Always be a first rate version of yourself and not a second rate version of someone else.

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rate version of someone else.

by CaremKeto

Summary

When Dean finds Castiel standing on the wrong side of the bridge railing in the pouring rain, he takes him home. He finds himself caring for the man as a replacement for his younger brother, but when Cas gradually reveals what led him to contemplate suicide Dean realises that they can't ignore his past, and takes steps to help Cas heal and move on. As Dean becomes more aware of how our pasts can affect us, and as his old trauma resurfaces, he – albeit reluctantly - starts to open up to Cas about his own past. What starts out as a friendship born of loneliness and desperation grows into something more as they are drawn closer to each other over time, and slowly help each other to mend.

(The tags probably make this sound more depressing than it's going to be.)

Notes

When I first thought I had completed this, it was around 30,000 words. Now I'm rewriting it and that's going to be just a fraction of the overall length which I admit terrifies me somewhat. It's also the first multi-chaptered fic I ever attempted (though I've started and finished others since then) and I want to do it justice, so updates may be slow. Many thanks to Lokuricas for beta-ing the first draft (even though it now barely resembles the original draft) and to Otanda and SameDestination for beta-ing the rewrite. (Also as this fic is a WIP the tags will probably change.)

For those looking for a lot of Sam/Jess, this probably won't be the fic for you. At present they mainly exist at the other end of the phone, and will probably only make a brief appearance towards the end. Dean/Lisa and Dean/Cassie is all in the past but their relationships will play a part later on.

The title is taken from a Judy Garland quote.
Chapter 1

It was dark, it was cold, and Castiel wondered if there was a storm approaching, for the night air was damp, giving the wind a bitter bite. He pulled his over-sized beige trench coat tighter around him as he walked up the hill; he was so far out of town that there were no paths to walk on, so he stuck tightly to the left hand side of the road so he could be seen and easily avoided by any oncoming traffic.

He could hear the river rushing past him at the bottom of the embankment, and he slowly started to make his way across the bridge. Now he was here he wasn't feeling quite as confident as he'd been when he'd started walking up here. He let the small hold-all he'd been carrying drop to the ground, and a shiver ran up his spine as he carefully negotiated his way over the railing. At this late hour no-one should be passing by, and for that Castiel was relieved. Everyone should be safely at home, tucked up in their nice warm beds. How Castiel wished that was where he was right now.

* * *

"You are a disgusting sinner, and I want you out of my house!"

"But father, where am I—"

"SILENCE!" his father bellowed, and Castiel flinched at the harshness of his tone. "I don't care where you go, just that you do not return to this house again until you are willing to seek the good Lord's forgiveness."

Castiel's elder brother, Michael, hovered at the doorway.

"Father," he started.

"Upstairs, Michael," their father cut him off. "Pray to God that your brother here sees the error of his ways and repents, before it is too late for him to do so." He turned to Castiel. "Pack your bags – take only that which you need and is yours, and do not return. You are no longer welcome here."

* * *

What Castiel wouldn't give to be able to go home and slot back into his old life – but he couldn't. He couldn't change who he was, no matter how much he might wish to. Fresh tears began to fall as the enormity of his decision finally hit him.

This wind stung his cheeks where the cold air met with damp trails, but Castiel couldn't feel it – not really. It was nothing compared to his father's vicious attack on him. He allowed himself one final glance up at the heavens, as he prayed through tears to a God who hated him; prayed that He would look after his family, and for His forgiveness.

"I'm sorry." Castiel looked down at the river below, black under the night sky, oblivious to the black car that had just started driving across the bridge. "But I just can't go on alone any longer."

"Hey! Hey, you on the bridge! Hey!"

Castiel's hand involuntarily clenched tighter around the railing as he flinched in surprise. He turned to the stranger's voice, astonished at both that anyone else would be up here so late at night, and also that they would take the time to notice him.
"Hey, wait! Don't!" the man continued, as he got out of his car.

Castiel gripped the railing behind him tighter as he viewed the strange man who walked hesitantly up to him.

"I'm Dean," the man introduced himself.

Cas just looked at him, as if unsure of what to say.

"Uh, never mind. Can I...?" Dean trailed off, motioning closer to Castiel, who nodded after a moment's pause. Dean didn't fail to notice the way his knuckles whitened as he tightened his grip on the railing, as if afraid Dean would grab his hand and prise it off. Not that the thought hadn't crossed his mind, but slowly does it.

"So, uh, you're a long way from town."

"So are you," Castiel replied.

Dean laughed emptily. "True." When he saw the man was waiting for more, he elaborated. "I was on my way home."

Castiel nodded at that.

"What about you? Can I offer you a lift home?"

The man shook his head.

"No? Okay, then."

They both stood in silence for a moment, Dean unsure of what to say next.

"You got a name?" he asked eventually.

"Cas..." The other man swallowed. "Castiel."

"Castiel? Strange name."

"My family is very religious."

"Oh, right. So it's some Biblical name, then?"

Now it was Castiel's turn to give an empty laugh. "Something like that, yes."

Dean pulled his collar up to keep the chill off. "Listen, it's getting cold up here..."

"Then go home – don't let me keep you."

"No, that's not what I..." Dean sighed. "Look, I'm not just gonna walk away from this. From you."

Castiel looked Dean in the eye for the first time, then, and Dean found himself temporarily lost in sea of blue. He knew he was staring, but he couldn't stop himself as he drowned in the young man's confused gaze.

"But you don't know me," was all Castiel said.

Dean hesitantly put a hand over Castiel's. "That's not how this works, Cas," he said gently. "I'm a part of this, now – I walk away, I might as well be the one to shove you off this bridge."
"Don't say that, Dean. You are not responsible for me."

"Well someone has to be." Dean immediately realised his mistake when Castiel turned away from him. His stomach clenched as he watched Castiel look down at the swirling river. "Look, uh, I'm not really good with the whole talking thing, I know that – but if you want to talk I can listen?" he pressed desperately.

Dean didn't know when the rain had started to fall, but when Castiel shivered he realised that the poor man's shirt must be soaked right through.

"Come on, Cas. Let me take you home."

"I haven't got a home to go to," Castiel admitted quietly; so quietly that Dean barely heard him. His hurt and broken expression hit Dean like a punch in the gut.

"You do now," he found himself saying, and he gave Castiel's hand a reassuring squeeze. "Let me take you home," he repeated.

Castiel stared at him as if unable to comprehend why Dean was being so nice to him, and it was all Dean could do to hold his gaze.

"That... would not be a good idea."

The smile that had slowly started to spread across Dean's face quickly disappeared. "Will I tell you what's a worse idea?"

Castiel looked at him.

"Dying," Dean said simply.

"That would be my choice to make, Dean."

"Take it from someone who knows what it's like to lose people you care about." Dean could feel tears pricking but he ignored them. "I won't believe there aren't people who'll miss you if you die here tonight."

Tears were falling down Castiel's cheeks. "Then there is nothing more I can say to you, Dean, for I have no-one. Not any more."

"You got me," Dean said gruffly, clenching a hand around Castiel's wrist. Dammit, he was going to save this guy's life if it killed him. "If I didn't care, I wouldn't be standing here freezing my ass off."

Castiel looked at him and Dean stared at him right back, unwilling and unable to look away. He must have seen something in Dean's eyes in which to believe, for he turned to climb back over the railing. Dean let go of the man's wrist so he could wrap an arm around his shivering waist instead to pull him over, but whether it was the sudden gust of wind that threw Castiel off balance or the wetness of the railing that caused him to lose his grip, Dean's hand clenched around air. It felt like time had stopped as he watched Castiel flail for a grip on something, anything – but then the man was falling backwards with a scream into the choppy waters below.
Chapter 2

Dean frantically scrambled down the dirty, grassy slope beside the bridge and barrelled his way along the edge of the river.

"Cas!" he yelled. "CASTIEL!"

He thought he could make out a figure in the water, but if he leapt in now he could get them both killed. He knew the river widened out up ahead, and the water wouldn't flow so fast there. If he could just keep up with Castiel as he was swept downstream, he'd have one chance to haul him out of the water. He shoved rogue branches out of his way as he leapt over exposed tree roots, and stumbled over several slippery rocks. The current was actually drawing a floundering Castiel nearer to the shore, so Dean waded into the shallows to make a grab for him.

"Come on, Cas," he grunted as he pulled the man ashore.

Collapsing on the shingle on the riverbank, he lay down beside Castiel to catch his breath.

"You alright?" he asked, looking over at the other man's motionless form. "Castiel?" he asked. "Shit!"

He scrambled onto his knees and rolled Castiel over onto his back to begin a cycle of compressions.

"Come on, man, don't make me kiss you," he grunted as he counted to fifteen. He checked Castiel's breathing: nothing. "Oh, fuck you."

Pinching Castiel's nose and tipping his head back, Dean exhaled twice into the other man's mouth. He paused to check if Castiel was breathing, and was rewarded by him choking in his ear. He rolled Castiel's rather limp form over onto his side as he wretched up water.

"Don't ever make me do that to you again," Dean complained, cupping Castiel's cheek with one hand as he looked at him. But he wasn't mad – he was smiling; the relief that Castiel was still alive was evident in the way his face lit up.

All Castiel could do was nod in agreement as he let Dean pull him to his feet.

