. Mr. Novak, you’ve not been declared dead but you’ve been missing for a long time. That you’re back changes the custody situation. But…” She looks at Dean again, slightly helpless.

Dean clears his throat. “Can he get her back? His daughter, I mean?”

Jody looks from Dean to Cas and back. “He’s got a steady address?”

“At the bunker, yeah. He’s doing a security overhaul for us. We’re in the process of formalizing the contract. That’s what we came for, ID and social security number.”

“Okay,” Jody jots that down. “The steady address and job are good. I can help with the ID. I already have the SSN card here. You are lucky that you have not actually been declared dead yet.”

She hands the card over and Cas takes it with shaking hands.

“Next thing on the list is your driver’s license, I guess. It won’t take long to renew it. We can check your eyesight, make a picture and have the license by tomorrow. And I can start the paperwork on a passport if you want that. Then you should have more than enough validation for custody proceedings.”

“He wants that,” Dean nods because there’s a weird mix of emotions on Cas’ face, somewhere in between horror and disbelief and utter relief and Dean isn’t sure how much of their conversation he is actually following. But he can explain it to him later.

Jody observes them quietly for a moment before she says, “There’ll be hearings. A psych evaluation. Mr. Novak, you’ve dropped off the grid for almost two years. CPS will want to make sure that you’re the right person to raise Claire.”

And judging from the way Cas’ breath hitches and he goes taut, the mix of emotions took a turn towards panic. Not good. Dean would really like to avoid him going catatonic again. “Do we have to do this today? This is a lot to take in at once.”

“No,” Jody sighs. “No, it can wait for a little while. I’ve put a notice in the system that he’s alive. That will automatically stall the custody case. But there’s going to be formalities. You’re going to need a lawyer.”

“Okay,” Dean says. “Okay. So what’s next? I mean, immediately next?” Because he doesn’t think Cas is going to hold it together much longer.

Jody takes a large envelope out of her files. One look at Cas and she hands it to Dean. “This is all the information I have. On the accident, on the current status of things. There’s – photos in there. Make sure you only look at them if you can handle it.”
Dean nods. “Okay. Thank you.” He really wants to conclude this and get out of here. Give Cas some space to breathe. So he changes the topic to matters at hand. Everything else can wait. “You said something about eyesight and driver’s license?”

“Yes, you’d have to follow one of our officers over to the evaluation area. It won’t take long.”

“Cas?” Dean leans forward until he can look Cas in the eyes. “I know this is a lot but are you up for that?”

Cas’ eyes are bright and glassy and they still look like he’s not processing anything he’s heard. He whispers to Dean, “She’s alive.”

And Dean knows it’s the shock and that the rest of it will hit him later but for now, this is okay. It’s better than catatonic anyway.

“Yeah, Cas, your daughter’s alive.” He hugs him and then he nods at Jody. “He’s up for the test.”

Cas gets up on his own when Dean gets up. Cas hands him the SSN card and Dean packs it into the envelope with everything else. They follow Jody to a younger officer who greets them friendly.

“Can you come with me, please, Sir?”

Dean automatically starts following the officer but Jody holds him back. “Dean? Do you have a second? I don’t think they need you in there.”

Dean bites his lip worriedly. But even though Jody framed it as a polite request he knows it’s more of an order. “Cas? That okay with you? Can you do this on your own? I’ll be right over here.”

Cas needs a moment to comprehend but then he squares his shoulders and lets go of Dean’s hand. He follows the young officer and he doesn’t even look like he wants to melt into the walls and be invisible. Dean breathes a sigh of relief and turns back to Jody.

“Step into my office for a second?”

He follows her and she closes the door.

“Dean…”

“Is this going to be a lecture?” he interrupts her. “Because excuse me but I’m kind of wrung out. I’m not in the mood for a lecture.”

Jody sighs. “No. Not a lecture. You’re too old for that. But a question. You and him – what is it that you two are to each other?”

Dean shifts uncomfortably. “Why’d you ask?” he asks back gruffly. Maybe it wouldn’t come out quite as harshly if he had any idea what the answer to that question was.

“Frankly? Because he’s going to need all the help he can get. Both personally and if he wants his daughter back. Because honestly, Dean, right now, I wouldn’t be sure whether I’d want to give his daughter into his care. He looks anything but well-adjusted. CPS is going to see that, too. But with you and Charlie at his side… Chances might still be slim but a bit better.”

“How?”

“Gabriel Novak, he’s single. Living alone. If you’re – if you and Cas are something of a stable family unit, and you have Charlie as a female influence,” she shrugs, “you can argue that.”
“Jody… Cas and I… we don’t know each other that long. Any judge’s going to see this. And we’re not even talking prejudices about the two dudes thing here.”

“All I’m saying is that as he is right now, he’s got no chance on his own.”

And yeah, there isn’t really a way to argue against that. “I’ll talk to Sammy,” Dean sighs. “See what he says. He’s a lawyer after all.”

“Good idea,” Jody nods.

“He doesn’t realize it yet – with his wife,” Dean adds after a pause because he’s pretty sure Jody heard the relief in Cas’ voice. “He’s going to realize it eventually. But he – he loves his daughter so much. He was scared she got killed because he didn’t come home.”

There’s compassion in Jody’s eyes even though he knows she likes things orderly and families together and doesn’t approve of running away from your problems. “If it helps any, I don’t think it would have made a difference. If he was home. His wife was on her way to church for a community event. I’m guessing she would have gone there either way.”

“I’ll tell him. When the realization sets in,” Dean says gratefully.

Jody nods curtly, going back to business. “I’ll see that I get his license before the party. I’ll bring it over with me. If I need him back at the station, I’ll call. But for now, I think you need to get things sorted. There’s info who to contact about Claire in the envelope. For the official proceedings. I also included Gabriel Novak’s phone number. Probably shouldn’t have done it. But since he’s his brother,” she shrugs. “I’ll give the other party your number if that’s alright with you.”

“You’re a good person, Jody. I ever tell you this?”

She rolls her eyes and shoos him out. “It’s my job, Dean. Now go get your boyfriend. And drive safely.”

“Yes, Ma’am.” He doesn’t correct her on the boyfriend part.

Cas is already finished with the test and the photo by the time Dean gets back. The young officer is waiting next to him, obviously torn between being uncomfortable and not wanting to let him wait on his own.

“I’m here, we can go.”

Cas nods and Dean offers his hand again. Because he’s going to be worrying about handholding becoming second nature later. Right now, Cas is hurting and Dean’s going to do what he can to make it better. However little that might be.

When they step out into the cold winter air, Cas stops. “Dean, can we… Can we not go back right now?”

Dean thinks of the artificial lights at the bunker and nods. “Where do you want to go? Just drive around for a bit?”

“Can we go to the lake?”

Dean doesn’t need to ask which lake Cas means, he already knows. “The one behind the cabin.”
Cas nods, so Dean nods, too.

The drive is silent. The envelope sits between them in the middle of the car. It sits there like a wall, even though Dean needs both hands on the steering wheel anyway. The backroads aren’t all that good for Baby, not with all the snow. He knows how to get to the lake, though, and it doesn’t actually take that long.

He hasn’t really planned for a hike outside, and neither has Cas, who has managed to remember the fingerless gloves but neither his warm sweater nor the mittens. Well, they can warm up again when they’re back and that’s a lot better than freezing and not having a home to get back to.

There’s a small path going around the lake. In summer, it is popular. Now, it is deserted. They have to wade through ankle deep snow but at least that means there’s enough grip that they won’t slide on sheets of ice and break their necks.

Cas stops when they’ve reached the edge of the water, hands deep in his pockets, eyes closed against the wind. He breathes in the cold air in long hungry gulps.

Dean huddles closer into his jacket. The wind over the half-frozen lake is biting into his skin. Yet Dean doesn’t think he has ever seen Cas standing this tall. It’s like the world of humans can’t touch him. It’s just him and the wind. So Dean stays back, too. He wants to retreat to the safety of Baby, away from the openness of the sky and the water. He is an outsider here while Cas belongs.

But Baby is ten minutes back where the road ended, and Cas has endured Marv for him, so Dean can endure the sky and feeling small and insignificant under it for Cas.

“Can we walk?” The wind takes Cas’ words and blows them away but Dean understands and falls in step next to him.

“Hand?” Cas asks and Dean complies, curling his fingers around Cas’ to stave off the worst of the cold.

A while in, the path becomes more shielded, flanked by trees on both sides, snow less deep and wind less piercing.

“I was never what she wanted.”

“Huh?” Dean has gotten so used to the silence that he didn’t actually expect Cas to talk.

“I tried. But I’m not… I’m not a good liar. And the head of household me was a lie.”

“Okay?” Dean asks carefully.

“I tried… I went to church every Sunday but… I knew I wasn’t…”

“Religious?”

“Straight.”

“Oh.” And because he’s petty like this, even at a time like this, and because he had panicked when he had thought Cas was going to leave, he asks, “So, she wasn’t what you wanted, either?”

“I didn’t marry on a whim, Dean. She was a lot of the things I wanted.”

And he guesses he deserves the rebuke because this conversation isn’t about him and he shouldn’t try to make it, but it still doesn’t feel good.
“A lot of the things I wanted. But not everything. And I’m a bad liar.” Cas sighs. “She needed longer than you, though. To figure out that I was lying. And she took it worse when she caught the lie.”

“She knew? That you aren’t straight?”

“Not in so many words. But yes, she knew.”

“You didn’t talk about it?” He gets that, he guesses, even though he has no idea how that’s supposed to work. Lisa had known. They’d talked about it. She wasn’t necessarily happy about the extra competition but he thinks he’d have been a lot more tempted to act out if he’d had to keep his attraction to Dr. Sexy and his cowboy boots secret.

“She prayed for me. And she cried. A lot.”

“Ouch.” He squeezes Cas’ hand because he has no idea what else to do.

“The war was – welcome. In that way.”

“Is that why you didn’t go back?”

“No.”

There something wrong with this no. Dean can’t put his finger on it but something about the tone raises all his alarms and he doesn’t think they’re ready for something else. Not with everything that’s been stirred up today. So he tries to steer the conversation away from the abyss quickly. “Do you still love her?” And maybe that had been a bit too quick because you shouldn’t be asking questions when you don’t want to hear the answer.

His hand gets jerked back when Cas stops in the middle of the path. Dean has no choice but to stop, too.

“I thought the answer to that was clear.”

Dean shakes his head, because no, to him it isn’t clear. He can see that he’s something to Cas. But where that leaves him in relation to his wife, he’s got no idea.

Cas tugs at his hand until Dean looks at him. “I don’t love her like a husband should love his wife. I’ve known that for a while. She did, too. I didn’t want her to die. But I didn’t want to be with her, either.”

And oh, maybe Dean had wanted the answer after all. Since it’s this answer. He breathes a relieved sigh and tries his best to keep it silent because fuck, Cas’ wife is still dead and he shouldn’t be happy, but he isn’t sure he manages because Cas is doing the head tilt thing again. So Dean smiles sheepishly. “I’m sorry. I had assumed that… since you wanted to go back…”

“Dean, I… I didn’t. I never wanted… When I came to the shelter… I hadn’t even… I…” Cas is losing his voice rapidly.

“It’s okay, Cas. Take it slow.” Dean runs his hands up and down Cas’ arms, a soothing motion, though his gloveless fingers are protesting immediately.

It takes a moment for Cas to take a deep breath and re-center himself but then he starts anew, still somewhat haltingly but steadier. “It was raining for days. I went to the mall. Might have been spring. There was yelling. Someone yelling at me. Me yelling at someone. I think. It’s – fuzzy. That was the last time. The last time I talked to someone. Before you.”
“Panic attack?” Dean asks and Cas nods.

“I didn’t try again, after.”

“Well, if it helps any, you’re doing well.”

Cas looks down at where Dean’s hands are still rubbing slowly over his arms, though Dean’s concentrated the motion at Cas’ wrists now where he can keep his fingers under the trench coat and catch a bit of warmth that way. “Because of this,” Cas says quietly. “Because of you.”

“Nah,” Dean shakes his head. “You’re the one doing the work. I’m just along for the ride.” Cas frowns at him so Dean adds, “I’m not saying that I don’t mean anything to you. Or that you don’t mean anything to me. Because you do. I’m here for you all the way. Just don’t sell yourself short.”

“All the way?” Cas asks.

“Yes,” Dean nods.

“Because you didn’t – you didn’t want to meet – Claire.” Cas hesitates on his daughter’s name as if it is hard to even say it out loud.

“That’s not true,” Dean says.

“But you said –“

“I said you had to go alone, I know. But not because of your daughter. I just couldn’t – your wife and you together – I just couldn’t.”

“Oh.” There’s surprise there but also something different. Something deeper.

A painful chuckle finds its way out of Dean’s chest. “You have caught on to this only now?”

“I – wasn’t sure. You were – You said you’re flirting a lot. I wasn’t sure.”

That’s the level of painful honesty, so Dean grimaces and says, “Yeah, well, with you, I was trying not to flirt. I was trying to be your friend and nothing else. But – that doesn’t seem to work so well.” He bites his lips and looks anywhere but at Cas because talking about his feelings is so not his forte. But he’s come this far. “So, any mixed signals you’re getting from me, all me trying to give you space. No mixed signals in what I feel.”

Cas counters Dean’s attempt to avoid looking at him by literally stepping so far into his personal space that he can’t look anywhere but at Cas. “What if I don’t need space?”

“I – was sure. You were – You said you’re flirting a lot. I wasn’t sure.”

But there is something steely in Cas’ gaze, a resolve that makes Dean’s mouth go dry. Because Cas might be fucked up but when he forgets that, he is forceful and direct and Dean has a feeling that if Cas sets his mind to it, he gets what he wants.

“Then tell me what you need, Cas,” Dean asks and holds Cas’ gaze.

Instead of an answer, Cas presses his mouth to Dean’s.

Dean’s lips go pliant as Cas presses into him. And okay, Dean guesses this is an answer to his question, too, even though it has no words. After that, his world focuses down to Cas and his lips and warmth, and to how he’s suddenly not freezing anymore because a low heat is pooling in his
When Cas finally lets go and takes a half-step back, Dean has to calm down for a moment before he finds his voice. “Okay, point taken.” But it comes out low and breathless and just as affected by the kiss as he is.

“I’m Cas,” Cas says. “Doesn’t matter what it says on the ID. I’m Cas.”

“Oh, okay,” Dean answers because he thinks he gets what that means.

“And we’re Cas and Dean.”

“Cas and Dean,” Dean repeats and it sounds less like two names run together and more like a promise.

“Good,” Cas nods. “I want to go home and look at the envelope now.”