Dean took one of Castiel's arms around his shoulders and wrapped an arm around Castiel's waist as he helped him back up to the car.

"That yours?" he asked, nodding at the small bag propped up against the railing.

"Yes," said Castiel. Everything he owned, save for the clothes on his back, was in that small hold-all.

"Alright, get in."

Dean helped Castiel get in the passenger seat and tried not to think about wet seats. He tossed Castiel's bag in the trunk, wondering how someone could end up with only a small bag of belongings to their name.

Out of habit he hit play on the cassette player as he drove off, before realising how rude it was. He was about to reach over and switch it off when he realised Castiel was absently drumming his fingers in time to the music.

"You like AC/DC?" he asked, surprised.
"I have never heard this before," Castiel admitted. "It's rather loud."

"I can switch it off," Dean said, stretching a hand across.

"No!" cried Castiel a little too quickly, grabbing Dean's hand in midair. He blushed, and pulled his hand away. "You don't have to do that – I don't dislike it."

"You sure?"

"I would like to hear more."

Dean nodded, and flashed him an approving grin. "Okay, then." His legs were freezing, and he knew Castiel had to be as well, so he turned the heating up and reached behind him to grab the blanket off the back seat. Hoping it didn't smell too much of sex, he offered it to Castiel. "Here."

"Thank you," Castiel whispered, shivering as he cocooned himself in the blanket so only his head was visible.

Dean chuckled to himself, and focused his eyes ahead of him. He saved the guy's life from the river; the last thing he needed was to kill him on the road.

Forty minutes later they pulled up outside Dean's apartment. He turned to Castiel and placed a hand on his shoulder, aware of how Castiel tensed at his touch.

"Come on," he said gently. "Let's get you inside and warmed up."

Castiel stared down at his hands and nodded.

"I'll grab your stuff out of the trunk."

Dean was aware that Castiel stood beside the car door once he had shut it, somewhat unsure of himself. He slammed the trunk shut and jogged up the steps to the apartment block entrance. The key turned easily in the lock, and he pushed the door open. He held it for Castiel, who was hovering several steps behind.

"Dude – you're not planning on running, are you?"

"Running?" Castiel echoed.

"Yeah. Running away."

Castiel blinked. "Where would I go?" he asked, shivering, and he stepped past Dean and into the foyer without waiting for an answer.

"Up the stairs," Dean instructed, as he shut the door. "Third floor."

The walk upstairs was silent, except for the slight echo of footsteps that reverberated within the cold, concrete walls. Castiel found himself watching Dean as he followed him up the stairs – watching the way he moved. He could feel his own feet trudging along, his legs getting heavier with each step he took, but Dean didn't seem to tire the way most other people did after walking up so many stairs. After a brief struggle with his front door, Dean dropped Castiel's bag on the floor as soon as they were inside his apartment.

"Come on. I'll run you a warm bath. Don't want you getting hypothermia."

Castiel nodded absently, obediently following Dean down the hall to the bathroom where he stood,
still clutching the blanket around his shoulders, as Dean filled the bath.

"You got a change of clothes in your bag?" he asked Castiel over his shoulder.

Castiel nodded at Dean's back.

Dean turned to him. "Cas?" he prompted.

"Yes."

"Okay. You get in and I'll go bring your bag."

When Castiel didn't answer, instead only looking at him, he took that silence to be agreement.

Before retrieving Castiel's bag from where he'd left it, Dean hurried to swap his uncomfortably wet jeans into a drier pair. When he picked up the tattered bag a small part of him was tempted to look inside; to see what few items Castiel possessed, but he knew that would be a breach of the trust Castiel had placed in him.

Or had he? Did he trust Dean, or had Dean just given him no other option?

He knocked on the bathroom door. "Cas?"

"Yes?"

"You in the bath yet?"

He heard the gentle sloshing of water as Castiel tentatively stepped into the bath tub and sat down, then, "Yes."

He slowly opened the door and stepped around it. Placing it beside the bath, he then pulled a towel out from the cupboard under the sink and draped it across the radiator.

Castiel eyed him carefully, his legs bent slightly at the knees.

"You don't say much, do you?" Dean commented.

"What would you like me to say?" Castiel asked.

"I don't know. Anything." Dean dropped the toilet lid and sat down, trying not to stare at the bruises that covered the other man's body.

"Are you going to watch me take a bath?" Castiel asked.

"I want to make sure you're alright. Last thing I want is for you to pass out and drown in my bath tub."

"I think one drowning is enough for tonight, don't you?" Cas asked softly, as he lay back in the tub.

"Cas, that isn't funny. You scared the shit out of me."

Cas blinked. "Why?"

"Why?" Dean repeated, his voice nearly a shout. "I thought you were dead, Cas!"

"But why should that scare you? You don't know me."
Dean stared at him. "You're really asking me that?" When Castiel didn't answer, he continued. "Fuck... Cas, just because I don't know you doesn't mean I don't care if you die or not."

"My father knows me, and his only concern is whether or not I repent my sins before I die, not whether or not I actually die," Castiel said quietly.

"What?" Dean couldn't believe someone's father could be so callous. "Cas, I'm sure your father loves you—"

"He loved me. But then I disappointed him. Now he hates me. I... disgust him."

Dean noticed the way Castiel subconsciously fingered the bruises on his arm as he spoke, and swallowed. "That can't be right," Dean said, shaking his head.

"I think I know my own father, Dean."

"But what the hell could you do to make him hate you?"

Castiel said nothing.

"Cas?"

Castiel suddenly found the ingredients listed on the bottle of shower gel incredibly fascinating.

"Cas!" Dean said, a little too sharply, and he leaned forward.

Castiel jumped and sat up, dropping the bottle with a splash.

"Did your father give you those?" he asked gently.

Castiel looked down at himself, then drew his legs up to his chest so he could rest his chin on his knees.

"Sorry," Dean apologised.

Castiel shook his head. "It's alright. But yes. Some of them."

Dean took a deep breath, judging Castiel carefully before he asked his next question. "Was your father the reason you were on the bridge?"

A knot suddenly twisted itself so tightly in Castiel's stomach that he thought he'd be sick, and he couldn't stop the pained expression that clouded his face.

Dean held his hands up and sat back. "Whoa, cool it there, it's alright – you don't have to tell me."

Castiel wished that if he pulled the plug right now, the water would carry him away. When he fell from the bridge he was scared, yes, and he fought to survive, but that was an instinctive reaction. He hadn't quite been prepared – Dean had turned up out of nowhere just as he'd been about to let go. But none of that meant that he didn't want to die anymore.

Tomorrow, perhaps, he'd have his chance. He had the feeling Dean wouldn't let him leave tonight – would insist on making sure he was 'okay' before he felt comfortable letting him go.

"Cas?"

He suddenly realised Dean was talking to him.
"Cas, buddy – are you okay?"

No. No, he wasn't. He'd intended on being dead by now, but Dean had deemed his life worth saving. He'd change his mind if he knew the truth about him, though – of that, Castiel was sure. So no, he was not 'okay'.

"Yes," he murmured. "Yes, I'm fine."

"You're shaking – if you're cold just add more hot water. I didn't make it too hot, 'cause I didn't want you to go into shock."

Castiel shook his head. "I'm fine."

Castiel lay back in the bath as Dean lapsed into silence. He counted the tiles on the ceiling, wondering briefly if that had been Dean's strange idea or if had been a previous tenant's, as he tried to divert his attention from the fact that Dean was trying not to stare at the bruises on his body. Please don't ask about them again, Castiel thought to himself. He really didn't want to talk about them. About anything.

Dean wasn't usually one for talking, but the silence in the room was unnervingly awkward. He kept shooting glances at Castiel, wanting to know exactly how badly hurt he was, but feeling weird for looking at a naked guy. He knew that if his brother had bruises that bad, he'd want to gank the son of a bitch who'd given him them. He couldn't quite understand why he felt so strongly about the strange man who now sat in his bath tub – maybe Castiel reminded him of Sam when he was younger – but there was an undeniable part of him that wanted to look out for him, to make sure he was okay. He wanted to press him for answers, wanted to understand what it was that had brought him to the bridge that night, but at the same time knew that if he pushed too hard too fast, the guy would run a mile.

It was rather pleasant lying there, Castiel supposed, providing he ignored the fact there was another person in the room. He closed his eyes as he realised he was no longer cold, letting himself enjoy the quiet, when Dean's voice startled him. Perhaps he'd been about to drift off.

"I'm going to call my brother, and then I'll turn the kettle on. Will you be okay?"

"Yes," Castiel nodded.

"Okay. You a coffee person?"

"Not really."

"I haven't got tea," he apologised. "I can't stand the stuff."

"I'm really not thirsty."

"It's not about being thirsty, Cas, it's about getting you warmed up." Dean stood, keeping his gaze directed firmly at the floor. "Erm... Oh! I've got some hot chocolate in the cupboard. Everyone loves hot chocolate," he muttered to himself as he left the room.

Castiel could hear Dean chattering to himself about where the hot chocolate actually was as he entered the kitchen, and smiled in spite of himself.

Grabbing the bar of soap that sat on the edge of the bath he gave himself a quick scrub, aware that his skin was starting to wrinkle having spent so long submerged in water. Unsure of where Dean kept his shampoo, Castiel just ducked his head under the water and gave his hair a quick rub. At least
that would get the worst of the dirt from the river out.

Satisfied that he was now as clean as he could be, he curled his toe around the chain and pulled the plug out. As he lay back, feeling the water level recede, he imagined that he was free; that his soul was floating up, up, and away – for a moment forgetting that he was going straight down to Hell when he died.

Once the water was gone he started to feel a little cold, so stepped out of the bath and wrapped himself in the towel that Dean had looked out for him, and it was pleasantly warm after having sat on the radiator for a good quarter of an hour. Crouching down beside his bag he gave the zip a sharp tug, and the damn thing got stuck. He gave it a yank, and a twist, but with a cry of frustration threw it away and collapsed to the floor, letting the tears flow down his cheeks.

He was pathetic. He couldn't be a normal person, he couldn't kill himself properly, and he couldn't even open his bloody bag! He didn't know where everything had gone so wrong; just that he couldn't do a damn think to fix it.

He still didn't really understand why this man was helping him – it's not like Castiel had asked for his help. Sure, it was Christian thing to do, but Dean didn't really strike Castiel as the religious type – and no-one was ever that nice for nothing, were they? Castiel sighed. He'd barely even met the man and he was already trying to second-guess him.

If Dean wasn't ready to give up on him just yet, it would be rude to just throw his hands in the air and say 'I quit', so perhaps he should give him the benefit of the doubt, for now.

With a sudden bout of determination, he wrestled the zip of his bag free, breaking it in the process, and pulled out a fresh t-shirt and a rather ratty pair of old jeans. He stared at the broken zip. Damn it!

Now he needed a new bag, as well as some clothes, and a place to live, and... And he couldn't afford any one of the above, let alone all of them. To hang with it – he'd worry about it tomorrow. He was too miserable to dwell on any more disappointment tonight.

In the kitchen Dean was pacing, waiting for Sam to pick up the phone. He hoped Jess wouldn't answer, because he really, really wasn't up for another fight about what a shit brother he was, and how Sam deserved better, and how he should be more grateful whenever Sam had to bail him out of yet another one of his messes.

He stopped pacing as there was a click on the other end. "Sam?" he asked.

"Dean."

Sam's voice was emotionless, so Dean took a deep breath before speaking. "Dude, I need money."

"Dean, we've had this conversation before," Sam said, his voice tired.

"This is different!"

"It's always 'different', Dean! I give you money and you drink it away. We buried our mom, and then we buried our dad – I'm not going to bury you, too."

"I'm not asking you to, Sammy!" Dean could almost hear Sam flinch at the other end.

"Don't 'Sammy' me, Dean! Jess and I have talked about this—"

"What's this got to do with her? We're brothers, Sam – I am asking for your help!"
"You're always asking for my help, Dean. She's my girlfriend, and this affects her as much as it does me. And don't roll your eyes at me!"

Dean looked at the phone in his hand. "I'm not," he lied.

"Whatever. So what's the story this time, hmm? No, wait, let me guess – you're short on either your rent, or your electric bill. Which is it?"

"Neither."

"The car?"

"No, she's fine," Dean said, a hint of pride in his voice.

"Then what is it?"

"I've got a friend staying with me for a while – indefinitely. I need a bit of extra money for food."

"You don't have friends, Dean – all you have is people that you owe money to."

"And you."

"And me."

"Then help me!" Dean was sure Sam was close to giving in, but there was a pause before Sam spoke again and Dean could swear Jess was telling Sam not to back down. Bitch.

Sam sighed. "This friend..."

"Cas. Well, Castiel."

"Castiel? What sort of a name is that?"

"His name, Sam."

"Dean, is this even a real friend?"

"Son of a bitch!" Dean exclaimed in frustration. "Are you calling me a liar, Sam?"

"No, but you're not exactly the most honest of people, Dean: I've represented criminals less dishonest than you."

"Screw you, Sam!"

"I thought you wanted my help?"

Dean screwed his face up as he tried not to blow it. Castiel was unfortunate enough to walk into the room at that moment. "Talk to my brother, Cas," he snapped angrily.

Castiel, startled, grabbed the phone thrust at him without thinking. He hesitantly raised it to his ear, and asked, "Hello?"

"Hi. Castiel?"

"Yes?"

"I'm Sam, Dean's brother. You're a friend of his?"
Dean, listening, started nodding frantically.

"I, eh, yes," Castiel said, brow furrowed in confusion.

"You don't sound sure," Sam prompted.

"I – no, we're friends. Yes, we're friends."

Dean covered his face with his hands, shaking his head. Stupid, stupid idea.

Castiel tapped him lightly on the arm and held the phone out to him. "He wants to speak to you."

Dean grabbed the phone a little too roughly, and Castiel backed away. "Yeah?" he said gruffly.

"Is this some random guy you've paid to pretend to be your friend?"

"If I could afford to pay a guy to pretend to be my friend so that I could get money from you to spend on drink, don't you think I'd be spending that on drink instead?"

"I had to ask, Dean."

"No, you didn't have to ask Sam, you chose to ask me that."

Sam was silent at the other end of the phone.

"So? Are you gonna help me out or not? It's not like you'll miss a few hundred bucks."

"That's not the point, Dean—"

"Sam!"

Sam sighed. "I'll transfer the money into your account tomorrow."

"Thank you, Sam."

"But so help me, Dean, if I find out this is just some bullshit scam—"

"It isn't."

"—I'm cutting you off. You hear me? You'll lose this number, and I won't have a brother."

"I hear you." Dean swallowed thickly. He didn't think Sam meant it, not really – but he didn't know what he'd do without Sam. Hell, he didn't want to have to think about what he'd do without Sam.

"Thank you."

"Goodbye, Dean. Unless there was something else you wanted?" Sam almost sounded hopeful.

"No, that was it."

"Text me and let me know you get the money okay." Sam's voice was emotionless again, and Dean knew he was being unfair on his brother, but he just didn't know how to make things right.

"Thanks, Sam. I owe you one."

"You owe me a lot more than that, Dean," Sam said, and hung up.

Dean had stormed around the kitchen, banging drawers and doors as he'd made a coffee for himself
and a hot chocolate for Castiel, and Castiel had done his best to stay quietly out of his way, passing him things that he's absently put down only to need again five seconds later.

"You and your brother do not seem to be very close," Castiel observed, as he took a delicate sip of his hot chocolate. "I'm sorry," he said, as he noticed the slump in Dean's shoulders. "I should not have said anything."

"No, it's alright." Dean sighed. "You're right."

Castiel waited. People who wanted to talk didn't need much prompting.

"Sammy and me... We used to be as close as two brothers could get, you know?"

Castiel shook his head.

"Oh. You an only child?"

"No."

"You got a sister?"

"No, a brother."

"But you said—"

"We are not close."

"Oh. That's too bad. Me and Sam..." Dean swallowed. "Well, shit happened. Things changed."

Realising Dean didn't want to say any more, Castiel didn't press the matter. "I'm sorry," he said.

"'S fine, Cas."

The two sat and finished their drinks in peace.

"You keep calling me Cas," Castiel broke the silence.

Dean looked at him. "Sorry – would you prefer it if I called you Castiel? Just it's a bit of a mouthful, you know."

"No, it's not that, I just... Why?"

Dean shrugged. "Why not? When we were kids I called my brother Sammy. Hell, still did, right up until..." Dean trailed off. "Anyway."

"Cas is fine," Castiel assured him. "It's nice, actually – sometimes I feel that Castiel sounds too... I don't know... stuck-up, for want of a better word. Too serious, too formal, almost. My father told me to stop being so stupid and vain, and to accept and be grateful for the name he and my mother gave me. So I've always been 'Castiel'."

"Man, I can't believe no-one's ever shortened it before."

"I was home-schooled for many years," Castiel explained. "I suppose that's why I don't always know how to react around people, and can sometimes say or do the wrong thing. It makes things difficult, I find, and can often lead to misunderstandings."
"You never had any friends?" Dean asked in disbelief. "Not one?"

"Where would I meet them?" Castiel replied. "We lived in a small town, where there were not many children. The only time we really saw anyone who wasn't family was at Sunday school, but we weren't there to socialise."

"You went to Sunday school?"

"Every week, until we were old enough to attend the main church service," Castiel replied. "And then our father would expand on what we had learned that afternoon until the family sat down to dinner."

"Man, and I thought it was bad being dragged to church at Easter and Christmas," Dean exclaimed.

"You only went to church twice a year?" Castiel asked, shocked.

"Cas, if I could have gotten away with it, I'd never have gone."

Castiel didn't know what to say to that, for religion had always been a large part of his upbringing. He'd say as much to Dean, except he'd already said too much - he didn't know what had made him tell Dean as much as he had.

But Dean made a big deal out of yawning at that point, eager to avoid a fire and brimstone lecture about his soul was damned. Castiel didn't know jack shit about his soul. He carried their empty mugs through to the kitchen, and Castiel could hear him bumbling around. He took the opportunity to examine his surroundings. Looking around him, it was obvious that Dean didn't care a lot for his apartment everything was plain, simple, and functional. There was no clutter, no decoration. In fact, there were no 'homely' touches at all. A single photograph sat atop the mantelpiece, but it was lying face down. A quick check assured him that Dean wasn't coming back in the next few seconds, and he quickly crossed the room and picked it up. A rather handsome man stood with a beautiful woman and two children. Judging by the intensity of the young boy's green eyes, Castiel would guess that the young boy was Dean.