Dean makes hot cocoa for all of them. It’s the only thing he can think of while the envelope is sitting thick and menacing in the middle of the kitchen table. They’ve filled Charlie in on the outline of what’s happened and she’s hugged Cas, who went completely stiff, and told him her condolences. Now, the two of them are sitting at the kitchen table and waiting for Dean, and all Dean can think of are Jody’s words about how Cas can’t get his daughter back on his own. So Dean takes the ‘Cas and Dean’ and adds ‘and Claire’ to it mentally and it works and it doesn’t at the same time. Because he’s known Cas for all of a week and he doesn’t know his daughter at all and Dean has given up on being the responsible father type after his one and only try at it. Well, at least from that try he knows how this works. Only that didn’t end so well for him. So maybe he doesn’t know how this works after all.

He sighs and brings the mugs over to the others. No use getting tied up into knots before they haven’t even checked the info and decided what to do.

“So, how do we do this?” Charlie asks nervously.

Instead of answering, Cas draws the envelope over to himself, determination in his gaze.

“You sure about that?” Dean asks. “I trust you, man, but Jody said there’s photos and it’s not pretty.”

“I’ve been in a war, Dean. I’ve seen bodies.”

“None of them were your wife,” Dean counters.

“But some of them were someone’s wives,” Cas says.

“Okay,” Dean gives in because he doesn’t think he can keep determined Cas from doing what he wants to do.

Cas rips open the envelope and drops the pile of files on the table. He looks at every sheet of paper before handing it over to Dean who in turn hands it to Charlie once he’s done.

The first part deals solely with Cas. It’s copies of his army files, including his discharge. There aren’t many records of his civilian life. Dean guesses that that’s a different office and Jody didn’t have quite as easy access to it as to the military files. There is a missing person’s report filed by Cas’ wife but there aren’t even copies of Cas’ birth or marriage certificates.
Then the files move on to the accident. The police report is short. The evidence about the accident was conclusive and there’s no doubt how it happened. The police photos still turn Dean’s stomach. It’s not like he hasn’t seen bodies before. He identifies them often enough. But that’s clinical and detached, and he has no real relationship to the people who he happens to know because they get soup from him every so often. This is messy and bloody, and it’s Cas’ wife.

Cas stoically flips through one photo after another, until the pile runs out and they’re back to official papers. He slows down then, reading carefully before giving the papers on.

Dean reads his way through the evaluations and documentations. They’ve got everything from the CPS’ original evaluation of Claire to the protocols of the home visits with Gabriel. It seems to Dean that the reports get worse over time. The agent recommends settling the adoption proceedings quickly to provide a stable home for an unstable teenager but Dean thinks what he’s really saying is that he wants off the case. Dean’s got a stack of papers about himself in a folder somewhere and they don’t read any better.

“She’s in trouble,” Charlie summarizes what Dean was thinking. But then, Charlie’s got a stack of CPS papers, too.

“Yeah,” Dean agrees.

Cas fastens them with a look. “Why do you think she’s in trouble?”

Charlie sighs. “She’s switched case worker three times. And with this last one, there are – blanks. Things he isn’t telling.”

“She ran away, most likely,” Deans nods. “If they put that in the report it’s a problem for the adoption hearing. So they write around it and you got to look for it between the lines.”

“Why is she running, though?” Charlie muses. “Is your brother a bad guy?”

Cas shakes his head.

“So is she running away or towards something? Are there any relatives she’d rather stay with? But it seems like your mother outright refused to take her in.”

“No other relatives. I don’t think.”

Dean lets himself fall back in his chair. “Then she’s looking for you. Only thing that makes sense. Her mom is dead, she tries to find her dad. It’s what I would do.”

“Well, she’ll find out soon enough. Jody gave them the info that Cas has shown up, right?”

Dean nods. “She gave the info to their lawyer. He’ll give it on.”

“You gonna call Sammy?” Charlie asks.

“Don’t call him that,” Dean says automatically and turns to Cas. “Sam’s a civil rights attorney. He’s got some experience with adoption cases. He can decipher all the legalese and get us a strategy. If that’s what you want.”

“Us?” Cas asks.

Dean swallows hard but manages something that approaches a semi-confident smile. This decision he’s already made. “Assuming you want her back. And to stay here. And have us help with this.”
He ignores how Charlie’s gaze is burning a hole into his skull and keeps his focus on Cas, who looks equal parts grateful and scared to death. Dean doesn’t think that has anything to do with him, though. It’s all about his daughter.

“I just want to make sure she’s safe,” Cas mumbles.

It softens Charlie’s eyes. She stretches out her hand as if to lay it on Cas’ shoulder but then thinks better of it and lets it drop. “You want to talk to her?”

Cas averts his eyes but he nods. “Very much.”

“Okay.” Dean nods. “Then we’ll see what we have to do to make this go right.” He takes his cell phone out and finds Sammy’s contact. Because if there’s one thing he knows it’s that when there are lawyers already involved, you better not try to do shit on your own.

It rings a few times before an exasperated voice answers. “Dean? I’m at work, can you call back during my lunch-break?”

“Sam…”

It takes only that one word.

“Fuck, Dean, give me a second. Okay, door’s closed, what happened?”

“Umm,” Dean is speechless for a moment at how well his brother can still read him. Then he gets his thoughts together. “Do you remember the guy I told you about?”

“Yeah, Dean, I remember. Everything okay?”

“He needs your help, Sam. We need your help. He’s got a daughter and his wife’s had an accident and he’s been missing long enough to be assumed dead and there are adoption proceedings and….”

“Stop,” Sam halts him. “You’re too fast. I’m not getting all of this. You have to slow down. No, wait. You know what, just give me Cas.”

And Dean is speechless some more. He holds the phone out to Cas. “He wants to talk to you.”

Cas shyly takes the phone and then turns his back to them. “Hello, Sam.”

Dean’s eyebrows rise to his hairline and he looks at Charlie. “Did you tell Sam Cas’ name? Cause I’m pretty goddamn sure I didn’t. How did he know?”

Charlie shrugs. “Told you Cas stole the info.”

Dean shakes his head and looks over to where Cas has moved to the other side of the room to talk to his brother. And by the looks of it, he is talking. Expressively, too. It’s most definitely not the first time those two have talked. “Did you trace all outgoing calls?”

Charlie levels him with a stare.

“Just asking.”

“I did, for a matter of fact, but there’s Christmas surprises at stake.”

“Yeah,” Dean says, “not anymore I think. There’s a child’s life at stake now.”
“You really want to do this, huh?” Charlie asks.

“Yes,” Dean nods. “Kid deserves a family. God knows you and I never had that. Gotta make it right for someone.”

Charlie sighs deeply but she says, “I get it. Okay. I get it.”

“Can you dig up some info on Cas’ brother? To make sure she’s in good hands?”

“I can,” Charlie says hesitantly. “But Dean, at some point we gotta talk about this. Because I’m keeping a low profile here. And if we’re crawling with lawyers and CPS agents, that’s not a low profile anymore.”

“Your papers are solid, though,” Dean answers.

“They are,” Charlie nods.

“And Jody’s got your back.”

“She does,” Charlie sighs and looks up when Cas comes back to the table.

He hands Dean his phone back. “He wants you to fax him the papers.”

“Alright,” Dean nods and makes as if to get up, but Charlie holds him back.

“Cas, can you sit down again for a moment? There’s stuff we got to talk about if we’re really doing this.”

“Charlie, you sure?” Dean asks.

“Yes. That’s his kid’s life. He needs to know the facts.”

Cas looks from one of them to the other but sits back down quietly.

“You already know that I got a, uhh, skill set that got me in trouble before. So, a few years back, it got me into more trouble than I could handle. Much as it pains me, my only chance to get out of that was the law enforcement. So I cut a deal. Made my statements, provided my evidence, brought down some big shots. Got into witness protection in return. Strict conditions about no more hacking of course.” Her face crumples at that as if this is the worst part about it. “So anyway, Dean knows. Sam knows. Jody knows. But that’s it. Witness protection only works if you stay silent about it.”

Cas doesn’t answer, just takes the information in.

“Look, Cas,” Charlie sighs. “I’m not even that worried about myself. If someone catches wind of me, I’ll disappear. It’s going to suck because I actually kind of love it here and Dean’s the best big brother a girl could hope for. So I’d hate losing that. But I’ve done it before. I’ve got no idea what consequences my existence has to a custody case, though. I’m guessing they’re going to poke much deeper into Dean’s files than mine if – when you decide you want your daughter back seeing how you two are – a couple?” She makes it a question but she doesn’t wait for them to answer, “and there’s a good chance that my paper trail doesn’t unravel. The feds were thorough. But I want to be straight with you. If push comes to shove, I’m a risk.”

There is something incredibly lost in Cas’ gaze when he shakes his head. “Thank you. But I’m the biggest risk to my daughter.”

“Cas,” Charlie’s voice is sympathetic.
“No,” Cas shakes his head, “no, you and Dean – you are assets.”

He attempts a smile that turns out more as a grimace. He seems to notice, because he turns away from them, clumsily starts collecting the files that are still scattered on the table.

Charlie helplessly looks at Dean, who shrugs. Cas’ whole body is closed up. It’s not a good idea to try to physically comfort someone when every part of their being scream to leave them alone.

“Thank you for this, Charlie,” Dean attempts a smile. Then he bends over the table to help scooping up the files. “I’ll go fax these to my brother,” he says to no one in particular, and then goes to do just that.

It takes only half an hour for Sam to call back. Dean takes it as a good sign even when Sam starts out with, “Dude, what the hell?”

“Have you read the files?” Dean asks stoically.

“‘Make sure that if we file we file under Illinois jurisdiction’? Want to explain that note to me?”

“Well, Cas lived in Pontiac, Illinois, didn’t he? So that should be the applicable legislation?”

“Dean, don’t even try. You can con anyone in the world but not me,” Sam’s frustration is audible. “There’s only one reason you could be interested in Illinois legislation. And it doesn’t even make sense. Unless you’ve secretly got married.”

“I haven’t,” Dean grumbles.

“But I’m still right, ain’t I?” Sam says, only slightly calmer.

“Depends on what you think,” Dean mumbles.


Dean bites his lips. “Kind of did, yeah.”

“You planning on marrying Cas?” Sam asks sharply.

Dean doesn’t answer. The question isn’t important yet. Thing is, he has no idea how long the law case will drag out. Has no idea whether the question will become important by then.

“Because he’s found out that his wife is dead about five minutes ago. You’re aware of that, right?”

“Yes, Sam, I’m aware,” Dean manages to bite out.

“Good. So at least not all common sense has left you. That’s something.”

Okay, so Sam isn’t taking this well, after all. Not unexpected, he guesses.

“Dean, are you even listening? That’s a kid’s life you’re toying with here.”

Suddenly, Dean is angry. “I’m not toying with anything. I’m trying to help.”

“Like you did with Ben?”
Dean grits his teeth to stop himself from screaming in frustration. “Ben had nothing to do with what happened with Lisa.”

“No, Dean, Ben had everything to do with what happened with Lisa. Ben was the whole effing reason for Lisa.”

“Shut up.”

But it doesn’t have the effect it’s supposed to have. “Oh, fuck’s sake, Dean, grow up.”

He wants to answer with ‘no, you grow up’ but being childish is only more ammunition against him so he doesn’t. “Did he call you?” he demands instead.

“What?”

“Cas. Did he call you about Christmas? Because I sure as hell didn’t tell you his name. But you knew it.”

There’s no answer from Sam and that’s about as much of an admission of guilt as he needs.

“We’re not going to fight,” Dean grits out. “You don’t have to tell me, so that I can honestly be surprised. But he’s trying to do something nice for me here. So if for some odd reason you should find yourself in Kansas over Christmas, we’re not hashing any of this out. We’re going to smile and eat pie and give each other awkward presents. And we’re going to pretend to like them. We’re not ruining this for him. Understood?”

If there wasn’t the faint noise of breathing on the other end of the line, Dean would think Sam had hung up on him.

Finally though, Sam sighs. It sounds defeated. “Don’t contact the other side. If their lawyer contacts you, give them my office number. I’ll try to figure out how to proceed with this. No matter what Cas decides to do, we want to avoid going to court. All that’ll do is dredge up everything ugly that’s ever happened in their family and no kid should have to go through that. Besides, it looks like she’s in enough trouble already.”

“You noticed that, too, huh?” Dean says.

“I’m not even sure whether it reads more like your file or like mine. The petty theft sounds like you.”

“The running is more your style, though.”

They both chuckle quietly though there is nothing per se funny about this.

“Glad you always came back,” Dean says.

“Glad you never got locked up for good.”

They’re both silent for a moment.

Then Sam says quietly, “So you’re sure this isn’t like Lisa? It’s not your savior complex making you do this? Because Dean, if it is, it’s fucking unfair to Cas.”

“I’m not taking advantage of him.”

“Yeah, Dean, I know that you’re trying to do the right thing. But you keep saying things like ‘I’m just trying to help’. And I don’t think that’s how Cas sees you. Actually, I don’t think he sees you
like that at all. So you better make sure that you know your feelings towards him and act that way. If you’re in love with him, fine. Tell him that, let him get over his grief, work from there. If you’re just helping him, better make that very clear right now. Because he’s lost three close family members over the course of the last few years. He can’t use another blow.”

“I know,” Dean says because there isn’t much else to say.

“Okay. I’ll call you back when I know more.”

“Text Charlie with your arrival time. She’ll arrange for someone to pick you up from the airport.”

Sam snorts. “You’re very sure of yourself, aren’t you?”

Dean half-smiles. “I’ve got a hunch.”

Cas, Dean and Charlie are quiet with each other for the rest of the day, going through the motions of normal life, or at least what counts as normal for them. There doesn’t seem anything else to say so Dean doesn’t. But he brushes a hand over Cas’ arm or his shoulder or his back every time he walks by. A silent comfort where words fail.

When the day is finally over, Cas is in bed before Dean, so Dean wordlessly slips under the covers next to him.

Life has taken a surreal turn this past week and as hard as he’s fallen for Cas, the stakes are suddenly so much higher. For his own heart, too.

The bright laughter of a boy wants to find its way into his thoughts, a fierce monkey-hold on him making him topple over into the freshly raked leaves of the front lawn, chasing away the knowledge that this is not what he wanted. That Lisa is not what he wanted. Ben was, though.

Dean turns to shut off the light.

“My wife is dead.”

Dean pauses, hand already on the off switch. He turns back without turning off the lights. “Yeah, she’s dead.”

“Do you think she is in Heaven?”

Dean can’t even begin to describe how much he is the wrong person to answer that question. “You should ask a priest, not me.”

There’s a mirthless laugh from Cas. “Don’t think a priest would particularly approve of me these days.”

“Then they’re wrong about you,” Dean replies.

“If they’re wrong about things, why do you want me to ask them my questions?” Cas asks.

“You’re quite the smartass, you know that?”

But Cas doesn’t look like he thinks this funny. “Either you believe that they are the authority on matters of God and morale, or you don’t. If you don’t, why send me to them?” he insists.
Dean sighs and leans back against the headboard. “Because I have no answers. Why don’t you tell me what you think instead. Is she in Heaven?”