As Dean's footsteps approached the living room, Castiel placed the photo back on the mantle and sat back down. To Dean, it would look as if he hadn't moved. He looked up as Dean came back in, arms laden with blankets and pillows.

"It gets cold in here at nights," he explained, as he tossed the blankets on the sofa. "This thing pulls out as a sofa-bed – I'm just sorry I haven't got a proper bed for you to crash in."

"That's fine," Castiel said. "I wasn't really expecting——"

"There's no way I'm throwing you out onto the street, Cas – so just don't even start, okay?"

Castiel nodded, and shot Dean a small smile. "Here – I'll do that."

"You sure?" Dean asked, as Castiel took the blankets from him.

"Yes. Don't worry about me."

Dean looked at him.

"I can manage, Dean."

Dean held his hands up in surrender. "Okay, well, my room's down the corridor just past the
bathroom if you need anything. You know where the kitchen is if you get hungry – not that there's much in the cupboards, but I'm sure you'll be able to find something."

Castiel shook his head. "Right now, all I want to do is sleep."

"Well, alright then. I'll see you in the morning. 'Night, Cas."

"Good night, Dean," Castiel whispered to the empty room, once Dean had left him alone.
Chapter 3

Castiel stretched out beneath the covers, before remembering where he was. He sat up quickly, to see Dean glancing up at him over the sports section of the morning paper.

"Good afternoon," he joked.

Castiel turned to look at the clock, shocked to see that it was quarter past eleven. "I am so sorry," he apologised, hurriedly grabbing at his clothes from the night before. "You should have woken me."

"No, it looked like you needed the sleep," Dean said, looking back down at the football scores from the night before. "I only took the morning off work, so I'll have to head out shortly after lunch," he grumbled. "Unless..." He looked back up again. "Are you going to be okay here on your own?"

"I should really be going," he said, his sleep-addled brain still trying to digest everything that Dean had just said to him.

"Going where?" Dean asked. "You said it yourself, you've got nowhere to go. Stay here. At least until you get yourself sorted out."

Castiel's blood ran cold. His father had wanted to 'sort him out' and now this stranger, who had barged into his life last night, thought he could do the same? How dare he? How dare they both? Just because he wasn't made like other people didn't them the right to walk all over him.

"I do not need to be sorted out, as you so delicately put it," Castiel spat defensively.

Dean looked up at him, eyes wide in surprise at Castiel's sudden and unexpected outburst.

"You think that you have some sort of hold over me, because you saved my life? Just because I tried to—" Castiel closed his eyes and took a breath. "My problems are none of your concern," he stated, much more calmly this time. "Thank you for taking care of me last night, but I shan't impose upon your hospitality any further."

Dean tossed the paper on the carpet and strode across the room, and Castiel took an involuntary step back as he got closer. Two firm hands gripped his shoulders as green eyes stared into his.

"Now you listen to me, Castiel – I don't know who you are, and I don't know where you've come from, but I am offering you a roof over your head and a bed, of sorts, to sleep in – are you really going to walk away from that?"

Castiel didn't know what to say, but Dean didn't really give him a chance to answer, anyway.

"And besides," he went on, dropping his hands to his sides, "when I said about getting you sorted out, I meant a place to live. I told you last night, I'm not really great with the whole talking thing."

"Oh," Castiel breathed, as he realised what a complete idiot he'd just been, jumping to conclusions about the man who'd been nothing but kind to him. "I'm so sorry, Dean, I didn't mean to be rude, I just—"

"Hey, it's ok. You don't need to apologise for standing up for yourself."

"I'm just so used to people – well, my father – telling me what to do," Castiel admitted.

"Well you don't have to answer to your father any more, Cas. And you certainly don't have to
explain yourself to me."

Castiel looked at him, the picture of concern and sincerity, and green... His eyes were so green... He screamed at himself internally to stop staring as he fought to make his mouth work. "You're really alright if I stay here?" he asked, aware that Dean had started looking at him like he'd grown a second head the longer he'd stared at him.

Dean raised his eyebrows. He hadn't been expecting Castiel to give in quite so easily.

Castiel suddenly worried that the invitation didn't stand any longer seeing as he'd just insulted the man in his front room and was about to apologise again when Dean spoke.

"Yeah," Dean said. "Oh, and Sam's money came through – he keeps his promises, I'll give him that – so I thought we'd hit the supermarket at the weekend. As much as I hate shopping, I hate being hungry even more. You in?"

"It's not really my place, is it?" Castiel asked slowly.

"You're living here now, aren't you?"

"Well, yes," Castiel said, still gathering his things together, because clearly it was the answer Dean was expecting. "Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"My coat – I don't remember seeing it last night."

"Eh, yeah," Dean mumbled. I kind of lost it when I was pulling you out of the river."

From the look on Castiel's face it looked as though Dean had just told him he'd run over his dog.

"We'll get you another one, and you can borrow one of mine in the mean time if you want to go anywhere. Sam always gives me twice as much as he says he will – I think it's 'cause he expects me to drink it away, and he wants me to have some let over for the important things. It doesn't matter what he says – he's always got my back." Dean knew he sounded like he was trying to convince himself as much as Castiel, but the truth was it didn't matter how often he lectured Dean about money and drinking and whatever else, he'd never threatened to cut him off before – and the thought of losing Sam terrified Dean more than he would care to admit. "So yeah, we'll get you a new coat, and not that I was looking or anything, but you could probably use some new t-shirts as well. Honestly, dude, those threads are not cool."

Castiel shook his head. "Dean, I can't let you do that – your brother gave you that money, not me."

"But how I spend it's up to me. And I want to help you out." He wanted to do a better job of helping Cas out than he'd managed with his own brother.

"No, Dean. I won't let you do that."

"Cas—"

"No, Dean," Castiel repeated firmly. "I am indebted to you enough for your generous hospitality – I do not wish to be any further in your debt."

"Dude, I'm not asking you to pay me back – I just want to make sure you'll be alright."

"Nevertheless, Dean, I cannot allow you to waste your brother's money on me, when he meant for it
"Fine!" Dean held his hands up in surrender. "If you want to be doing laundry in the sink every other night, be my guest. But I've got to go get some lunch sorted – you hungry?"

Castiel's stomach chose to speak up at that moment, and he nodded.

"Sandwiches okay?" Dean yelled from the kitchen. "You'd be struggling for much else."

"Whatever you're having will be fine with me," Castiel called back, not really caring what he ate so long as he ate something.

Lunch (or in Castiel's case, breakfast as well) was a silent affair. Castiel would barely look at Dean, and every time Dean opened his mouth to say something he'd close it again without saying a word. He just didn't know how to broach the subject of Castiel's suicide attempt last night. Could it even be called an attempt if he fell? The intention was there to jump, but maybe he wouldn't have been able to go through with it?

Dean sighed, and blue eyes glanced up and back down again so quickly he thought he'd imagined it. With Sam it had always been easy – neither were really the talking type, so they just found a way to deal with whatever it was through actions rather than words. Even if those actions meant avoiding the problem altogether... But how did you ask someone you'd only just met what was so bad in their life that they felt they needed a way out? Maybe he'd ask Bobby. Maybe. At any rate, when he got back from work tonight he should probably say something to Cas. If he could figure out what.

* * *

Later that afternoon Dean was lying on his back underneath a silver Audi and wondering why he couldn't seem to get Castiel out of his head. The past few years he'd pretty much just kept himself to himself, so why he had suddenly offered his couch to some random guy who had more problems bottled up inside him than even he himself did he had no idea. Dean had always looked out for Sam when they were growing up – it's not like he raised him, for their dad was always around in varying states of inebriation – but he had certainly taken care of him. If he was being honest ever since things had become difficult between him and Sam he'd just kind of let life pass him by. Maybe he just missed having someone to look after, which was just freaking selfish given the way he'd almost fucked everything up with him. His sighed. Castiel wasn't his responsibility. And yet... He just couldn't let the guy leave without anyone or anywhere to go to. For all he knew, Cas was just some con guy looking for his latest target – and Dean had given him a key to the place and left him home alone. He tightened his grip on the wrench he was using. If he got home and his TV and stereo had gone... He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. Cas didn't seem like the type. And he had honest eyes. And getting those bruises must have hurt like crazy—

"You plannin' on stayin' here all night, boy?"

"Huh?" Dean looked at his watch. "Shit, sorry Bobby. Kind of lost track of time there."

"Yeah, yeah. Get goin' before I have to start paying you overtime!"

Dean grinned at Bobby, who shook his head and muttered, "Idjit" under his breath, but Dean knew the corners of his mouth would be turning up.

But as it turned out, Dean didn't have to worry about coming home to finding half his possessions gone. But there was something missing as he walked through his front door and stepped on a key that must have been slipped under the door.
"Cas?" He flicked on the light switch in the living room. "Castiel?" he called, louder this time.

A quick check of the apartment revealed the place in darkness and Castiel nowhere to be seen. Though the TV and stereo were still there, Dean noted with a wry grin. Looks like he was right about the guy's eyes. He felt an odd pang of disappointment knowing that he'd never see the guy again, and knew he'd be checking the papers for weeks for any unidentified bodies that had been found. Poor guy. He really did hope everything would turn out okay for him.

There was no point in hanging out by himself and being miserable on a Friday night, he decided as he viewed the contents of the nearly-empty fridge, so he reheated some of the pie he'd bought at lunch, washed it down with a bottle of beer, and jumped in the shower before heading off down to Ellen's for the night. He figured he might manage to hustle a few games of pool first, and then he would see about picking up a girl for the night – in his experience, the first female crowd were out to get drunk. It was the ones who came out later who were looking to get laid, so getting too drunk was not on the cards. He grabbed his keys and cast a last look around the place. All going well, he wouldn't see it until tomorrow.

* * *

As he trudged home at one o'clock in the morning he let out a bitter laugh which misted in the air in front of him. Well, it was certainly tomorrow, alright. He'd won a shitload of money off some college students and spent it all on beer, getting himself drunk to the point that no girl was going to take him home that night, and to top it all off Ellen had kept his keys claiming he was too drunk to drive.

"Bobby would have my head if I let you drive home in the state you're in, even if you made it there on one piece!" was all she said before kicking him out after he'd refused her offer of a cab.

Dean was still a good twenty-five minutes from his place, but he could knock a few off if he cut through the park. If he'd been sober he'd never have done it, because the people who hung around there at that time of night were the type to gank you as soon as look at you; however the beer had left him feeling particularly brazen.

He was halfway through when even in his drunken state he was beginning to think taking a shortcut had been a bad idea when he noticed a figure on one of the benches. Slowing down, he considered turning back because this was a really stupid idea. But he could see the gate, and home was only fifteen minutes from there to his bed. He sped up, intent on walking past really quickly, but his foot caught something and he went flying – a bag with a bust zip, he realised when he saw the contents spilling out onto the path. The guy on the bench hadn't moved, so Dean was about to go when he took a second look at the bag. There was nothing special about, except for the fact he'd put it in his trunk the night before.

"Cas?" he asked quietly, stepping closer to the man on the bench.

Middle of the night or not, Dean recognised the mess of dark hair that contrasted with his pale skin.

"Cas," he said again, moving to shake the guy's shoulder.

In a second Dean was flipped around and on the ground, a knee pressing painfully against his lower back. He couldn't help but think that it was embarrassing how easily he'd been overpowered, but told himself that if he'd been sober he'd have come out on top.

"I don't want any trouble," Cas growled in his ear. "And I have nothing of value, or else I wouldn't be sleeping on a park bench. Now be on your way."
"Cas..." Dean choked out, and breathed a sigh of relief when the knee eased up slightly.

"Dean?" Castiel asked cautiously.

"Dude, I still got an empty couch – why are you sleeping on a park bench?"

He got to his feet when Castiel moved away, and brushed himself off. When he turned, Castiel was right in front of him, staring into his eyes.

"Uh, Cas?" he said, slightly nervously. "Personal space, man – ever heard of it?"

"Why do you keep helping me?" he asked, not moving from where he stood.

And when Dean tried to step back, he found he was prevented from doing so by two hands gripping his elbows tightly.

"I have nothing to offer you, so why?" Cas asked again.

Dean shrugged. "It's the right thing to do?" he asked.

"You don't even know."

"No," Dean agreed, and when Castiel released him he bent to pick up his bag. "Come on, let's get you home," he sighed.

Fingers brushed against his as Castiel moved to take his bag from Dean, and Dean let him; also draping his own jacket around Castiel when he shivered.

"Thank you," Castiel said quietly.

"Don't worry about it," Dean replied, and when Castiel stumbled he grabbed him around the waist to hold him up. He didn't take his arm away once Castiel had righted himself, but felt oddly reassured by the way Cas seemed to lean into him.

When they got back to Dean's apartment, however, it was Castiel carrying Dean through the front door – and straight down the corridor to the bathroom where he promptly threw up down the toilet.

"You're drunk," Castiel stated.

"No shit, Sherlock."

"Do you do this often? Or only when your houseguests leave?"

"Only most nights." When Dean turned back to the toilet and started retching Castiel rubbed a soothing hand on his back. "Man, I feel hot."

Castiel said nothing and moved away, but a moment later a cool wet flannel was pressed to the back of Dean's neck.

"Perhaps you shouldn't have drunk so much," Castiel suggested in concern.

"Cas, you need to lighten up. We'll go out tomorrow, have a good time."

That was the last thing he wanted. He just wanted to be left alone to figure out if there was even a point in living any more. "Dean, I don't think that's—"
"I'm not taking no for an answer." He saw Castiel's reluctant expression and mistook it for disapproving. "Look, I promise I won't drink. Much. You shouldn't have to sit here with me, anyway. I'm not a pretty sight right now." He leant back over the toilet and retched once again.

Castiel slid his hand down Dean's back and rubbed him gently once again. "You offered me a place to stay when I had nowhere. You offered your support when I had no-one else—"

"Alright, alright – don't turn this into a freaking chick flick moment," Dean protested, but the corner of his mouth had risen in a smirk.

"This is the least I could do after all you've done for me, Dean. Do you need anything else?"

"Right now death would feel good," Dean groaned without thinking.

Castiel's hand stilled.

Dean turned to him. "Shit, Cas, I'm sorry – I didn't mean to make light of what happened with you or anything—"

"That's alright, Dean. But I think, if you do not require anything further, I shall retire for the night."

"Yeah. Yeah, sorry."

"Good night, Dean."

"Night. But Cas – tomorrow night, yeah?"

"Perhaps," he conceded, mainly just to shut Dean up about it. Hopefully by tomorrow Dean would forget about it or, if he was still insisting on it, he'd be able to make his excuses.
Dean's eyes were still half shut when he got in the shower the next morning. (He could call it that – there was still ten minutes before it officially became 'afternoon'.) He'd woken up at nine and promptly gone back to sleep without another thought, but as the warm water helped clear away the cobwebs in his brain he was suddenly hit with the memory of finding Castiel again last night. He jumped out of the shower and gave himself a quick rub down, wrapping the towel around his waist before he sprayed his underarms with a quick burst of deodorant. The sound of the TV greeted him as he walked into the living room.

"The parents of a seventeen-year-old school girl are asking her to come home. Samina Abdul hasn't been seen since she left for school yesterday morning – though she never arrived there. It wasn't until she didn't come home that night and that her parents found out and raised the alarm. A note left behind indicated her intention to meet up with an online boyfriend, who parents say had been at the centre of several recent family arguments."

"I half expected you to have done a disappearing act by the time I got up," Dean grinned.

Castiel looked up at Dean. "The thought had crossed my mind," he admitted, his eyes darting over Dean's body as he shuffled awkwardly in his seat.

Dean's grin faded. "So what stopped you?"

"I don't know," Castiel replied, switching the TV off. "No-one has been this kind to me in a long time, so maybe that has something to do with it."

Dean sat down, droplets of water dripping from his still-wet hair. Most fell onto his shoulders and down his muscled chest, but some ran down his freckled cheeks like tears. He figured if Castiel kept busy, maybe he could forget whatever it was that was getting him down – even just for a few hours – because he knew he sucked at the whole talking thing, and distraction used to work great (some of the time) with Sam.

"I hope you don't mind that I put the TV on," Castiel said, running a hand up and down his arm as Dean watched him. "I've never had the opportunity to watch it much, before."

"No, it's cool, Cas. Whatever you want. Treat this place like your home."

"Thank you, Dean. I'll do my best not to be too much of an inconvenience."

"Dude, it's fine. Really."

Castiel held his tongue, for the last thing he wanted to do was start an argument and annoy Dean. He didn't know him, so he wasn't sure how quickly he might change his mind and ask Castiel to leave, so he figured that the better behaved he was the longer he might have a roof over his head.

"So you got any plans for today?" Dean, sweeping a hand through his hair to brush it back.

Castiel looked at him blankly, his neutral expression disguising the fact that he thought that was a really stupid question to ask someone who had intended to jump off a bridge two nights ago. "No, no plans," he said, thinking unless you're still thinking about taking me out, because he dearly hoped Dean had forgotten about his drunken offer. "What about you? Do you have work today?"

"No, not today," Dean said. "And no plans until later tonight."
"Crap. "I don't want you to feel that you have to spend your entire weekend with me," Castiel said hurriedly. "If you have friends or family that you'd like to see, then please, don't let me stop you."

"You mean you don't want me to babysit you all the time?"

"I... Well... Yes, I suppose. Though I hadn't thought of it quite like that."

"Well, no friends and no family – at least that I'm on speaking terms with – so it's just you and me."

Castiel's shoulders slumped slightly, and Dean noticed. A hand subconsciously moved to rub the back of his neck. Of course Castiel was disappointed – just because he thought Dean was kind didn't mean he wanted to spend all day hanging out with Dean. Or all weekend. "Well, I mean, if you want to do whatever by yourself I've got some stuff I could do, I'm sure, and—"

"I'm sorry," Castiel said suddenly.

"What?"

"That you have no-one."

"Oh."

"I know how alone that can make you feel."

"Well, yeah, I guess, but I usually try to keep myself busy."