There is a long pause. If the lights were out, Dean might think that Cas has fallen asleep. But he’s got his knees pulled up all the way to his chest and is staring into space with a concentrated frown. “I don’t think she’s in Hell,” is what he finally says.

“That’s a start.”

“Sometimes I wish I wasn’t going to Hell.”

Dean’s eyes turn wide. “Dude, what the fuck?”

Cas turns to him but there is no particular emotion on his face, just a quiet sort of compliance with his fate. “I’m going to Hell, Dean. That is very certain.”

Dean shakes his head to clear it. Because Cas’ calm statement is entirely spooky. “Why would you think that?”

Cas doesn’t answer, so Dean grabs for the most plausible explanation.

“So you’re saying I’m going to Hell, too?”

Cas narrows his eyes at him. “Why would you be going to Hell, Dean?”

“Well, if what we’re doing - or feeling,” because they haven’t actually done that much, “is so wrong, then I’m going to end up in Hell with you, won’t I?”

“Dean, this is not about… Even if it was, it would be me breaking my marriage covenant, not you.”

“Well, there’s still the whole gay thing.”

Cas sighs. “Does it help if I say that I was damned before I met you?”

“No, not really,” Dean shakes his head. “Why are you damned?”

“No.” The statement brooks no argument.

“Cas, man…” But Dean’s pretty sure that he can’t get anything out of Cas that Cas doesn’t want to tell. So he switches gears and asks, “You really believe in Heaven and Hell?”

“Yes, Dean, I do.” It sounds exhausted.

“Well, then I hope she’s in Heaven. Your wife.”

“You don’t know her,” Cas points out.

“No. But I know you. And she’s the mother of your daughter. Also, I don’t wish eternal torture on anyone. Not even on Marv.”

He notices his mistake in the choice of joke when Cas doesn’t answer. He looks small and pale, drawn in a way that he hadn’t looked anymore in the past few days. Yeah, words are failing here. So Dean holds his arm out for Cas to cuddle into his side.

When he hesitates, Dean says, “Come on. If you’re sure you’re going to get tortured for all eternity you might as well take what little comfort I can offer right now.”
He’s not necessarily sure that that makes Cas feel any more deserving of the comfort but he does scoot over. Dean wraps him tightly into his arms. It doesn’t take more than a minute before the heaving of his shoulders and the subsequent wetness against Dean’s shirt show that Cas is silently crying.

Dean stretches out one arm to turn off the lights and then settles back against the headboard to hold Cas through it.

Dean must have fallen asleep at some point because the alarm wakes him up. It seems trite and unnecessary on a day like this, so Dean shuts it off. But he can’t fall back asleep. Yesterday keeps repeating itself in his mind, from the police station to Cas’ adamant insistence that he’s damned.

So he finally turns over and finds Cas awake. His eyes are red-rimmed and his face is still ashen. The fact that this is visible in the colored lights of the nightlight is not a good sign.

“Did you sleep?” Dean asks him.

“Some,” Cas answers but his voice sounds hoarse. So ‘some’ is probably an exaggeration.

“Want to try to sleep some more?”

Cas shakes his head.

“Me, either,” Dean sighs.

They lie in silence for a while, staring at the display of stars on the ceiling.

“Dean?” Cas asks.

“Hmm?”

“Have you ever wanted a family? Of your own, I mean.”

The question comes out of the blue, Dean’s thoughts still hung up on Heaven and Hell but of course it makes sense. Cas wanted a family once. And then it all fell apart. Well, Dean knows how that feels.

“Yeah, I have. I’ve actually had one, once.”

It feels like a confession. That he had allowed himself to believe in a happily ever after once in his life. It scares him shitless that he’s pretty much doing the exact same thing again. Not exactly the same, though, because he’s never felt for Lisa what he feels for Cas.

“What happened?”

His throat is too dry, so he has to cough a few times before getting the words out. “Didn’t work out.”

“No,” Cas shakes his head, “what happened?”

It’s easier not to look at Cas so it’s back to the purple stars while he thinks about how to condense this down into something understandable that also won’t choke him. “Her name was Lisa. We were together for two years. I moved in with her and everything.”

The only person he ever committed to enough to move in together. But Sam was right, wasn’t he? It
had never really been about Lisa. Yeah, he misses her every so often. Her way of staying patient with him where Charlie resorts to either sarcasm or violence. Her softness where everything else in his life is all angles and sharp edges. He is okay with the fact that their relationship ended, though. It’s the other part he isn’t okay with.

“She had a son. Ben. Not my kid. Might as well have been, though. Loved him like he was mine. But we weren’t married, Lisa and I, so I never got to adopt him. Had no rights to him when we split up. I tried to keep in touch, but… The new guy didn’t want me around.”

Still weird, how a kid that isn’t even yours can get so ingrained in your heart. How you can miss them so much for so long. Hell, he still thinks about Ben, especially when someone with kids comes in to the shelter. But Lisa has his number. He made her promise to call if she got in trouble. Or if something was wrong. And she texts every so often. Maybe he’ll get a picture for Christmas. Maybe he can ask for one. No, better not. They have a family now, he doesn’t need to disturb them at Christmas of all days.

“I don’t talk about this much, Cas,” he says honestly. “Feels like getting the rug ripped out from under you, being a father and then not being one.”

Cas is silent for a moment before he hesitantly says. “Would you do it again?”

“With Lisa? No. I’d save all of us the heartache.”

Cas mulls that over quietly for a while, before he says. “I have a daughter.”

He’s not looking up at Dean and Dean is not sure that at this particular moment he knows anything to say that makes this better. It’s not like he has his own feelings on this point figured out yet.

“Yeah,” he nods. “I’m aware. And even though Cas is still staring at some empty point in the room, he gives him a small smile. “I’m still here. I’m not pulling a Sam. I’m not running.”

That causes Cas to look up, if only for a second, before he guiltily looks away. “I called your brother.”

Dean almost laughs at the awkward admission. “Yeah, Cas, I know.”

“You do?” Cas turns back to him.

“You’re a shitty liar, I told you. And you didn’t cover your tracks after snooping around. Also, you didn’t instruct Sam well enough. I got suspicious when he knew your name.”

“Oh.”

“He didn’t tell me what you talked about. And he made it very clear that he will punch me if I hurt you. Which, for the record, I’m not planning to do.”

“He should be worrying about me hurting you. I already did when I told you I was married.”

And yeah, that had hurt. But, “I don’t break easy, Cas. If I did, I’d be gone already.” And because he realizes that Cas might take that the wrong way, he adds, “Not, ‘gone’ as in leaving you. ‘Gone’ as in…” but then he notices that this doesn’t sound any better, either, so he shuts up.

“Gone as in - length of rope?” Cas asks quietly.

“Gun, more likely,” Dean answers grudgingly, “but yeah, that.”
Cas nods, though the words are a faint whisper. “Yeah, me too.”

There’s a small ball of dread forming in Dean’s stomach. “Do you still – do you still feel that way?”

“I came here, didn’t I?” Cas says with a grimace that Dean thinks is supposed to be a smile.

“You came here in a hoodie. In December,” Dean points out. Freezing is still a pretty awful death, but it’s a hell of a lot faster than starving.

“It wasn’t snowing yet.”

“Might as well have been, though.”

Cas shakes his head. “You keep your guns in a metal closet in the office. You have it padlocked but I could have stolen the keys from your pocket at any time. I may be a shitty liar but your security is atrocious.”

Dean is taken aback for a moment but then he nods. “Alright, point taken. If you wanted a quick way out, you’d find it. So we’re going through this the messy way.”

When his phone rings, Dean has both hands in the water because he’s washing the meat for the soup kitchen. He’d let it ring, but the only person with a reason to call him is Sam, and if this is Sam, it could be important. So he quickly wipes one hand on his jeans and clamps the phone between his ear and his shoulder. “What’s up, Sam?”

“Who are you?” And that’s definitely not Sam’s voice.

“Beg your pardon?”

“Who are you and why does my lawyer have your number and tells me not to call it?”

“Shit,” Dean curses. “Give me a sec.” He sets the meat that has almost tumbled out of his hands on a paper towel to dry and wipes his hands off. Then he turns back to the phone. “You’re Gabriel Novak.” It is the only explanation.

“Our lawyer?” Gabriel’s voice is sharp.

Dean sighs. “Your brother’s lawyer. Whatever. Look, man, I know this is all somewhat sudden but at least he’s not dead.”

“Yes and I will jubilate when I’ve actually talked to him.” Sarcasm is dripping off Gabriel’s voice. “If he actually wants to talk to me, that is. Which I guess he doesn’t because he contacted my frikking lawyer instead of calling me!”

“Uhh, that was mostly by accident, I think,” Dean stutters.

“So he didn’t want to contact me at all?”
“No! That’s not what I mean,” and really, Dean is out of his depth here. “Look, we didn’t know. About his wife. Or about you and Claire. The police told us yesterday. It was the sheriff who gave on the contact info.”

“We didn’t know? Is my brother there? Cause why the hell am I talking to you if my brother is there?”

And fuck, Dean has no idea what to say to this.

“Unless he doesn’t want to talk to me in which case fuck him and I’m out.”

“No, wait!” Dean rushes in. “Just, wait, let me explain.” He rubs his hand through his hair. Because how much is he actually supposed to explain? What if it fucks things up if he tells Gabriel how unstable Cas really is? But he’s got to say something.

“I’m waiting,” Gabriel snarls.

“Yes, yes,” Dean tries to pacify him, “and I’m trying, okay? Cas is here. Not here-here but I can ask him to call you back. Is that good enough for you?”

“Is that good enough for me? What the hell is wrong with you? My whole fucking family is dead! Apart from my mother, who doesn’t talk to me, and my niece, who keeps running away to find her saintly father, even though I tell her over and over that he’s dead, too, and she just has to move on. And now you’re coming along, claiming that he’s alive and asking me whether it’s enough for me that he calls me back? What the fuck is wrong with you?”

The last few sentences are shouted fairly loud.

“I’m sorry,” Dean says and he is. “I’m sorry for your loss and I’m sorry that I’m not more helpful. But this is what I can offer right now.” Because no way in hell is he going to surprise Cas with this.

“You know, whatever, man,” and suddenly Gabriel sounds very exhausted. “Tell him that I’m not telling Claire he’s alive. She’s messed up enough. I don’t need to get her hopes up for something that probably isn’t happening.”

“How is she?” Dean asks.

“What interest is it to you?” Gabriel growls.

“Please,” Dean says. “Just tell me whether she’s okay. I don’t need the details if you don’t want to give them.”

“She’s about as far from okay as you can get. Her mother died, her father died, her uncles died - apart from the one loser she got stuck with - and her grandmother doesn’t want anything to do with the offspring of the faggot. Her words, not mine.”

“She knows?” Dean asks surprised.

“Ah,” Gabriel exhales, “I guess that answers that question. It is true then. Little Cassie plays for the hot pink team. Ah well. I guess that explains you, too.”

Dean bites his lips because he hadn’t actually wanted to give anything away that Cas hadn’t told his brother yet. “Look, man, you should be having this discussion with your brother, not with me. And before you say it, yes, I’m aware that he’d have to talk to you for that. I’ll try to make it happen, okay? But I can’t promise you anything. He’s – he’s not in good shape.”
Gabriel is instantly suspicious. “How ‘not good’ is his shape exactly?”

“I can’t. It’s his story to tell.”

Gabriel grunts something inaudible before he says. “Alright. You’re a wall and running my head against it doesn’t help. I get it. So if you’re his boyfriend, I compliment you on doing a marvelous job as first line of defense. But as his brother, I gotta tell you: fuck you. Because I’m freaked out here and you’re not giving me jack. I still don’t even know whether he’s actually alive. You could have found his dog tags at a garage sale and used them for identity theft for all I know.”

Dean sighs. “Cas is a security expert. Your mother’s name is Naomi. She’s also a soldier. Your father disappeared when you were young. Cas’ wife’s name was Amelia. Claire was 10 when Cas left, she’s turning 13.”

“That’s random facts, you could have gotten them anywhere.”

Dean rolls his eyes. “Alright. Cas loves his trench coat. I mean, obviously he doesn’t have the same one he had back then but he loves the ugly thing.”

“Oh God, I had forgotten that,” Gabriel says, suddenly quiet. “He always had a penchant for the dramatic. Or should I say for clothes that don’t quite fit. But I’m guessing that would have been his dream, be an old-time PI in a trench coat instead of a spy in camouflage. Though with the coat, he looked more like an insurance salesman, if you ask me.”

“Spy?” Dean picks out the word that doesn’t make sense to him.

“Well, because he’s MI,” Gabriel says.

„Intelligence?“ Dean whistles through his teeth. “Alright, that explains a few things.”

“He didn’t tell you?” Gabriel asks, immediately on guard again.

“He doesn’t talk much about the army or the war. And I don’t make him,” Dean goes on the defense.

There is a noise in the background at Gabriel’s end of the line. Then Gabriel says abruptly, “I’ve got to go,” and the line is dead.

Mechanically, Dean puts his phone back in his pocket. Fuck. He takes his phone back out of his pocket and hits Sam’s number again.

“Dean, what’s up?”

“I got a call from Gabriel Novak. Thought I’d let you know. Since you’re our lawyer and shit.”

“Dean?” Sam’s voice is concerned. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Go get yourself a glass of water. Sit down somewhere.”

“I’m fine,” Dean insists.

“Your voice is shaking.”

Now that Sam says it, he notices that his hands are shaking a bit, too. “Gimme a sec.”
He gets a glass and fills it. There’s enough chairs, so he plonks down on one. He takes a long sip of water before turning back to the phone. “What the hell am I doing, Sammy?” he sighs. “I’m so in over my head.”

“What did you tell Gabriel Novak?”

“Nothing. That I would ask Cas whether he wants to call him back.”

“Have you talked to Cas yet?”

“No,” Dean shakes his head.

“Well, as your lawyer I strongly advise you not to call him back. Not without me there, anyway.”

“And as my brother?”

Sam sighs. “As your brother – do you hear that?”

The phone gets held up in the air obviously, and there’s the sudden noise of a crowd, interspersed with loud announcements.

“Did you get that?”

“That’s not your office,” Dean deducts.

“I’m at the airport, Dean. Wait another few hours and I’ll be there. Okay?”

It’s a relief that Sam is coming. Terrifying in its own way but nevertheless a relief.

“Dean?”

There’s a hand on his arm. It’s slender and feminine.

“Jo,” Dean says. “Is it this late already? I didn’t get done with the meat.”

“You look awful,” she says worriedly, “and you were staring into space.”

“How late is it?” he asks, determined not to let her get too close.

“I’m here early. Wanted to help Charlie with the decorations. Remember? We’re putting them up two days before the party normally?”


She raises her eyebrows. “You forgot Christmas?”

He shrugs because there isn’t much to say to it. The holiday cheer isn’t really on the forefront of his mind today. “You go find Charlie, I’ll go cut up the meat.”

“No,” Jo holds him back. “I’ll handle the meat. You’re in no condition to be near sharp instruments.”

“Jo…”

“No, believe me, I know the look. You go help with the decorations or whatever, I’ll handle the front. It’s alright. I’ve done it before.”
If he’s honest, he’s got to admit that he probably really isn’t in the best condition to handle knives. Or humans. Apart from one particular human. That one he should find. Because he needs to tell him that his brother called. Fuck. “Okay,” he nods, “thanks Jo.”

“You’re not debating this? Jesus, Dean, you’re in even worse shape than I thought. Anything I can do?”

He shakes his head. “Thanks for taking over out here. That’s enough.”

She nods and he makes his way to the back. Actually, he should be finding Charlie, too, probably. Should tell her that he isn’t working. Should tell her that Sam is on his way.

But his feet somehow bring him straight to his room instead of searching for either Charlie or Cas. And once he is in his room, the will to hold himself upright disappears. A few minutes won’t make a difference.

He stares at his bed for a moment before allowing himself to fall down on it. It looks tidy as usual. He is a neat person. He makes his bed in the morning. Only, he hasn’t actually been sleeping in this bed for the past few days. And these aren’t even his pillows and blankets. They are Sam’s. He should give them back since Sam is visiting. He’ll do that, too, in a minute.

Once he’s sunken down on the bed, his limbs feel heavy. Too heavy to move at all. He stares at the blank wall opposite his bed and wonders what is happening. Why he suddenly feels like his mind is frozen.

He’s been frantically in motion all week and now it is catching up to him, that is what is happening. He’s had no time to process, too worried about Cas, too worried about everything. But thinking about Lisa and Ben – there is a chasm in his heart that he’s learned to ignore but that has never really been bridged. It wasn’t coincidence that he stopped looking for a relationship after them. Cas had powered through that somehow, captivating him from moment one. But now the phone call with Gabriel has driven the reality of what is happening home.

He has fallen in love with a guy who has a daughter. An estranged daughter but one who wants to find her Dad.

And Dean is head over heels for that Dad. Who is severely damaged by a war. Who needs to heal and instead is being bombarded with bad news. Like that his wife died in a horrible car crash.

Fucking hell.

Dean’s hands are shaking.

“I can do this,” he mumbles to himself. “I can do this.”

Because he can. Because he wants to. Because at this point, it doesn’t even matter if it costs him personally. If in the end he’s going to be left behind heartbroken. Because he wants to see Cas happy. More than anything. And he can’t imagine that not having his daughter in the picture is ever going to make Cas happy.

Also, Dean doesn’t run. He has never run. Even when it would have been easier. Even when it would have been better. Sam ran. He ran from foster families. He ran from Dad to find Dean and patch him up when their Dad had laid into him in a drunken stupor. He ran from the winter towards Cali.

“Must be nice. Cali must be nice. No winter. Must be nice,” he mumbles, though he knows it’s
hardly fair to accuse Sam of this.

“Would you want that?”

Dean jumps about five feet in the air when the dark voice appears next to him. Cas wordlessly offers him his hands.

Dean looks from his own shaking hands to Cas’. “You don’t have to,” he mumbles.

“No. I do. I’m here for you, too,” Cas answers simply.

“That’s not how it usually works.” But Dean lays his palms on Cas’ anyway.

Immediately, fingers wrap themselves around his wrists, holding him tight. The fingers are long and slender and beautiful. They’re strong, too. Much stronger than they should be with how Cas has been living. But then, he was a soldier. He is powerful. More powerful than Dean, maybe, because Cas can tap into reserves Dean was never aware he had. He remembers the heavy hand supporting him through the snow, when Dean would have fallen without it.

Slowly, ever so slowly the tremors subside.

When they’ve petered out, Dean’s hands quiet and still in Cas’, Cas lets go. He stays close, though, not leaving Dean’s space.

Dean wonders whether he’d want to. Or whether he himself wants to. He’d never planned to be drawn in this deep. But then, “I’ve told you before. My brother’s decisions were never mine. Even if I resent him for them sometimes.”

“Because he gets away clean.”

“Because it seems like that, sometimes,” Dean allows, though he knows in his heart that it is not the truth. He smiles at Cas with a little shrug. “He takes on pro bono cases where I dole out soup. It’s not as different as it sounds.”

“Are you mad that I called him?” Cas asks.

“No,” Dean shakes his head. “I’m glad.”

Cas nods. “Me, too.” He looks away from Dean. “He should be here.”

“At the moment when you break my heart?” Dean asks with raised eyebrows because that sounded like Cas saying that he wants family here for Dean at the moment when they fall apart.

Cas doesn’t answer for the longest moment, so Dean grasps at his hands again.

“Cas…”

When Cas looks back at Dean, his face has changed, hardened. “I can’t save you, Dean.”

“I didn’t ask you to.”

“Yes, you did. You do. But I’m broken. I’ll cling on as long as you allow. But I can’t be what you deserve.”

“That’s bullshit, Cas,” Dean replies angrily. “Bullshit, you hear me?”
And because he’s bad at words and because he can see it in Cas’ face how he has all defenses up and nothing Dean says will get through, Dean puts his hand on Cas’ neck, and pulls him in roughly for a kiss. Because goddammit, the world is fucked up and he’s still got no idea what it was that got Cas this messed up, but Dean’s already made his choice. He’s not running.

It takes a frightening moment before Cas responds. Before his arms wrap around Dean’s torso and he kisses back.

Dean kisses with all that he has. All the feelings, all the words that never come and only lead to misunderstandings, everything that he has no other way to express, he packs it all into this kiss.

And almost cries with relief when Cas melts into it, slowly at first, hesitantly, still keeping his guard up. But then tiny moans start falling from his lips and he sinks forward into Dean and Dean draws Cas with him when he falls backwards on the bed.

Cas is straddling him and they’re making out like teenagers, only, unlike teenagers there is no clumsy groping, their bodies slotting together with the knowledge of years and relationships, of beginnings and ends. And while their bodies are still new to each other and Dean guesses his body is unlike the ones Cas knows, they’ve also plotted out each other’s lines in the dark hours of the previous nights, have found smooth curves and sharp edges, soft hair and hard muscles.

It is different now, touching not with the intent to hold and to comfort, but to draw closer and to meld into each other.

Arousal isn’t even what they’re chasing after, but Cas is straddling Dean, and there’s friction there, good friction, and Cas’ hands find their way under Dean’s shirt and they’re hot on his skin, just rough enough, and determined, oh so determined.

“Cas, Cas,” Dean finally manages to break the kiss long enough to find his voice. Because if this goes on, clothes will be shed next and he isn’t sure about that. Not because he doesn’t want it, hell yeah, he wants it. But because he isn’t sure they are ready. And because, “I gotta tell you something. I hate it already because it’s going to ruin the mood. But I gotta tell you.”

Cas takes a moment, like he needs to find his way back to the present after the kiss, but then he slides off Dean. Dean almost whines at the loss of contact and friction but he catches himself. He’s not that guy. As soon as Cas is sitting next to him instead of on Dean, he starts fidgeting again, suddenly awkward and shy where he had been forward and free just a second ago.

“Sorry,” Dean says and means it. Because it was nice to see Cas forget about his situation for a second and now Dean’s got to drag everything back. “But Cas, your brother called.”

Dean can virtually see it shattering the rest of Cas’ confidence. His eyes widen and his shoulders hunch in. “My - brother?” His voice sounds tiny and spooked.

“Yes, Gabriel,” Dean says and then internally scolds himself for the clarification. As if any of the dead brothers could call. For a lack of other options, he decides to flee forward. “Apparently his lawyer was quick to give on the contact info. Your brother is, umm, upset that his lawyer knew you were alive before he did. And, umm, he might also have come to the conclusion that we’re a couple. I didn’t say anything, but,” he shrugs helplessly, “umm, yeah.”

“My brother,” Cas repeats, still stuck on that bit of information.

“I told him I’d ask you to call him back.”

Cas’ eyes are wide as saucers and he actually shrinks back at that.
“You don’t have to,” Dean quickly clarifies. “But I got the feeling he would really like to talk to you.”

“I can’t. What do I even tell him?” Cas looks panicked.

“I don’t know. Wait for Sam. He’s going to be here in a few hours. He’ll know what to do.”

Dean’s rarely been this glad to see his brother. He’s still over-grown and he has to hunch to get through the bunker door and then he shakes the snow off like a puppy.

“Sammy,” he sighs with relief and wraps his arms around his brother for a hug. “Brrr, freezing.” He lets go again. “You didn’t bring Jess.” Dean looks behind his brother to make sure she hasn’t been hiding there.

“Nah, man, she didn’t want to be this far away from her family for Christmas. It’s fine, though, I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t want to,” he adds before Dean can even give voice to the guilt that usually accompanies statements like this. “So, where’s Cas?”

“In the back. He’s fiddling with the new cameras. Needed something to do.”

“I get it,” Sam nods. “And Charlie?”

“I’m here!” A bright voice calls from the other room and a second later, Sam has a redhead hanging from his neck.

He hugs her tightly and sets her back on the ground.

“It’s good to have you back,” she smiles. “Takes Dean down a notch or two, having someone taller than him around. Though I’m guessing the circumstances for your visit could be better.”

“Well, I’m not here because of the circumstances. I’m here because of Christmas,” Sam says.

“And I’d say come help us with the decorations, but then I’m guessing the ‘circumstances’ need your expertise more than we do.”

“If you need to reach high places, I’m all yours,” Sam smiles.

“Oh, come on, we have ladders, Moose, we don’t need you,” Charlie chuckles. “Go get your luggage to your room, get yourself something to drink, meet Cas. Dean? Be a good host and help.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean grumbles but he takes Sam’s suitcase to carry it to the back.

Sam chuckles, too. “She’s still the boss around here, isn’t she?”

“We’re equal partners. On paper anyway.”

“Yeah, she’s still the boss,” Sam confirms and Dean doesn’t deny it.

They set the suitcase down inside Sam’s room and make their way to the kitchen. Which is a battlefield.

“Cas? What happened?” Dean asks and stares at the floor which is covered in flour.
Cas flinches and turns around with a guilty expression. “Apparently, you’re not supposed to use the electrical mixer before you poured the melted butter in.”

“Umm, yes, that’s probably true,” Dean says carefully and makes his way over to the kitchen counter while trying to avoid the worst of the mess. “What are you making anyway?”

“Christmas cookies,” Cas replies quietly. “Or I was. I’m not sure they’re working out. I’m sorry, Dean.” He stares at the mess on the kitchen counter sorrowfully.

“That’s alright, Cas,” Dean answers and even though this mess means additional work for him, he can’t help but smile when he brushes flour out of Cas’ hair. “You’re aging before your time, what with that white hair.”

“Oh,” Cas says self-consciously and wants to touch a hand to his hair.

Dean catches it at the last second before Cas can make it worse. “Okay, what do you say, you go shower, Sam and I clean up here and then we try again together?” With the volunteers around for the decorating, they won’t need him out front. So they might as well bake cookies.

“Sam is here?” Cas asks and looks up from his baking attempt for the first time.

“Yep. I’m right here. Hi Cas,” Sam greets from the doorway where he’s stayed so far. “Your first try at baking?”

But Cas looks away and doesn’t answer, embarrassed blush creeping up from his neck.

“Hey, it’s no biggie. We all start out sometime,” Dean comforts him. Then he nudges him, “And you didn’t even test out whether the sprinkler system really works now, so that’s a win.”

It conjures a miniscule smile on Cas’ lips and even spawns a response. “Of course the sprinkler system works now. I fixed it. I don’t need to test it.”

Dean chuckles at that and draws Cas close to give him a kiss on his unruly floury hair. But Cas goes still under him, muscles freezing, so Dean lets go again. “Because of Sam?” he asks softly because he doesn’t think he’s done anything to fuck up in the past half hour.

The nod comes a moment too late and is so small that Dean isn’t sure he’s actually seen it. Still, it’s gotta suffice. “Hand?” he asks and holds his own hand out. It’s another long moment before Cas responds but he slides his palm over Dean’s.

Dean holds it tight and turns the both of them around to Sam. “So, this is Cas. He’s an awesome guy and it looks like we’re together. Like, in the couple-y way. You got a problem with that, Sammy?”

Sam smiles, wide and deep. He’s gotten good at taking things in stride. “No, Dean, you know that I don’t. And I already knew that you two were a thing.”

“So, if I kiss the man in front of you, you gonna think it gross?”

Sam chuckles. “Depends on how much tongue is involved.”

Dean snorts. “Fair enough. That good for you, Cas, or do you need more?”

“Kiss?” Cas says and looks up at Dean through his eye-lashes.

And okay, Dean can work with that, even if it gets him all floury, too. So he wraps his free hand around Cas’ neck and dips down for a kiss. He keeps it short enough, though, that there’s no danger
of Sam having to live through too much tongue.

Then he smiles at Cas and asks, “Better?”

Cas nods and then looks up at Sam, for the first time locking eyes with him. “Hello, Sam. Thank you for coming.”

“It’s all good, man,” Sam nods. “Glad I can be here and glad I can help.”

Just under an hour later, a new batch of cookies is in the oven, the kitchen is cleaned up and Sam is settled in enough that they can start tackling the actual issues. Which currently involves three nervous people sitting around the kitchen table.

“You sure you want to do this?” Sam asks for the third time.

Cas nods but his hand is cramped into Dean’s so hard that Dean thinks there will be fingernail-shaped holes in him later.

“Okay. Dean?”

Dean takes his phone, scrolls through the calls list and hits Gabriel Novak’s number. He puts the phone on speaker. It rings a few times before someone picks up.

“Novak?” It sounds suspicious but there’s also something like hope mingled into it.

“Is this Gabriel Novak speaking?” Sam asks.

“If this is Dean Winchester again and my brother’s not there, I swear…”

“I’m here,” Cas says quickly. “Gabriel, I’m here.”

There is a moment of stunned silence and then, “Fuck.”

“Mr. Novak,” Sam clears his throat, “my name is Sam Winchester and I am your brother’s lawyer. I am very sorry that your family reunion is happening under these circumstances. I know you would prefer it differently and Cas – I mean, your brother would prefer it differently, too. But there is a possibility that it’ll come to a court case and that’s why I counseled your brother that it’s better I be present during this conversation. I understand that it is not ideal.”

There is an impatient huff from the other end of the line. “I don’t care who you are or whether you’re listening in as long as you just stop talking! Cassie? You really there?”

“Yes,” Cas exhales and holds on even tighter to Dean.

“Fuck. Fuck, Cassie, what happened? We thought you were dead.”

“I –,” but Sam shakes his head determinedly, so Cas swallows down what he was going to say and continues with, “Will you tell Claire? Will you tell her that I’m alive? Will you tell me how she is? How is she, Gabe?”