"Or drunk," Castiel said, somewhere between being a question and being teasing, like a child testing his boundaries. Something told him that last night hadn't been a one-off.

"Or drunk," Dean echoed, chuckling.

Castiel relaxed then, safe in the knowledge that Dean wasn't upset by his comment.

"What did you do yesterday, anyway?" Dean asked him.

Castiel shrugged. "I just sort of... walked around."

"'Walked around'?"

"Yes," Castiel admitted.

There was an awkward silence as neither looked at the other, until Dean said, "Look, I meant what I said yesterday."

Castiel looked at him.

"You've got nowhere to go, I've got an empty couch..." Dean trailed off. "Just... think about it, okay? It's not a marriage proposal – just a roof over your head."

Castiel managed a smile at that, but then his face fell as a thought occurred to him. "But I have no money, so I can't—"

"Don't sweat it, Cas – it'll be fine."

"I don't want you to have to rely on your brother to—"

"I don't rely on my brother, Cas!" Dean protested.
"No, I don't mean it like that." Castiel said quickly. "I just meant that I want to be able to pay my own way, without you having to borrow money from your brother so you can afford to keep me."

"Jesus Christ, Cas, you're not a pet!" Dean laughed.

"I know, I didn't mean—"

"You don't mean a lot of things you say," Dean teased.

"Everything I try to say comes out wrong!" Castiel exclaimed in frustration, burying his head in his hands.

"Cas, Cas – I get it," Dean said, his smile fading because he didn't want to get Castiel all worked up. "Don't worry. But I'll figure something out. We'll figure it out," he amended when Castiel opened his mouth to protest.

Dean took it as agreement when Castiel nodded. There were so many things he wanted to ask, but he wasn't good with words and he didn't want to insult him. An awkward silence fell between the two of them as he tried to find the right thing to say.

"Cas," he started hesitantly. "Can I just ask..."

Castiel looked at him, waiting expectantly.

"You don't have to answer, but, when did your dad kick you out?"

Castiel was surprised. He'd expected Dean to ask why; what he'd done that was so dreadful his father had disowned him. And for Dean to inevitably revoke his invitation.

"I mean, how many nights have you risked your neck by sleeping on park benches?"

"A few weeks ago," he said. "Maybe a month? Maybe a bit longer?"

"A month?" Dean echoed in shock. "Cas, please tell me you've had a roof over your head in that time."

"Sometimes. Sometimes I'd manage to get a bed in a homeless shelter, but other nights I'd be sleeping rough on benches or in shop doorways."

Dean looked simultaneously angry, horrified, and sympathetic. "Castiel," he said sadly, "don't you have any friends that would have helped you out?"

"None that I could turn to," he admitted carefully. Dean was getting perilously close to asking why.

"I know me and Sam have had out difference over the years, but we've always been there for each other," Dean said. "I can't believe that none of your friends would help you out."

"I brought my situation on myself, Dean."

"Bull. They should still help you!"

"Dean, please. Just let it go," Castiel pleaded.

Dean frowned, wanting to know why Castiel had been turned away; why no-one who knew him would help him. But the desperation in Castiel's eyes made him bite his tongue – for now – and he let the matter drop.
"Go shower, Cas. Shave. Get dressed, then we'll go out and grab some lunch."

Castiel automatically moved to follow Dean's instructions, but then paused in the doorway. Dean was not his father – here he was allowed to question.

"Dean?"

"Yeah, Cas?"

"Could we just have lunch here?" he asked hesitantly.

"If you want," Dean said. "I just thought you might like to go out. Do something, you know?"

"Like what?"

"I don't know," Dean admitted. "I was going to think about that when you were in the shower."

"Okay."

"I mean, if you want to stay in it's no big deal!" Dean hurried to reassure him.

"How about we have lunch here, and then we could go out for a bit?" Castiel asked, seeking a compromise. "How does that sound?"

"Like a plan," Dean grinned. "I'll see what I've got in the cupboards – there's not much, but I should be able to scrape something together that'll survive the cooking process."

"Survive?"

"Yeah," Dean said. "I'm not the best of cooks."

"Well you might want to start by putting some clothes on first," Castiel noted, his gaze travelling down to where the towel rested just below Dean's navel.

"Yeah, else you'll cop an eyeful if this drops!" Dean laughed, and Castiel flushed. "Alright, alright. But clean razors and stuff is in the wall cabinet, okay?"

Castiel averted his gaze from Dean as he stood up to leave and nodded. Either Dean was a gift from God – a gift he didn't deserve – or more likely he was temptation from the Devil.  

* * *

The water was warm when Castiel stepped under it, and it made a pleasant change from trying to wash up in a café restroom (or not at all). When the tears ran down his cheeks – tears of shame, of relief, and of fear – he stuck his face under the spray, letting them mix with the water until he could almost convince himself that he wasn't crying. He ran the bar of soap over his skin, hating himself for the bruises he wore.

He thought of Dean: of his fear when he found Cas on the bridge; of his concern when he found Cas on the bench; of his relief when he found Cas on his sofa. Maybe Dean really did want to help him – he seemed genuine enough, and he'd certainly been kind to him so far. He was trying to decide if he could trust Dean, and with how much, when he absentlty reached a soapy hand between his legs.

He dropped the bar of soap when his dick started to swell. "No," he said to himself, shutting the shower off. "No, no, no, no, no."
He stepped out of the shower and hurriedly dried himself off, then wrapped the damp towel round his waist. One hand wiped a streak through the steam on the mirror, just enough to see himself, and he studied his reflection for the first time in weeks.

He barely recognised the man he saw.

His hair was longer than it had ever been, and needed to be cut. There were dark shadows under his eyes, and he looked tired – but not the kind of tired that could be cured with a good night's sleep. He picked up the razor he'd looked out before he got in the shower, and ran a thumb over the blade. A thin line of blood oozed where it cut the skin, and Castiel thought how easy it would be to end it all there and then.

"Cas!" Dean's voice carried down the hall. "This'll be done in like two minutes!"

Castiel started, and the razor dropped into the sink with a dull clank.

"Cas?"

"I'll be five minutes!" he shouted back.

Shaking his head, he took the shaving gel and massaged it into his face and neck before giving himself the quickest shave he could. He looked much younger without the beard that had been building up since the last time he'd been able to shave, but it didn't make him look any less tired. He instinctively reached for the deodorant that sat out and it wasn't until he sprayed it and he thought it smelted different that he realised it was Dean's; his was still in his back in the living room, with his clean clothes.

"Yours'll be cold by the time you get in here!" Dean laughed as Cas hurried past the kitchen to the living room.

"I don't mind – I'll just be a minute."

He got dressed as quickly as he could and when he got to the kitchen he found that Dean was nearly finished. He sat down and looked at the... meal... that was on his plate.

"What's wrong?" Dean asked through a mouthful of food.

"Nothing!" Castiel said quickly, grabbing his fork. "It looks..."

"Like a dog ate it and threw it up on your plate?" Dean supplied. "Yeah, sorry about that. But I can promise you it tastes better than it looks."

"I thought you were going to say it tastes better than vomit," Castiel said quietly, and stared at Dean when he burst out laughing.

"That too!" he grinned.

Castiel smiled back at him, and took a bite. It was rather good, for whatever it was.

"It's supposed to be an omelette," Dean said, as if he could read Castiel's mind. "Don't ask me what's in it, though – I just threw in a few things that were sitting around."

Castiel's shoulders shook as he tried not to laugh.

"What?"
"For what looks like a culinary disaster, it tastes really good."

"Uh, thanks, I think."

"No, thank you."

Dean shoved the last of his lunch in his mouth.

"So what did you want to do this afternoon?"

Dean swallowed and reached for his orange juice. "I thought we could just go for a walk or something. I mean, it's free and all, so..."

"Okay."

"I know you said that you spent yesterday walking around, though, so if there's something else you want to do, then just say."

"No. I like walking."

"Okay."

Dean sat and watched Castiel finish his lunch – which wasn't weird or anything – and when he was done he reached for Castiel's plate.

"I've got that," he said, standing up before Castiel could protest. He dumped them in the sink and ran some water over them. "Right, I'm going to clean my teeth and take a piss and I'll be ready to go. What about you?"

"Same."

"Good."

When Dean left, Castiel moved to the sink and removed the dishes, pouring out the water and refilling the basin – this time with washing up liquid. It took no time at all to wash and dry the few dishes there were, and Dean came back just as he was hanging the damp dish towel over the radiator.

"Bathroom's all yours if— You didn't have to do that, Cas!"

"It's the least I could do," he shrugged.

Dean moved to put them away but stopped behind Castiel, who stiffened instinctively. Dean seemed to sniff the air around him.

"Wearing my deodorant already, I see!" Dean laughed. "Well it didn't take you long to make yourself at home."

Castiel relaxed slightly. Dean wasn't mad at him. "I'm sorry, I left mine in my bag."

"Don't worry about it. You'll get a toothbrush in the cabinet if you need one. You know, I usually just leave these," he added, motioning to the dishes.

Castiel watched him as he put the last of them away, paying attention to what went in which cupboard.

"You know, the quicker you go to the bathroom the quicker we can leave," Dean joked.
Castiel hurried down the corridor.