It takes a moment, then Gabriel answers. “She’s messed up. I mean, she’s pretty much an orphan. And she bought into all that religious crap. Got a feeling she thinks it’s all her fault. That she did something wrong and that’s why her devout father and mother died and she ended up with her heathen uncle.”
Cas pales at the words, so Dean says quietly. “Hey, you’re feeling responsible for the whole world, too. Maybe it’s a family trait.”

“You’re one to talk, Dean,” Sam huffs but the warm smile betrays his tone.

Gabriel sounds less than enthused at hearing Dean’s voice. “So, the boyfriend’s also there, huh? Blood relations with the lawyer I gather?”

“Dean is my brother,” Sam goes back to a professional tone. “Which has no influence on my professional capabilities.”

Gabriel snorts. “Yeah, man, I really don’t care. I care whether he’s my brother’s boyfriend, though. So is he?”

Dean looks at Cas because Cas is the one who needs to decide how to answer this but Cas just stares at the phone like it might bite him.

So finally Sam says, “Uhh, I can’t really speak for my client and it seems like he doesn’t want to…”

“Yes. Yes, he is. My - boyfriend.” The word is said with so much trepidation that it hurts.

There is a moment of silence before Gabriel bites, “Well, great for you. Really helps getting over the dead wife and everything.”

“Gabriel,” Dean starts and ignores his brother’s wide eyes and fervent shake of his head, “that was uncalled for. Because your brother and I – we are together, yes. But this is not a rebound or a fling or whatever else you’re thinking right now. I intend to be with him for a very long time.”

He doesn’t look up at Cas when he says that, too scared about what he will see. But he’s just stating his side, and if Cas decides to cut him loose once he’s back on his feet, there’s nothing Dean can do about that. And worrying about it right now won’t help. Right now, he’s worried about Cas.

“I’ve made peace with myself a long time ago, so you can hurtle at me whatever you want. But spare him. And spare Claire. She’ll be confused and hurt enough by everything as is.”

He stops and Sam actually looks at him in something like approval. Dean shrugs. It’s not like he’s always the bull in the china shop.

“Mr. Novak, I understand that you’re upset. It’s been a trying time for you…” Sam starts but Gabriel doesn’t let him finish the sentence.

“Oh, fuck you. You have no idea what I’ve been through. Cassie, where are they holding you hostage? I’m coming to get you.”

“What?” Sam and Dean exclaim at the same time.

“He doesn’t even have his own phone? You don’t let him talk on his own? Fuck you, guys, even if you don’t tell me I’m finding this out and coming down there.”

“We’re not holding your brother hostage,” Dean says appalled.

“Yeah, and you, not my brother, are the one telling me that. And even if he did, I wouldn’t believe him. There is such a thing as Stockholm Syndrome.”

“Stockholm Syndrome?” Sam repeats incredulously. “Mr. Novak I want to point out that I’m still a lawyer. You might want to temper your words.”
“You wouldn’t know,” Cas interrupts. “Without Dean you still wouldn’t know.”

“What do you mean?” Gabriel asks, clearly still upset.

Sam’s got his emotions in check, though. “What he means, Mr. Novak, is that Castiel wanted to stay under the radar. It was Dean who convinced him to get back on the grid and subsequently went to the police with him to get his ID confirmed.” He sighs. “Please do not take this as an indication that Castiel does not have the best interest of his daughter in mind. Because he does.”

There is silence on the other end of the line for a moment. Then Gabriel asks, “Cassie, where exactly have you been in the past two years?”

“Mr. Novak,” Sam starts, but Gabriel interrupts him again.

“This is not about your fucking potential law case, Mr. Winchester. This is about my brother. Do you even get that? Do you understand what worrying about your brother means? What it means to think he’s dead? What it means to not know what’s happened to him for two years? Do you know what kind of horrible things my brain can concoct?”

He’s screaming fairly loudly by the end of this rant.

Sam shrugs helplessly at them, and Cas looks like he’s about to pass out.

“Look, Gabriel,” Dean clears his throat. “I get it, okay? I’m a big brother, too. And Sammy’s never gone missing for two years but he’s gone missing for a few months at a time. And believe me I thought I’d find him dead in a ditch somewhere. And it about killed me. So yeah, I get it. But your brother,” Dean looks over at Cas, who looks horribly small again, “you got to give him some time, man. Don’t scream at him.”

“Dean…” Sam looks seriously uncomfortable at this turn of events.

“Nah, Sammy, Gabriel’s right. This is not about lawyer-shit. This is family. And if that was you and me, I’d turn the world upside down to come see you. Whether you wanted me to or not.” He shrugs apologetically at Cas because he reasonably sure this is not what Cas wants to hear.

But Cas is staring at him, head tilted, puzzling something out.

“Wow,” comes the voice from the other end of the line. “That almost made me start liking you. So you’re going to give me the address now?”

“Cas?” Dean asks because this is so not his call.

“Dean, we really shouldn’t,” Sam tries to butt in but Dean holds a hand up to stop him.

“No, Sammy, that’s not your decision. Or mine. Things are shitty, and I can’t tell you what Gabriel is going to think of all of this and of us. Or what Claire’s going to think. I wish we had more time to sort this out. But do you want to be the one explaining to Claire that everyone around her knew for weeks or months that her dad was alive and she was the only one who didn’t? Talk about losing her trust forever. Cas,” he turns to address him, “I’m sorry. I know this sucks. I know you don’t want her to see you like this. But, trust me on this, Cas. She’ll take you back any way she can have you. She won’t care.”

There are tears in Cas’ eyes and then suddenly he shoves his chair backwards and flees from the room.
“Fuck,” Dean jumps up to go after him.

“Ehh, sorry, Mr. Novak, that was a bit much for your brother. Dean is going after him to calm him down…” It’s the last thing Dean hears of the conversation before he’s out of the kitchen.

The door that slams shut is the one to the guestroom fortunately, not the one to the front. That’s something, Dean guesses and steels himself before knocking. “Cas? Can I come in?”

There is no reaction apart from muffled sobbing. Dean debates it for all of ten seconds before quietly opening the door and slipping into the room. It’s pitch-black, neither the lights nor the nightlight on.

“Don’t come closer!” Even though the words break they’re clear in their authority.

“Okay,” Dean answers. “I’ll stay right here by the door, alright?” He doesn’t wait for an answer before sliding down to the floor, his back to the wall.

It’s agonizing, hearing Cas sobbing on the bed and not being able to hold him through it. But he’s not about to break Cas’ trust by coming close against his will.

Cas hasn’t told him not to talk, though. So he can do that at least. “The first time was the worst. Sam must have been 11 or 12. We were living with our dad at the time. So it wasn’t like he ran away from a foster home or anything. He ran away right under my nose. And…,” the memory makes his skin itch with a pain that his brain has forgotten but his body hasn’t, “of course dad said it was my fault. Not that he could beat me up more than I was beating myself up. Keep Sammy safe. That was my whole reason to be alive.”

The sobbing from the bed gets somewhat quieter. Cas is listening.

“He wasn’t even gone all that long. Not that time. The police picked him up after a week or two. He got smarter later, ditching the cops for weeks or months and on the memorable occasion of my involuntary outing for five states.” He laughs a little self-deprecating laugh. “God, I wanted to beat the crap out of him so bad after that one. For putting me through that. For coming back with a California tan and a snarky attitude while I was worried sick. But then – that was the moment I knew. That he’d get out of this. That he’d make it just fine and I’d better start thinking about what I was gonna do without him. I think that’s probably the only reason. Why he’s still in my life. That I decided to let him go.” Dean closes his eyes as the story peters out. “What happened, Cas?” he asks quietly.

For a moment, it is completely silent. Like they’re both holding their breath after Dean’s question.

“I killed her.” Cas whispers it into the dark.

For a moment, Dean thinks he’s talking about his wife again. Or that maybe his brain is making up worst case scenarios about Claire. “Cas, you didn’t…”

“I did. She was so thin. And I – I tried to – but they dragged me away. There was no time. We needed to get out of there.” Cas’ voice is shaking, like he’s barely holding it together. But when Dean starts moving to crawl towards him, he shouts, “No! Stay where you are!”

“Okay, okay,” Dean soothes and sits back down.

“I killed her, Dean. I don’t even know who she was. But she can’t have been older than Claire. And I killed her. I should have known. I should have seen that she wasn’t one of them.” He breaks down
crying again.

“Cas, baby, please…”

“No. No, I don’t deserve – please don’t come closer.”

“Let me turn the light on at least? Please? Just the nightlight. Just the stars.”

There is no reaction to that so Dean takes it as permission and crawls over to turn on the nightlight. It’s closer to the bed, so he stays there, watching Cas in the purple light of the stars. He’s got his knees drawn all the way to his chest again, face buried against the light and Dean’s scrutiny. He looks so awfully small.

“I’ll stay here,” Dean narrates what he does. “I’m leaning against the bed but I’m not coming close before you don’t want me to.”

“You can’t,” Cas snaps his head up. “Don’t you see? I murdered a child! You can’t be close to me. No one can!”

Dean’s taken aback by the force of Cas’ anger but he doesn’t budge. “I can,” he insists. God knows he’s not going to leave Cas alone in this. He can figure out his own feelings towards it later.

“You can’t! If I disappear then maybe –,” Cas crumbles in on himself, “then maybe it isn’t true.”

“I understand,” Dean says because suddenly he does. He understands how Cas ended up where he ended up. But that doesn’t make the statement any more true. “We both know that’s not how it works.”

Cas nods against his knees, refusing to meet Dean’s eyes again now that his anger has left him.

“It is goddamn uncomfortable down here. I’m coming up on the bed.” Dean doesn’t give Cas the time to even take the breath needed to tell him No again. “I ain’t touching. I’m just going to sit on the bed. I’m too old to sit on the floor for extended periods of time.”

It’s an excuse and they both know it. But Cas stays silent while Dean clamors up on the bed. He perches on the edge, far enough away that he doesn’t crowd Cas, but close enough that he could reach out and touch him if he wanted.

“You see me,” Cas’ eyes are glassy when he lifts his head, not quite meeting Dean’s eyes. “From the first moment you saw me.”

“You can’t stay invisible forever, Cas,” Dean says softly.

“Everything became real. I didn’t want it to be real.”

“I want you to be real,” Dean admits. “I’m sorry that that’s hurting you. But I’d rather have you.”

“Dean.”

Dean lays his hand on the bedding then, palm up, invitation clear. Cas stares at it like it’s a snake that might bite.

“Cas, baby.” It’s a plea but it’s also a reminder. That Dean promised that he wouldn’t stop being there for Cas even if he revealed his darkest secrets. Dean guesses it doesn’t get much darker than this.
“No. You have to hate me, Dean.” But his voice break on the words, the last of the anger replaced with desperation. “Please hate me.”

“I don’t. I never will. Please, baby, let me hold your hand.”

“How can you – how can you even stand to be near me?” Cas asks. He manages to hold Dean’s gaze for a few seconds but then he crumbles in on himself again, averts his eyes.

“Please, sweetheart,” Dean repeats, intend on following through with this.

“A girl, Dean! Ten years old! She wore a shirt with red dots. And then I shot her and the whole shirt was one red lake of blood.”

“I’m right here, baby.”

“I shot her in the gut! Do you have any idea how much gut shots hurt before you die? Do you have any idea of the pain and the fear you go through before you bleed out?”

“All you have to do is take my hand.”

“She died a horrible death. With no one there to comfort her but the guy who shot her! Can you imagine that? Imagine someone doing that to Charlie!”

“You can keep trying, honey. But it’s not working. You’re not scaring me off.”

“Then you’re stupid! Or insane!”

Dean nods. “Probably. But I’m also still here.”

Cas has turned to angry gesturing, so he’s actually moved closer to Dean than he’d been a few minutes before. Dean makes use of that and lays his open hand on top of Cas’ knee.

“Still here, still all yours. Hand?”

Cas freezes in mid-motion. But his eyes aren’t on Dean’s hand, they’re on Dean’s face.

Dean goes back over what he just said. He smiles a remorseful little half-smile when he notices. “Yeah. Fell in love with you. Want to be with you. Am yours if you want me. Thought that was self-evident by now.”

There’s no answer, just a stunned expression on Cas’ face. It stays there long enough that Dean thinks he might have broken him completely again, back to catatonic.

“I’d get it, you know,” Dean goes on, “if after all is said and done, you thought I wasn’t a good person for your daughter to look up to as a parent. We’re a bunch of losers with a soup kitchen. That’s what we call a stable home. Back where you come from, people look down on us. So I’d get it, if in the end you wanted to go back with your brother. To a suburb somewhere to start a new life. I was always ready to let you go. But, Cas, you’ve come too far to go back to that house by the lake. Don’t run. Not now. Not after you’re almost there.”

“Almost where, Dean?” Cas whispers tonelessly. “There’s nowhere for me to go. She’ll still be dead.”

“Your daughter needs you, Cas. You’ve heard your brother. She’s running away to find you. She deserves to have a father. She deserves to have you.”
“I can’t!”

“You’re her parent. Her only parent. You can.”

“But what if I –” Cas breaks off.

“What if you what? Break down? Fuck her up? You won’t. Just be – yourself. Tell her as much as you can. Let her be a part of your life and be a part of hers. Wing the rest.”

“Dean…”

There’s so much desperation in Cas’ voice that Dean can’t stand it anymore. He surges forward and draws Cas into a tight hug. There’s an agonizingly long moment in which Dean thinks Cas will push him off. But then his taut muscles relax by a fraction. It’s not much but Cas’ fingers find the hem of Dean’s shirt and hold on to that.

“I’m not leaving you, baby. You don’t have to do this alone,” Dean mumbles it into Cas’ hair, too scared that Cas might tell him to fuck off to say it out loud.

There’s a knock at the door then and the hesitant voice of Dean’s brother. “Dean? Cas?”

“Go away, Sam,” Dean shouts while holding Cas even tighter.

But it’s a rare day when Sam listens to Dean, so the door opens, admitting an overgrown moose with a tray with two steaming mugs and a plate of cookies. “Hot chocolate and fresh baked cookies. Thought you might need a pick-me-up.”

“Good idea, wrong timing,” Dean says and shields Cas from Sam’s view because Cas is hiding behind him anyway. “Thanks, man. Now go.”

But Sam stubbornly comes closer. He sets the tray on the floor next to the nightstand and sits down on the other side of the bed from them. Cas sits frozen, stock-still in Dean’s arms. Sam observes it, then looks up at Dean. Dean shakes his head at his brother, silently trying to make clear that it’s not a good time for talking.

“I told him our address,” Sam says quietly but in his no nonsense voice. “It’s against every proceeding in the book. But you were right, this isn’t about the law. He’s going to call back whether he brings Claire with him. He’s definitely not going to bring her to a first meeting but he doesn’t seem to trust her enough to leave her at home.”

“Stop, Sam,” Dean shakes his head again, more insistently this time. “We can talk about this tomorrow.”

“It’s less than two days to the party. I invited him. You need to be prepared,” Sam insists.

“This isn’t witness prep, Sam. Give us half a day to get ourselves together, okay?”

“That’s what I’m doing,” Sam says and his face turns a little softer. “I’m giving you as much advance warning as I can.”

“Noted and appreciated,” Dean says but really all that he’s noting is that Cas has started shaking again at the mention of his daughter’s name. So he turns away from Sam and towards Cas. “Come here, sweetie.” He draws him back into his arms, cradling him so that his head is buried against Dean’s neck. “Yeah, that’s better. You’re real but we can still hide from the world for a bit.”
Cas’ arms are caught against Dean’s chest where Cas had been hugging himself. Dean can feel every shudder and every shake that’s running through Cas and his heart hurts with him.

“It’s gonna get better, love, I promise,” he whispers.

Cas has carried this for two years. He hasn’t told it to anyone, hasn’t once mentioned it after getting discharged from the military. Has buried it deep inside him and has buried himself with it. Dean is sure of it. He’s crying then, too, his shoulders shaking with it, and because he doesn’t want his brother to see, doesn’t want to have to explain, he nuzzles his face deep into Cas’ hair, holding him so tight as if it’s him who’s drowning and not Cas.

And strangely, somehow, this is what makes Cas move, what makes him extract his hands from between their chests and instead wrap them around Dean’s back, crushing them together, and holding on stronger than ever before.

“Thank you,” Dean whispers, voice choked with tears, and he doesn’t know what he’s thanking Cas for, whether it’s for telling him or for holding on and not disappearing, for hugging back instead of letting go. “I love you, Cas. I love you.”

There is nothing more true in his life than this. It’s the only thing that keeps him upright, so he holds on to it as much as he’s holding on to Cas physically.

“I’m always going to see you. You’re real. We’re real. I love you.”

He’s not even sure what exactly he’s stuttering out between sobs but he knows that he needs to say it, that Cas needs to hear it, that he can’t for a second let Cas think that he’s alone.

At some point, there’s a hand on his shoulder and Dean dimly notices that Sam’s getting up. He doesn’t turn around. Sam will understand. For all that they’ve grown apart in recent years, Sam is still his ally in life.

It takes a while, indeterminate minutes or hours, before their sobs die down and the room turns silent apart from their breathing. Another while, and Dean’s legs start cramping, so he draws Cas down to lie down on the bed. He goes without resistance. Dean pulls the blanket up over both of them and then hugs him close again. Cas stays very still at his side. He is not crying anymore, as far as Dean can tell. He isn’t sure how far away Cas’ mind is, or what places it’s going to, but they’re probably not good. He knows it because his own mind volunteers the advice to not leave his keys to the weapons’ cabinet anywhere where Cas can reach them tonight.

“Stay with me, Cas,” Dean whispers. “Don’t make me lose you. Please.”

He’s begging because even if he doesn’t get to the keys, even if he just disappears into the night, this time Cas is going to be gone for good. Dean will find what is left of him in the morgue, asked to identify another frozen body. There is no question about it.

“Please, Cas. Please stay.”

“Your mother was murdered.”

Dean flinches at the sudden words. He actually hadn’t thought Cas was coherent enough to talk.

“Yeah.” Dean’s voice is raspy when he answers. He hasn’t quite shaken the image of Cas’ still body on a stretcher yet and the mention of his mother doesn’t make it any better.

“I have killed, Dean. Innocent people.”
“Yes,” Dean nods.

“You shouldn’t want to be with me.” Dean isn’t sure whether Cas is as convinced of this as he makes it sound. But his voice doesn’t waver.

“You know that’s bull,” he answers. “Also, it’s not your decision to make.”

Cas doesn’t reply but his face doesn’t soften, either.

Dean feels for his wallet, in which he always carries an old faded photo of his mom. But he hasn’t got it on him. Well, it’s not like she can help him with this.

“There’s a difference between searching out a victim with the intent to torture and burn them, and making a mistake in a situation where your life is threatened,” he says evenly.

“The result is the same,” Cas answers heatedly. He actually gets enough momentum to push himself away from Dean.

“No,” Dean says. “You’re wrong.”

“How am I wrong? They’re all dead!” Cas cries out.

“I’m not talking about them,” Dean answers. “I’m talking about you.”

“I don’t understand.”

And he probably really doesn’t. Dean takes a deep breath, hardens his voice because this is the only way he’ll get the words out. “I visited him. In jail. The serial killer. Before they executed him. So, it’s not the same,” he says tightly, crossing his arms in front of his chest.

“You did what?” Cas asks flabbergasted.

“Don’t tell Sam! He doesn’t know.”


It’s a question he’s asked himself more than once. One that he doesn’t have a great answer for. Because sometimes he wishes he’d never have done it. So he shrugs. “Cause I needed to. Dad was already – he was already gone when they caught him. He never caught him and he never got any of his answers. So I needed to.”

“Dean.” Somehow the name sounds like the name of a wounded puppy, the way Cas says it. And maybe that’s not too far off from the truth, either. Dean kind of feels like throwing up just at the thought of this.

“It didn’t do what it was supposed to do. It didn’t give me closure. The guy barely remembered my Mom. She was a checkmark on his list, no more.” He looks at Cas again, determined to make his point even though his gut still churns with bile at the memory of the snake eyes and bored voice. “That guy didn’t spend a single minute thinking about my Mom after the blood lust wore off. He didn’t spend sleepless nights remembering her face. He chose her, and he forgot her name. So no, the result is not the same. And if there’s anyone on the planet who knows the difference, it’s me.”

He lets that stand but he doesn’t look away, challenges Cas to acknowledge the truth in this.

“Yeah,” Dean breathes a deep breath of relief. “Yeah, we can make that happen.” He leans in and gives Cas a kiss on the temple. “Thank you.”

It gets answered with the smallest of sad smiles. “I told you, didn’t I?”

“You want to be seen,” Dean understands. “You want to live.”

The emotions on Cas’ face are still warring with each other but he nods. “I think I do,” he whispers. Dean draws him into another tight hug, though this time they aren’t drowning. This time, it feels like they’ve found the shore.

Something is different in the morning. It’s hard to put a finger on it. They both look like shit after the rough night. Cas has bags under his eyes the size of continents. And Dean’s complexion when he looks at himself in the mirror is a lovely grey with a shade of swamp thrown in.

But Dean showers and shaves and brushes his teeth, and not once is he worried that when he comes back to their room Cas might be gone. And when Cas goes to do his morning routine, Dean thinks about his razor that’s got its place in plain sight but he doesn’t feel the need to pack it away.

Instead, he tells Cas to meet him in the kitchen for breakfast, and Cas nods and Dean presses a quick kiss to the corner of his mouth, and Cas leans into him for a moment, and somehow, they are okay. Or at least as okay as they’re going to get for now.

Dean takes the tray with the mugs and the cookies back to the kitchen. They haven’t touched any of it and the cocoa is stale and cold. He wrinkles his nose at the murky liquid when he pours it out. He’s already washing the cups when someone clears their throat behind him.

“Heya Sammy,” Dean says over his shoulder, “make yourself useful and make some coffee, would you?”

“Sure,” Sam nods.

He comes over and for a few minutes they work silently beside each other. Besides Sam side-eyeing him every so often, trying to gauge his mood and the lingering effects of yesterday night, it’s easy to fall into it. They’ve had a routine for so many years, that even the years of living in different states can’t break it apart completely.

“I’ve missed this,” Dean says and then shuts his mouth when he realizes what he’s said without thinking about it.

Sam freezes mid-motion. “You what?”

Dean growls under his breath because what he said was true but, “I’m happy for you, man. That you’ve got everything you ever wanted in California.” He doesn’t need to spoil that by putting expectations of showing up here on his brother.

“But you miss me,” Sam says like he needs to make sure that he’s heard that right.

“Yes. Now don’t make it weird by making a big thing out of it,” Dean grumbles. He leaves the mugs to dry on the dishrack and goes to get some eggs out of the fridge. “Scrambled eggs okay?”

“Dean?”
“Yeah?”
“I miss you, too.”

Dean huffs. “See, now you’re making it weird.”

“Am not,” Sam insists and wraps his obnoxiously long arms around Dean for a hug.

Dean returns it for a moment before batting Sam away. “Breakfast doesn’t make itself.”

Sam chuckles and hops on the counter next to Dean, who smashes the eggs into a bowl with a little more force than maybe necessary.

Sam observes it for a bit before asking, “So how are you doing?”

“Better than I have been.” It’s no more than the truth.

“You and Cas figured things out?”

“Sam…”

“Dude, I don’t mean signing adoption papers. I just mean, you’ve figured it out what you mean to each other?”

“Are we really doing this?” Dean grouses.

“Yes,” Sam nods with a self-satisfied smirk. “We’re doing this. After last night, you owe me that much.”

Which is unfortunately probably true. “A simple Yes won’t suffice as an answer, will it?”

“Actually, I’ve kind of figured out that much on my own,” Sam says. There’s a teasing smile on his face but Dean is an expert at reading his brother, so he doesn’t miss the worry hidden in Sam’s eyes.

Dean sighs and puts the spatula away, turns down the heat on the pan for a moment. He leans heavily on the counter, shaking his head and chuckling at himself because he’s stupid and sappy. He’s still smiling helplessly, though, when he looks up at Sam. “He’s the one, Sam. I got no idea why or how and I don’t know whether he feels the same, but – he’s the one. I just know it.”

It’s only then that he notices that Sam isn’t looking at him anymore but is looking over his shoulder.

He turns around and there is Cas, in Dean’s blue button-down and his own dark red hoodie. He smiles are very soft shy smile.

“He does,” Cas says, and his eyes flicker to Dean before they flicker back down to the floor. “Feel the same.”

The butterflies erupt in Dean’s stomach at the words and he has trouble composing himself enough to even answer. “I’m glad,” he mumbles and he knows he’s blushing but he can’t help it. “Scrambled eggs?” he asks Cas to get over the moment.

Sam starts laughing but Cas keeps smiling ever so slightly. “Yes, please,” he nods.

“Coming right up,” Dean answers, and hides his elation by turning back to the stove and turning the heat back up.
They eat at the table, just the three of them because Charlie is out front helping with the volunteers and Dean needs to do something really nice for her once things have settled down because she’s definitely doing more than her share this Christmas.

Sam is telling them stories of his adventures in California – law, and hiking, and his dog, and his in-laws – Dean doesn’t manage to listen to the actual words because it’s marvelous to see how Cas reacts to them. How in the beginning he’s hunched and quiet and doesn’t look up from his plate for more than a quick glance at Dean but somewhere along the line he gets snared in. He even chuckles a time or two when Sam regales them with tales from the dog park.

Dean can see where his brother makes a good lawyer beyond knowing the actual law. If both his clients, and the judges and jury are this taken in by him, his opposition will have a hard time.

Now if Dean was only sure that the easy way Sam laughs and draws Cas into the conversation also means that he actually likes him, and not just that he wants to put a client at ease. Sam will accept Cas for Dean’s sake, that part Dean has no doubts about. But he’d like it if they could be – a family, a voice inside his head supplies. Yeah, he nods to himself, a family. With Lisa, Sam had had this frown on his face from the beginning. Oh, he had tried to hide it, always putting on a polite smile where Lisa could see. He’d respected Dean’s wishes and after one talk was quiet about his worries. But Dean could see it in every interaction between Sam and Lisa. How strained it was. How Sam bid his time until the relationship ended. He doesn’t want the same to happen with Cas.

“I should get started. I need to work on the door today.”

The sentence breaks Dean out of his reverie.

Cas has managed to eat the better part of his portion, Dean notices automatically. “You don’t have to, man. What with everything,” he says.

“No. I have to. I want to get it finished before…” Cas breaks off but Dean’s stomach sinks anyway.

“If you explain it to us, we can - we can finish it on our own if need be,” Dean says even though every word hurts.

“Not the door,” Cas answers with a quiet headshake. “You’d manage to lock yourself in and never get back out.” There’s a half-smile accompanying the sentence, making clear that it was meant as a joke.

Dean doesn’t feel like laughing but he still answers with, “Yeah, never coming out is not my thing.”

Sam groans and Cas frowns, the humor lost to the fact that Cas just had to come out to his brother yesterday, Dean guesses.

“Cas?” Dean asks when Cas gets up to pack the rest of his eggs into the fridge.

Cas turns back around to him.

“I’ll be there, you know that, right? Whether it’s here or there and whatever else happens. As long as you want me to, I’ll be there.”

“I know,” Cas says, quiet and blushing, before he retreats.

“Cas?” Sam pipes up and gets up from the table as well. “Wait up. Let me help. I’m not as
electronically challenged as my brother.”

“I’m not electronically challenged!” Dean protests. He can build small useful stuff just fine, thank you very much.

“Whatever you say, Dean,” Sam pats his shoulder before squeezing it once.

Dean follows his brother and Cas with his eyes when they disappear into the hallway. Well, he’s just thought that he’d like his brother to show more than the perfunctory politeness he’d shown Lisa. Now, he’s suddenly not so sure anymore.

Dean doesn’t go out front. He can ohhh and ahhh at the finished decorations later. When he won’t stumble upon Cas and Sam while doing so. So instead, Dean goes to the office and starts back up with the endless list of potential donors. Even though this close to Christmas, the chances get ever slimmer. Unless someone looks for a last minute donation, they’ve usually put all their funds into different projects already. Still, it can never hurt to try, as Charlie likes to remind him.

So he spends the next few hours alternately calling people and checking his emails to see whether there are any new notifications from their donation drive on their website. The notifications at least somewhat offset the rejections he gets on the phone.

Sometime around lunch Charlie comes by to shoo him out. But she calls him back when he already wants to leave. “Dean? I’ve got a phone call scheduled with Mr. Shurley in half an hour.”

“Oh,” Dean nods, his stomach immediately cramping. He remembers those months without their benefactor’s help too vividly to ever not be nervous about a phone call with him.

“Do you still want me to ask? About Cas I mean?”

It’s a valid question, Dean guesses. It’s a risk to ask, and the reason Cas needed this job – to get presentable enough to go back to his family – has evaporated with the new developments. He’s going to meet his family no matter what. And as much as Dean wants him to, there is no guarantee that Cas will be staying. That he won’t get into his brother’s car and drive out of Dean’s life.

“Dean?”

He sighs. “Do it only if you think it won’t kill us.” There is no way he can justify anything else. The situation is too insecure and they’ve worked too hard at building this shelter to risk it.

Charlie smiles at him a little sadly. “I’m sorry.”

He shakes his head. “No, it’s – it was unavoidable.” Dean grimaces. “We’d always have come to this point.”

“But with a little more time…”

“I would just have loved him more.”

Charlie doesn’t say anything but both her compassion and her I told you his was a bad idea are clearly written on her face.

Dean runs a tired hand through his hair before answering. “I promised I’d do whatever it takes to help him and I’ll hold to that. So there’s no need to look at me like this. If that’s what he needs, I’m
going to let him go.” Though it’s going to rip his heart out.