* * *

Less than five minutes later they were standing outside. It was warm, and Castiel was relieved for it meant that he didn't have to borrow a jacket from Dean. Not that there was anything wrong with his clothes, but he would have felt bad about it.

"Shit," Dean said, suddenly realising that his car wasn't parked outside his apartment, but rather outside the Roadhouse.

"What is it?" Castiel asked, immediately concerned.

"We've got to go get my car first."

"I thought we were going for a walk?"

"We are."

"Then why do we need your car?"

"Because we need to drive to where we're going to walk."

Castiel raised his eyebrows.

"Just... come on," Dean sighed, reluctantly walking off.

Not having any other choice at this point, Castiel followed him.

It was a good forty minute walk from the Roadhouse to his apartment (when he was drunk) so Dean was surprised to find that it was a good ten, maybe fifteen minutes shorter when he was sober and actually able to put one foot in front of the other without tripping himself up. They didn't talk much on the way, though Castiel made a comment about how nice the weather had been the past couple of weeks - something which he'd been grateful for when he found himself sleeping rough. The first time he'd slept in a shop doorway it had rained all night and another person looking for a place to sleep had beaten him until he'd vacated the step, and for the rest of the night he'd missed what little shelter it had offered (though he didn't tell Dean that part, of course).

When they reached the Roadhouse Dean turned to Castiel. "The Harvelles own this place. They're good people," he told him, and walked straight up to the door and hammered his fist on it. "Ellen! Jo! Keys!" he yelled.

Castiel waited beside Dean's car, and he thought the woman who answered the door - Ellen, he guessed, assuming that Joe was her husband - looked rather intimidating, even from across the parking lot. There appeared to be a heated exchange of words, and she glanced over at Castiel, who tried to make himself look as small as possible, before disappearing back inside and reappearing with Dean's keys.

"Get in," Dean said as he unlocked the car.

Castiel obediently climbed into the passenger's side.

Once they were out of the city Dean hit play on the cassette player.

"Do you mind?" he asked as a drumbeat started to fill the car.
"No," Castiel shook his head.

"Good. I hate driving in silence."

Castiel looked out the window at the scenery, reading all the signs they passed. He wondered where Dean knew where he was going, or if he was just going to stop somewhere that looked nice. He imagined that it would be nice to live like that – always on the move and see new things. He found the thrum of the engine reassuring, and he smiled whenever Dean started singing. He'd suddenly fall silent, as if self-conscious of his audience, but occasionally he'd just belt it out and grin. Castiel supposed it depended on the song. At the moment he was drumming his hands off the steering wheel and singing something about being wanted dead or alive. He really hoped Dean was a good driver, for he didn't look like he was paying that much attention to the road.

"Dead or alive. Dead or ali-i-ve! Dead or ali— Oh, shit." Dean suddenly stopped and hit the stop button.

Castiel's face fell. "It's alright."

"No, it's not."

"What do you think I'm going to do? Throw myself from the car just because you're singing a song?"

"No, but—"

"I was rather enjoying listening to you singing, actually."

Dean's cheeks reddened. "We're nearly there anyway," he said gruffly.

"Where's 'there'?"

"Here," he said, pulling into a small parking lot.

Castiel climbed out of the car as Dean went to feed the meter. Wherever they were, it was beside the sea – he could smell it in the air. After ensuring that the ticket was securely displayed on the dashboard, Dean clapped him on the shoulder.

"Come on!"

Castiel followed him as they made their way through the small town.

"They have a market," Castiel noted.

"Yeah, they do that about once a month or something. They sell a bunch of fruit and veg, home-made jams and shit..." Dean trailed off as he realised that Castiel had stopped to look at a second-hand book stall. He moved to stand behind him as he flicked through various paperbacks. "See anything you like?"

Castiel dropped the book immediately. "No."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "You're a pretty shit liar, you know."

"Lying is a sin."

"Then I've got a one-way ticket downstairs," Dean commented. "What the hell were you looking at, anyway?" He picked it up and turned it over. "The Bible?"
"My father made me leave my copy at home. He said I didn't deserve it."

Dean looked from the book to Cas, and then over to the woman running the stall. "Hey, lady – how much for this?"

"Everything's three dollars," she said, pointing to the sign in front of him.

"Oh, yeah." He dug his hand in his pocket and dropped the coins in her hand.

"Do you want a bag to carry it in?" she asked.

"No, thank. I'll just go stick it in the car just now," he said to Cas. With a smirk, he added, "Don't disappear on me."

"Dean," Castiel started, but Dean was already jogging back to the car. He turned back to the books and amused himself until Dean returned.

"Still here I see!" he joked.

"You didn't need to do that, you know," Cas told him.

"I know. But I wanted to."

"I owe you enough, Dean."

"It was only three dollars."

"That's not the point."

Dean shook his head. "I'm not going to argue with you. I just wanted to do something nice."

Castiel immediately felt guilty. "Thank you," he said.

"Don't mention it."

Dean left Cas to look through the books and moved over to the DVD stall that was set up. A few things caught his eye, and he might have bought them if he didn't have Castiel staying with him now. Money-wise he'd be okay for now, but he wasn't so sure about in the long run. When Castiel started hovering around behind him, he figured Cas was ready to move on but was too damned polite to say anything. He walked away and led Castiel down a narrow side street, and Castiel's face lit up when they reached the beach.

"Dean, it's beautiful!"

"It's just some sand and water, dude," Dean shrugged.

"But look at the birds bobbing around on the water!"

"They're just gulls. They'll shit on you and steal your food when you're not looking." But nothing he said could wipe the grin from Castiel's face. "Have you ever been to the beach before?"

Castiel shook his head.

"What – never?"

"No. My father saw no point in frivolous excursions."
Dean grabbed his arm and positively dragged him onto the sand. "Come on – we're going to build sandcastles and jump in the waves and look for shells and whatever else it is that kids do on the beach."

"Dean, we are fully grown men, not children!" he protested, but nonetheless allowed Dean to lead him onto the sand and to the shoreline.

They walked along the shoreline for a bit, and Dean would periodically pick up pieces of shell and tell Castiel what they were.

"Limpet. Mussel. Cockle."

"What's this one?"

Dean looked over to see Castiel holding a long straight shell.

"Razor clam," he told him.

Castiel turned it over in his hands. "I like this one."

"So keep it."

"Why would I do that?"

"I don't know. That's what some people do."

Castiel slipped it into his pocket.

Dean resumed his commentary of the shells they came across, more often than not just repeating names until Castiel joined in and it became a race to see who could name the shells first.

"I much prefer it here than in the city," Castiel told him.

"Yeah? I mean, I like it here, but I'd get bored. There's less to do."

"I suppose," Castiel conceded.

"But you were right," Dean said, giving Castiel a friendly nudge in the ribs and causing him to grimace in pain. "Shit, sorry dude! I forgot you were kind of sore—"

"It's alright, Dean," Castiel cut him off.

"No, it's not alright. Man, I'm sorry – I can be such a douche sometimes."

"Forget about it, Dean," Castiel said. "You were saying?"

"Oh, just that you were right about it being kind of beautiful, I guess."

Dean fell silent after that, but Castiel didn't want them to fall into an awkward silence. He liked it when Dean talked.

"You said you wanted to go in the water," he reminded him, bending over to untie his shoelaces.

Dean laughed, and kicked his shoes off with ease. "Race you!" he shouted, and set off when Castiel was still struggling with the knot of his other shoe.

Eventually Castiel got his shoes off, by which point Dean was nearly in the water. He gathered their
shoes and socks and hurried after him.

"Just leave them on the sand and get in here!" Dean cried as he threw his jeans onto the sand. Castiel hesitantly removed his trousers as well, but he took the time to fold them.

"Come on, Cas!"

"It's cold!" he gasped as he stepped into the water.

"Of course it is!" Dean laughed.

"I can't believe I'm doing this."

Dean grabbed his hand. "You're the one who wanted to!"

"I've changed my mind!" Cas laughed even though he was shivering.

"Just wait for a wave... Wait for it... Jump!"

"People are staring!"

"Let them stare, Cas. Here comes another."

They jumped again, and then Dean was pulling him further out.

"No, Dean!" he cried as Dean's sudden movement pulled him forwards. A wave hit him in the chest, knocking him off balance and his hand slipped from Dean's. He choked as the water went in his face and he closed his eyes instinctively. "Dean!" He moved in what he hoped was the direction of the beach, and was relieved when the water level around his waist receded.

"Cas!"

Castiel sank to his knees on the sand, small stones and pieces of broken shell digging into his knees but he didn't care as he coughed and tried to regain control of his breathing.

"Cas!" Dean crouched down beside him. "What happened, man? It was just a bit of water and you started freaking out."

Castiel shook his head, and Dean wrapped an arm around his shoulders.

"I couldn't breathe."

"You're alright now," Dean said to him, rubbing a hand between his shoulder blades.

"When I fell from the bridge the water kept pulling me under and I couldn't breathe."

Dean wrapped his other arm around Castiel and held him close. As usual he fucked everything up. Sam always told him he needed to start thinking before he acted. "I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's not your fault."

"Yeah, it is. I dragged you further out. Cas, I don't even know if you can swim."

Castiel nodded. "Not brilliantly, but I can stay afloat."