“Wasn’t actually him that I was worried about here,” Charlie replies.

“I’ve got you,” Dean says. “I’ve got you and Sam and there are people depending on me every day. I’ve got a lot of stuff to hold onto. And, you know, even when he goes, he might not cut me out of his life completely.”

He tries to make it sound positive but Gabriel’s words about Stockholm Syndrome repeat themselves in his mind and while he knows that it’s not that way, he also knows that Gabriel is Claire’s guardian and that he’s going to want Cas to come home with them. Which, logically, is the thing that makes the most sense. Gabriel runs a shop, he has the funds to help his brother get back on his feet. And he won’t want to relocate. Not that Dean thinks it would be such a great idea to rip Claire out of her familiar surroundings. Not with everything else that’s going on.

But if Cas goes with them, Dean can’t follow. The shelter is open seven days a week and Illinois is a full day’s drive away. And no matter how much they feel for each other, it’s been no more than a few weeks. Cas is going to start a new life and Dean’s not going to be there for it. It’s not hard to do the math on what that means for them.

He can see it in Charlie’s pained face, too, that she has come to the same conclusion.

So Dean gives up on the fake positivity. “I wouldn’t change it, you know? Even if it’s not meant to last, I don’t regret a single moment.”

Charlie wraps him up in a hug then, and he lets himself be wrapped up in it.

“I’ll do my best,” Charlie says when she lets go. “We’ll get him this job and then we’ll see.”

“Thanks, Charles.” He gives her a lopsided grin to show he appreciates it before changing topic. “I’ve got to make a shopping run. I’ll be back in a couple of hours.” Charlie frowns at him so he adds, “It’s Christmas, Charles. And we’ve got unexpected visitors. In case you forgot.”

“There is that,” she admits. “Go then. But check in on your brother and Cas beforehand?”

“I will,” Dean promises.

Checking in on the two nerds turns out to be unnecessary. They work as a surprisingly good team, and need five minutes before they notice Dean watching them.

“Is it lunchtime already?” Sam asks and Dean chuckles. He should have expected that.

“It is, actually. But you’ll have to make your own food because I have a few errands to run. There’s leftover pasta sauce in the fridge.”

Cas’ face scrunches up at the mention of errands.

“Hey, I’ll be back before you notice. Or definitely before you’ve got that thing finished,” Dean waves at the mess of cables that’s sticking out of their door.

Cas huffs indignantly, so Dean closes the distance between them and presses a small kiss to the corner of Cas’ mouth. If he’s going to lose him, he’s going to at least make the best out of the time they have.
“I’m just teasing, baby,” he tells him. “You’re doing great.”

Cas blushes with the praise and the pet-name and reciprocates by stretching up to press a kiss to Dean’s lips. Dean is more than happy to let him. And if he starts nibbling at Cas’ lower lip a little, hey, who can blame him?

“Guys? I’m still here,” Sam complains after a minute.

“Yeah, yeah,” Dean sighs. “I’ll be back soon, okay?”

It’s not exactly a smile on Cas’ face but it’s closer than Cas has been to one for most of the time that he’s been here, so it’s enough to make Dean’s insides go mushy.

Yeah, he’s going to let Cas go because it’s the right thing to do. But he’s going to have to go back on his promise that he’s going to get of this unscarred. It’s too late for that.

It takes longer than planned to do his shopping. Sam is not so much of a problem, they don’t give each other anything real anyway. He’ll have to live with the relaxation CD Dean gets him. But Cas is different. Cas went to great length to do something nice for Dean. So Dean’s gotta get something nice for him as well. He has an idea fairly quickly but then it still takes an obnoxiously long time to find what he hopes is the exact right thing.

When he’s finally back with his neatly wrapped packages, there is already hustle and bustle in front. Jo is there again, using the time she has since she’s working over Christmas, and surprisingly, Sam and Cas are both out front, too, helping her pack a small mountain of care packages from the extra donations they got. They are lucky this year, they got a donation of backpacks that they are now filling up.

“Looks good,” Dean comments when he’s reached them.

“Look who finally cares to join us,” Jo grumbles.

“Hey, I had important stuff to do,” Dean counters and holds his shopping bags up as evidence.

“You gonna show us what you got?” Sam asks.

“Nope,” Dean shakes his head. “It ain’t Christmas til tomorrow.”

“Running a bit late, aren’t we?” Jo teases.

“Hey, my time management skills are excellent, I’m always coming at the exact right time.”

Jo snorts, Sam rolls his eyes and Cas looks at him with soft eyes. He also looks very tired, though.

“Hey, have you guys run this man ragged?” Dean asks and puts a hand on Cas’ shoulder.

“He wanted to help,” Jo shrugs. “I’m not one to say No to an extra pair of hands.”

“He wanted to help, huh? Does that mean Sam didn’t?” Dean teases while at the same time already taking Cas’ hand.

“Why do I get the feeling that your next words are going to be that that needs to be punished by him taking your place tonight?” Jo smirks.
“Cause you know me well, Lady Ninja,” Dean chuckles. But he still looks at Sam questioningly. If his brother isn’t okay with this, he’s going to get Cas to rest and then come back out here.

“Yeah, yeah, you go ahead,” Sam waves him off. “We’ll finish this and start prepping for tonight. Feel free to come back at your leisure.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. Good man.” Dean drags Cas up from his chair, claps Sam on the shoulder, and makes his way to the back, all the while keeping Cas’ hand in his. “This okay? Taking a break?” he asks as soon as they’re far enough away not to be overheard.

Cas is frowning but he’s also not letting go of Dean’s hand. “I could have helped more.”

“Yeah, but you’ve been going full speed all day. I get the whole bury yourself in work concept, but – no offense but you look like shit.” He nudges Cas in the shoulder. “So do I. I think we’ve earned us a Dr. Sexy episode on the couch and a little nap.”

Cas frowns some more, possibly because the last time they tried to watch TV together, it didn’t exactly end well, but he doesn’t contradict Dean.

“Uh, I think you gotta let me in,” Dean says when they’re in front of their new old door. A touch pad with numbers is now installed.

“The code is 401105,” Cas says. “It locks automatically but from the inside you can open it at any time. You only need the code to get in, not to get out. That way no one can get trapped.”

“That’s cool,” Dean smiles and types the new code.

“It’s secure,” Cas emphasizes.

“And that,” Dean agrees. The door opens smoothly. “And you oiled the hinges!”

“Sam did,” Cas nods.

“So you and Sam – that went okay?” Dean takes the opportunity to ask.

“He is very much like you and not like you at the same time,” Cas says contemplatively.

Dean chuckles. “That’s a very yoda thing to say. Do I have to understand it?”

“No,” Cas says and there might even be a bit of humor in his eyes, too.

“Alright then.”

Dean tells Cas to turn on the TV and DVD player while he prepares a few sandwiches for them. It’s early for dinner but Dean didn’t have a real lunch, so he’s hungry.

“Put in Season 1, will ya?” he calls over his shoulder. “It should be somewhere in the stack.”

Cas grunts his agreement and Dean makes quick work of the sandwiches.

He makes a point of it to set the plates next to each other on the table and not on opposing sides like last time. Just like he makes a point to sit immediately close to Cas. There’ll be no freak-outs anymore. At least not from Dean’s side.

“So, then let’s catch you up on Dr. Sexy from the start,” Dean says.
“Is that really necessary?” Cas asks back.

“Hell yeah,” Dean nods. “When you’re with me, you gotta know Dr. Sexy.”

He notices what he’s said only after the fact and quickly hits play to escape the implications. But then, it’s not like Cas doesn’t know that this is serious for Dean. So he settles in next to him, letting his shoulder brush against Cas’.

He’s going to enjoy every minute he has with Cas. It doesn’t even matter whether they’re watching TV or whether one of them is breaking down or whether they’re kissing. He’s going to enjoy it all.

So after they’ve eaten their sandwiches, he puts his arm around Cas’ shoulder. Cas tenses, so he asks. “This okay?”

Cas looks at him, searches his face with that intensity that he has, but then he nods and settles back against Dean.

It feels good, Cas’ warmth against him. Dean buries his nose in the hoodie for a second, reminded of when he did so in Cas’ place by the lake. It seems an eternity ago.

That would be nice, too. Not having sunshine in California, but instead having a house with a fireplace to cuddle in front in winter. Preferably one that was in better repair than the one Cas found, and heat and power would also be welcome, but it wouldn’t be all bad, that house by the lake.

He sighs and snuggles closer. It’s probably Dr. Sexy making him this dreamy.

“Dean?” Cas turns around to him a little.

“Hmm?”

“Will you be there?”

“What?”

“When my brother comes here, will you be there?” Cas repeats.

“If you want me to be, yes of course.”

“He might try to punch you.”

“Well, thanks for the warning. I’ll try to refrain from punching him back.”

“Will you tell Sam what you did? That you visited the murderer.”

Dean frowns. “Do you want to know whether you should tell your brother about the kid?”

“No. I know that I need to tell him. It doesn’t – it doesn’t make a difference anymore, anyway. It’s already real.”

“Yeah,” Dean says because he knows nothing else to say.

“Sam deserves to know, Dean. And you deserve to let go of the guilt.”

Dean thinks about that for a few seconds before he answers. “Sam and I are very similar and we are also very different. I don’t think he wants to know.”
“You’re wrong,” Cas says matter-of-factly. “Even if he couldn’t care less about the murderer, he cares about you. He’d want to know.”

And that’s a perspective that Dean hasn’t actually seen this from yet. “Thanks, Cas,” he says thoughtfully. “Maybe I will tell him. Possibly not at Christmas, though.”

“I don’t have any presents for anyone,” Cas’ shoulders slump.

“You have you,” Dean says and wraps his arm tighter around Cas. “I’m pretty certain that’s the best present you can give them.”

“They?” Cas asks.

“Us,” Dean amends and hides his face in Cas’ neck. “Us.”

They’re still sitting pretty much the same way when Charlie finds them an hour later. Only Cas’ eyes have fallen closed at some point, his whole body heavy against Dean’s. He’s glad that Cas has found enough peace to conk out for a bit, so he tries not to move even when his arm is falling asleep.

“How’s sleeping beauty?” Charlie stage-whispers.

“Exhausted,” Dean answers. “How did it go?”

Charlie doesn’t pretend not to know what he’s talking about. “Weird. I mean, even weirder than usual.” She grabs herself a drink and in lieu of finding any space on the couch sits down on the table.

“Is that even possible?”


“But he’s not abandoning us?” Dean asks because that’s always the most urgent question.

“I don’t think so, no. But something about this rattled him.”

“About this?”

“About Cas. I asked him about hiring Cas and I thought it was better to explain. Cause you know, he never likes it when we lie to him. So I told him pretty much everything we know about Cas. And, I dunno. He got very quiet. And then very agitated. And then very quiet again. Something’s off.”

“Maybe he’s a war vet, too?”


“Charlie, don’t,” Dean stops her right there, “don’t even think about it. He can probably even sniff that out.”

Charlie snorts. “Don’t be paranoid, Dean.”

“Do I have to tell you that so far he’s figured everything out?”

“And punished us promptly, yes, I remember. But I’m not going to go snooping around his personal life. I’m just – noticing, is all.”
“Well, don’t,” Dean says.

Charlie rolls her eyes at him and Cas begins stirring in his arms.

“It’s okay, you can sleep some more, you need it,” Dean tries calming him back down but it’s too late, Cas is already sitting up.

“Hey, Cas,” Charlie smiles at him.

Cas rubs the sleep out of his eyes. Dean can virtually see the moment when everything comes crashing back down on him. His whole face changes.

“Hey,” Dean touches his hand to the side of Cas’ face, trying to smooth the tension back out. He knows it’s impossible but it was so nice, seeing Cas content for a bit.

“Can you cut hair?” Cas asks and it’s not what Dean’s expected.

“No,” he shakes his head. “No better than what you managed, anyway.” He runs his fingers through Cas’ hair, parting the strands that stick up in all directions.

“Jo can,” Charlie says. “She’s still here, just ask her.”

Dean’s got the suspicion that the only reason Jo learned how to cut hair is because it gives her uninterrupted time to badger people into letting her give them shots but that notwithstanding, Dean has seen that she does a decent job with scissors.

Cas thinks about it for a moment, then he nods. “I think I will do that. If it’s no bother for her.”

Charlie shrugs. “No worries. You know what, I wanted to a word with Sam anyway, I’ll send her back here.”

“Charlie?” Dean asks.

“Nope. None of your business.”

Dean shakes his head but he lets her go. He only notices afterwards that she hasn’t given him an answer concerning Cas and the job.

Well, nothing to be done about that so Dean busies himself doing the dishes while they wait for Jo. Cas doesn’t need to be asked to help, quietly drying what is clean and putting it away. He has all the places in the cupboard memorized by now. It makes Dean smile at the same time that it makes that small ball of dread in his stomach hurt.

“Cas?” Dean asks.

“Yes?” Cas looks up from the pot he was drying.

“Would it be – can we hug? Just for a moment?”

Cas’ eyes turn worried but he puts the dish rag and the pot down and opens his arms.

Dean lets himself be wrapped up gratefully, sinking into Cas’ warmth and hiding from everything for just a moment. “You know I’ll be here, right? I’ll always be here.” Waiting for you. But he doesn’t say that part out loud.

Cas doesn’t answer but he buries his face in Dean’s shoulder.
Dean isn’t sure what Cas could say anyway. Assure him he will stay? They both know that it’s an assurance Cas can’t give. Tell him he’s going to come back? He doesn’t even know whether he’s going yet.

“I love you.” It comes out unbidden. He’s said it to him before but that was different. That was in the middle of keeping Cas safe. He has no excuse now. Now excuse for his pathetic little heart wanting to beat in synch with Cas’. For wanting to hold on and not let him go. “I love you.”

This time it comes out choked and Dean holds on tighter because tomorrow Cas’ brother and his daughter are going to be here and Dean’s pretty sure that this is the last night he’ll be allowed to hold on.

Cas stretches up then, cups the back of Dean’s head and draws him into a kiss.

Dean doesn’t need coaxing, he goes willingly, opening up to Cas and letting him deepen the kiss until Dean’s pressed against the kitchen counter.

His hands find Cas’ sides, worming their way under his layers until he feels skin. It’s warm and smooth and Cas’ hip bones are more pronounced than they should be but still he’s solid and he holds Dean firm.

“Do you have to go out tonight?” Cas asks, voice rough against Dean’s skin.

He shakes his head, even though he should. This is still his job and he should be working. But he’s pretty sure they’ll all understand.

“Good,” Cas rasps and lets his hands glide under Dean’s flannel.

“Guys?”

And oh, they’ve forgotten that Jo was supposed to come by for a haircut.

“Well, I guess I can be glad that I came before any clothes were shed. Unless you want me to go again?”

“Umm, no,” Dean stutters. He can feel his ears starting to burn, even as he wills his body to behave and get with the program that wherever Cas had wanted this to go, it’s not happening.

“You want to do this in the kitchen?” Jo asks and rattles the scissors a few times.

“Probably best,” Dean nods.

“You want to get your hair wet and get a big towel or something,” Jo says to Cas.

Cas does as he’s told. He sits down in a chair in front of Jo with less trepidation than Dean would have thought possible.

“How short do you want it?”

“Not military short.”

“Okay,” Jo nods and combs through Cas’ hair.

Cas seems relaxed enough, still, Dean hovers. He can’t help it. Cas has been trusting only him for so long now that even this tiny bit of normalcy, that he lets someone cut his hair, seems weird to Dean. So he hovers.
Jo chats idly while she’s making quick work of Cas’ overlong tresses. She doesn’t expect an answer and Cas doesn’t provide her with one. He sits perfectly still for the whole time until she finally walks around him to look at her work and nods satisfied. “Go find a mirror, check whether you like it,” she instructs him.

Cas disappears towards the bathroom, and Dean gets a broom for the hair.

“Think you can get Sam to let you do this?” he grins while Jo helps to clean up.

“Nope. He’d be afraid Jess would think he’s a burglar and not let him into the house when he gets back.”

Dean snorts in answer.

“Dean? You know we’re there to help, right? Me and my Mom?”

“Tell her Hi from me when you see her. I don’t think I’m going to come by tomorrow night.”

Jo raises her eyebrows. “How come?”

“Promised him not to,” Dean says with a tilt of his head towards where Cas had disappeared.

“God, Dean, you’re smitten.”

He doesn’t deny it.

Instead, he sends off a text message to Charlie to ask her whether it’s okay if he stays with Cas tonight. He’s got a bad conscience about it but it’s not bad enough not to do it.

_The Queen: I can deal with the replacement Winchester. Though I think he’d like to see more of you._

_Dean: He will. Tomorrow._

And possibly the day after when Dean will be crying into his coffee because when he finally found someone to love who loved him back, it turned out that even love is not enough.

“Dean?”

“Hey, Cas. You look good. I mean, you always look good. But the haircut suits you,” Dean smiles and tries to banish the thoughts.

“Where is Jo?”

“She already went back to the front. It’s dinner time out there.”

“I wanted to tell her thank you.”

“I can do it for you. Unless you wanted…?” Dean gestures vaguely towards the front.

“No,” Cas shakes his head and swallows heavily. “I’d like to – I’d like to spend the night with you.”

Dean closes his eyes and takes a deep breath. Then he looks Cas straight in the eye. “No. I mean, I’ll spend the night with you but we’re not doing that. We’re not doing this whole last night on Earth shit. That’s not what this is. That’s not what we are.”

Cas tilts his head and it would be halfway adorable if there wasn’t also so much hurt in the
“I’m not rejecting you,” Dean says and goes closer, until he can reach out and bridge the distance between them. “And I will hold you and kiss you. But I’m not doing the whole one night of memories before it ends thing. I refuse.”

He takes Cas’ hand in his and gives him a soft peck on the corner of his mouth.

“I’ll be here. If I lose you now, I’ll be here and you’ll know where to find me. So you come back when you’re ready. We’ll make all of the memories then. Without it being goodbye. Deal?”

Cas has tears in his eyes again but he nods. “Deal.”

The next morning, they’re all nervous. It’s the quiet kind of freak out but it’s a freak out nonetheless. They bustle around, getting through the morning at the shelter while already preparing to reopen only a few hours later for the all-afternoon-Christmas-party. No one feels ready for breakfast, so they just get some coffee.

Sam doesn’t say anything but he squeezes Dean’s shoulder in silent solidarity when he walks by.

Dean nods. He knows.

Cas knows, too, Dean thinks. He’s taken extra care in the morning, shaving himself to perfection. He’s forgone the layers of hoodie and trench coat today. In a button-down and jeans, with a new haircut and his shoulders straight, he looks nothing like the day he came in.

It makes Dean smile. It cements the certainty in his heart that Cas is going to make it, and in the end, that’s all that counts.

So Dean goes and gets all of Cas’ documents together in a bundle. He puts them next to Cas’ other belongings, and then puts the package that is his Christmas present for Cas on top of it. There is a letter that goes with it. Dean smooths over the paper of the present and closes the drawer. He puts a duffle next to the cabinet but can’t stop himself from kicking at it to make sure the duffle knows that he doesn’t like it.

Then he goes and puts on an ugly Christmas sweater. It’s not going to make things easier when Gabriel shows up but it is tradition.

There is nothing else to do to avoid going out, so he lets himself be guided to the front by the voices. Their volunteers are already there. Garth is heating the fruit punch, Kevin and Sam are setting up the buffet, Charlie and Cas are stacking the care packages in a big pile.

Dean hasn’t even made his presence known yet when the front door opens and Jody and Donna come in. “Casserole is here!”

There’s whooping from everyone, though Dean sees how Charlie puts a soothing hand on Cas’ arm when he tenses at Jody’s voice. He manages to hold his ground, though, even smiling at Charlie before going back to stacking back packs.

Dean goes on into the room then, saying his hellos even while the door opens again, admitting Missouri and some of her friends this time.

Garth pushes a cup of punch into his hand that he accepts even if he already sends a worried glance
towards where Jody is approaching Cas.

By the time Dean actually makes it over there, Jody is holding out an envelope to Cas.

“Thank you,” Cas says quietly.

“I’m glad I could help. And it wouldn’t have been possible without Donna. You know my partner yet?” She puts an arm around the blonde woman next to her.

“How could he when even I didn’t know this?” Dean says and extends a hand to Donna. “I’ve heard of you, though. I’m Dean. Glad to meet you.”

“Likewise,” Donna smiles. “And this – I mean, us is fairly recent. I wouldn’t even have come today if Jody didn’t insist.”

“You got to meet the rascals I deal with at some point,” Jody shrugs.

“They seem very civilized so far,” Donna laughs.

“Yeah, just wait till the kiddie punch kicks in,” Dean jokes.

He even gets a smile out of Cas for that one, though it’s nervous and timid. He draws him into a comforting side-hug.

“You two know anything new yet?” Jody asks.

Dean sends a glance to Cas but doesn’t see a reason to lie to Jody. “He’s coming by today. Cas’ brother. We don’t know whether he’s bringing Claire.”

“Oh,” Jody’s eyes turn wide. “Well, then I wish you the best of luck.”

“He’s family,” Dean says. “We’re kind of hoping that that makes all the difference.”

Jody nods and gives them a kind smile. “It usually does.”

Dean smiles back. He hopes it’s true. But he definitely does know that they have a better chance of things turning out well than they would have if a stranger was trying to adopt Claire.

The room quickly starts filling up after that, their friends mingling with their regulars as well as the ones who never come in apart from on occasions like this. They welcome them all.

Food starts piling up on the buffet and starts getting less again when people start devouring it. Dean stares longingly at the pies even while he’s sure he can’t eat anything. Charlie notices apparently, or in any case she winks at him and cuts a couple of slices off the pies and puts them on a plate and out of reach of everyone.

Somewhere in the middle of the hubbub, someone lays a hand on Dean. He snaps around and comes face to face with Adinca. “We’ve heard you were looking for us.”

“Oh, thank God,” Dean exhales and draws her into a hug. “I was worried about you. You look good!”

And she does. She looks healthier, no unnatural flush on her skin.

Daniel is beaming next to her. “We found a place. We can stay the whole winter. There’s even a job. If I can keep up with everything all winter, they might keep me on.”
“That’s great news, man.” Dean hugs him as well because that is great news.

“We even brought food,” Adina smiles shyly and holds up a bag.

“That is awesome! Thank you!” Dean smiles. It’s a big deal for them, and he knows it. Being able to bring food to the place that has fed them for the past few years. “I’m so proud of the two of you.”

He puts his arm back around Cas, who hasn’t left his side anymore since the room started filling up.

“Thank you.” Both of them are blushing now. “We’ll just…” They gesture towards the buffet and Dean waves them off.

“I did not expect that,” he says quietly to Cas while watching them unwrap their food.

“It makes you happy,” Cas observes.

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “Yeah, it does.”

Cas leans into him then, a fond smile on his face. “You have a big heart, Dean Winchester.”

It’s in this moment that Dean sees him. He looks so out of place in the bunker that there is no mistaking him. “Cas,” Dean pushes at Cas’ shoulder to get his attention.

Cas turns and freezes.

“Come on,” Dean softly pushes Cas forward.

Cas lets himself be led, his eyes fixed on the face of the sandy-blondie man who’s just as frozen, an unmovimg figure in the middle of the party. He looks shocked. Like maybe he still hadn’t believed his brother was alive until this very moment.

“Gabriel,” it finally is Cas who breaks the silence.

“Fuck,” is all that Gabriel answers before he throws his arms around Cas and hugs him tight.

Dean immediately feels like he’s intruding but he’s not going to leave Cas alone with his brother until he knows that it’s okay for him. So he stands awkwardly beside them.

“Fuck, Cassie, you’ve changed,” Gabriel holds Cas at arm’s length to look him over.

“So have you, Gabe,” Cas says.

“Ha! The grey hair is all on your daughter!” But he draws Cas into another hug.

Cas lets it happen more than that he reciprocates and at some point he starts pushing out of the embrace.

Gabriel lets him go, though he still doesn’t seem able to turn his eyes away from him. “Fuck, Cassie. I thought I’d never see you again.”

Cas’ eyes find the ground at their feet, his shoulders hunching. “I thought the same.”

“Cas,” Dean touches his shoulder, careful and gentle.

Cas leans into the touch, quietly drawing strength, Dean thinks, then he looks up at Dean. “We need a space where we can talk, Gabriel and I.”
Dean nods. “There is no one out back. You know your way around.”

Cas takes his hand, a quick squeeze, then with a deep breath he gestures at Gabriel to follow him.

Gabriel sends a hard look towards Dean but he doesn’t say anything, just follows Cas.

Dean stares after them until they’re out of sight.

When he turns, his brother is next to him.

“You okay?”

Dean rubs a hand over his face, giving Sam a weak smile. “No. But I will be.”

Sam smiles back, compassion in his eyes. “He’s going to leave with him, isn’t he?”

“Yeah,” Dean nods. “Yeah. For a while there I thought… But it always was going to end this way, wasn’t it?”

Sam shakes his head. “But it’s not the end, Dean. It’s just the beginning of something new.”

“You think so?”

“I know it.”

**Epilogue**

Cas leaves with Gabriel that day, like they both knew he would. But it doesn’t take longer than two hours before Dean gets the first text messages from the cell phone he got Cas for Christmas. He smiles at it even though he also breaks down in tears, prompting Charlie and Sam to smother him from two sides until he thinks they’re never going to stop hugging him.

They keep texting, sometimes only once or twice a day, sometimes in whole conversations.

The first time they call, it’s because something strange has happened.

*Dean: That house you lived in during summer? I just found the deed to it in the mail. The document is in both our names.*

It’s their secretive benefactor, Chuck Shurley, who bought the house for them, apparently figuring out the right property from a few descriptions Charlie had given him based on Dean’s tales. There is nothing forthcoming as to the why, though. Dean finds it safer not to prod.

What he does, though, is keep Chuck updated about his progress when he starts to renovate the house in his spare time. It doesn’t take long before his friends and found family start helping him, everyone knowing someone who can do this or can replace that.

In spring, Dean drives to Illinois for the first time. He’s nervous enough that he almost throws up in the car. But when he sees Cas, it’s like they’ve never been apart. Cas looks better, his weight up to normal, his muscles stronger than they had been. But the most striking change is his eyes. They are bright and lighten up when he sees Dean and he doesn’t hesitate to wrap his arms around him and kiss him.
Which also means that the first thing that Dean ever hears of Claire is her making gagging noises.

In summer, when school is on vacation, they come visit Dean. The house isn’t finished but it’s changed significantly. Cas walks around with wide eyes, touching the newly refurbished surfaces, staring at the newly set windows with the unbroken glass panes.

Claire doesn’t have the same reverence, she just runs out towards the lake, demanding that the first thing they do is find her bathing suit in their luggage.

Gabriel trusts them for a week before he follows, making sure that Cas and Claire are doing okay.

He is slow to warm up to Dean but Dean can’t really fault him for it. Still, something changes in Gabriel’s eyes after he finds Dean on the floor next to Claire, reading her a bedtime story while she snuggles up into her sleeping bag.

By the time fall turns into winter, the house is finally done. It still needs furnishing, though, so Dean starts keeping an eye out for furniture on craigslist. There are a few things that Gabriel’s kept from Cas’ old house but it isn’t much, seeing how he never thought Cas would have use for them again.

In the meantime, he keeps visiting Cas and Claire in Illinois at least once a month, until for Christmas, it’s finally their time to come back to Kansas again.

Charlie keeps giving him these big shit-eating grins that Dean tries his best to ignore already a week before, but it doesn’t come to a head until the Christmas party. Dean’s wrapped up in a pun-battle with Jess when Charlie suddenly clears her throat and asks for him and Cas and Claire to step forward.

“This is from all of us,” she says. “For a happy start into a life together. Merry Christmas!”

She gives them a heavy box and when they open it, there’s a card on top of it, signed by everyone, their friends and their regulars alike, and underneath it is a stack of money. Big bills, small bills, coins. Like everyone has given what they could afford. It’s enough to cover everything they still need for their house.

Dean’s too choked up to even say thank you so instead he goes around the room and hugs everyone.

It’s spring again when finally Cas and Claire come not in a car but with a big moving truck. Gabe’s unhappy to see them go but he helps them nonetheless, having somewhere over the year made his peace with the fact that he’s not going to get rid of Dean.

They have organized what they could – a place in school for Claire, a doctor to support Cas in his ongoing recovery. It’s still bumpy in the beginning, Claire missing her friends, Cas insecure in his new surroundings, Dean trying to juggle his work at the shelter with his new home-life. It helps that Garth has come on fulltime, giving Dean more spare time.

Dean sends Chuck an invitation to their house warming party in early summer, even though he is not surprised when he doesn’t show up. He’s surprised enough that Chuck sends flowers.

Everyone else is outside, laughing around the BBQ grill when the mailman brings the bouquet. Dean signs for it, still smiling at the delighted shrieks of Claire and her friends in the garden who have just started a water balloon fight with Gabriel and Charlie, he thinks.

Dean opens the small card attached to the flowers. All it says in a flowing script is:

*Home is where the actual story begins.*
Chuck.

Dean reads the sentence and looks back up to where his family is gathered.

It was a long way.

But they’re finally home.

He smiles and quickly puts the flowers into some water so that he can hurry back outside, not wanting to miss a second of their story together.

End Notes

Holy guacamole. When I wrote this story, there was a point when I thought it would never get finished. It took so long and I’ve stared at this story so much that I don’t even know anymore whether it is any good. I hope for the best, though, and so I hope that you all enjoyed it! If you did, comments are always welcome! <3

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