"Okay, so no more water," Dean said. "Check."
Dean rolled onto his back and stretched out on the sand, allowing the hot sun to dry him off, and Castiel did the same. He dug his feet into the hot sand and curled his toes, chuckling at the fact that just three days ago he'd never have considered doing something like this.

"I like having you around, Cas," he said suddenly. Clearing his throat, he added, "I'm just saying."

"I like being around you," Castiel told him.

Dean turned to look at him.

"That came out wrong," Cas said, his brow furrowing slightly.

Dean just laughed softly. "You know what? I really fancy some chips. You can't come to the beach and not have fish 'n' chips."

"Dean, we've just had lunch."

"So? I can still eat some more," he said as he sat up and reached for his jeans.

Castiel ran his socks between his toes to get the worst of the sand out.

"Dude, I'd never have thought of doing that," Dean said, copying him.

They headed back the way they'd come once they were fully dressed again – though walking in damp boxers didn't rank highly on Castiel's list of things he'd like to do again! – and Castiel was surprised at just how far they'd walked.

"Oh, hey, let's go in here," Dean said suddenly, once they were back on the street.

'Here' was a small, free-entry aquarium in what used to be a coastguard station that consisted of two small rooms – one which held several tanks of fish, and the other which was the small gift shop. The took their time as they looked at the creatures in each tank; Dean enjoying their antics while Castiel studied the fact sheets about them like it was a school outing.

"What's your favourite kind of fish, Dean?" Castiel asked, once they'd looked in all the tanks in the room.

"You mean that's not deep-fried in batter?" Dean joked, but Castiel didn't find it funny. "I, uh, I guess the little nemos are kind of cute," he said, flushing slightly.

"The..." Castiel looked at the sign that had the species list on it, but didn't see any identified as 'nemos'. He looked at Dean. "The what?"

"The little orange ones," Dean pointed.

"The clownfish!" Castiel exclaimed. "I like them as well. But why did you call them nemos?"

"You've never seen..." Dean trailed off, remembering what Castiel had said to him this morning about not having seen much television, and figured that went for films as well. "It doesn't matter."

Castiel watched in delight as a crab sidled out from under a rock, and Dean thought to himself how easily pleased he was. He didn't know anything about Castiel's family, but the fact that Castiel had been denied simple pleasure such as TV and family trips to the beach when growing up – things that Dean had taken for granted as a kid – made him hate them.

"Come on," Dean said. "Let's see if we can catch ourselves a deep-fried fish."
This time Cas did smile.

They left the aquarium and walked towards the small café with a flashing neon sign in the window that appeared to read 'Fsh 'n' chips'.

"I wonder if they know their sign is damaged," Castiel wondered aloud.

"Hey, that reminds me of a joke," Dean said.

"About a broken sign?" Castiel frowned.

"No," Dean said. "What do you call a fish with no eyes?"

Castiel contemplated this for a moment. "Blind?" he asked.

Dean chuckled. "No – a fsh!"

But Castiel was still looking at him as if he was waiting for the punchline. "You know – eyes, the letter 'i'..."

"Oh," he said. "Oh!" His eyes widened, and Dean could pinpoint the exact moment he got it.

Castiel laughed like it was the funniest thing he'd ever heard, and Dean laughed at how hard Castiel was laughing. But then it hit him that that was just another example of how much he seemed to have missed out on growing up.

"What do you want?"

"Oh, I'm not hungry."

Dean didn't believe this for a second, so ordered a portion of fish 'n' chips to take away.

"Are you really going to eat all that?" Castiel asked when he saw the size of the fish.

"Nah," Dean said. "I won't have room for dinner otherwise. We'll share it."

"I told you I'm not really hungry, Dean. You could have just bought some chips for yourself."

"And I told you you're a terrible liar."

Twenty minutes later they were standing on the pier, burning their fingers on their freshly cooked supper.

"You know, we never built sandcastles," Dean said suddenly.

"That's quite alright, Dean. Unless you were looking forward to that?"

"No," Dean said, stuffing another couple of chips in his mouth. "But we'll need to remember to do that if we ever come back," he said as he chewed. "I swear, they do the best chips."

"I think the bird wants some," Castiel noted, looking down at the seagull in the water.

"Of course the gull wants some," Dean told him. "They'll eat anything."

Castiel tossed a chip down to it, which it gobbled down greedily.

"Don't feed it!" Dean cried as several gulls overhead started cawing, but it was too late – soon no
fewer than twenty gulls were swimming around on the water beneath them, watching and waiting.

"Oops," Castiel said quietly, unable to hold back his guilty grin.

"Oops is right," Dean said. "Come on – let's get out of here."

The gulls all squawked their displeasure at not being fed as they binned the paper wrapper and walked back up to the car, wiping their greasy fingers on their t-shirts. Most of the stalls were being packed up, now, and Dean ran ahead to catch one guy.

"Hey. Hey! Hang on a minute!"

Castiel didn't hurry to catch up to Dean, and the guy clearly wasn't impressed with whatever Dean had said to him, but he turned and rummaged around in a couple of boxes before handing something to Dean.

"Thanks, mate," Dean said, giving him some money, but the man just grunted and continued packing his van.

"What did you—"

"Nuh-uh. You'll find out later," Dean said, hiding it behind his back. "It's a surprise."

*I * *

"I have a surprise for you, Castiel."

"Father?"

"Put a shirt on. Look smart."

"Yes, Father," Castiel replied in confusion.

"Well don't just stand there!"

Castiel jumped, and immediately moved to his wardrobe.

"Two minutes, Castiel. Be downstairs in two minutes."

His father shut the door shut behind him and Castiel pulled his t-shirt over his head. He had the shirt buttoned half-way up when he glanced in the mirror and realised that the short sleeves didn't quite cover the bruises on his arms from where his father had gripped him the day before and shaken him roughly. He swallowed, and shrugged the shirt off in favour of a long-sleeved one. He could roll the sleeves up and button them so they sat neatly, and they would still be longer enough to hide the purple fingerprints.

"Castiel!" his father called as he reached the bottom of the stairs.

"I'm here, Father," he replied.

"Well come here, boy – I'd like you to meet Rachel."

So this was his Father's surprise – yet another blind date. "It's a pleasure to meet you," Castiel said politely.

"You, too," she smiled.
She was pretty – even Castiel could see that – and prettier than Hester, his father's last failed attempt at a set-up. As he fixed his false smile in place for the rest of the night, he could feel another little part of him die inside.

* * *

It seemed to take less time to get to Dean's than it did to get to the beach, but then again Castiel had been distracted on the way back.

"I'm going to go shower," Dean announced as they walked through the front door. "I think I've got sand in my ass." He walked down the corridor to the bathroom, one hand pulling at the ass of his jeans.

Castiel could quite honestly say that he had never met anyone as brazen as Dean. And, he decided, he really needed to get out of his underwear because although common sense told him his boxers had dried out hours ago, the paranoid part of his brain was telling him that they felt like they were still holding half the ocean.

When Dean got out of the shower he wouldn't tell Castiel what it was that he'd bought, despite him asking several times.

"You'll find out once I bring the pizzas back," was all Dean would say. "And don't bother trying to cheat, because I'm taking it with me."

Castiel collapsed on the sofa as Dean left to get their dinner, and glanced at the Bible Dean had bought him. He reached out and rested his palm over the front cover, too afraid to open it. His father had told him he didn't deserve it, and his father was always right. He jerked his hand back suddenly like he'd been burned, and he snatched the newspaper up and turned to the crossword to take his mind off it.

He was halfway through when Dean returned – he didn't hear him come in because he was preoccupied trying to figure out what a six-letter word for an African antelope, but the smell of pizza interrupted his train of thought.

"One meat feat for me, and one Hawaiian for you, plus a side of garlic bread."

"What's an African antelope? Six letters."

"Impala," Dean answered immediately. "Why?"

"How did you know that?"

"I read," Dean shrugged. "Plus they've got the same name as my car, so, I guess I just remember these things."

"It fits," Castiel informed him while filling in the boxes.

Dean nodded to himself. "Good. Now put that down and I'll put the film on."

"Film?"

Dean took the disc out and tossed him the box.

"Finding Nemo," Castiel read as he examined the front cover with interest. "Dean, I believe this is a children's film."
"And?"

"And nothing. Is this what you bought today?"

"A-ha."

"It has a clown fish in it."

"It has two."

"This is why you called them nemos."

"Yeah," Dean said, sitting down next to him. "Now shut up and enjoy the film," he grinned.

Castiel gasped when Nemo's mother died along with the rest of her eggs, and Dean didn't think anything of it. But when Nemo was taken from his father Cas let out a choked sob. Dean closed his eyes and tipped his head back against the sofa. He was an idiot for not thinking about Cas's problems with his dad. A fucking idiot.

"Do you want me to switch it off?" he asked quietly.

Castiel shook his head as he reached for the box of tissues. "Just tell me it's all going to be okay."

Dean let out a low huff of laughter. "Cas, it's a kid's movie. They all have happy endings." He paused. "Except Bambi."

Castiel blew his nose. "Don't let me see that one."

"I won't." Dean swallowed. "If you ever meet my brother and tell him this I'll kill you, but the first time I saw Bambi I cried." He didn't know what had possessed him to tell Castiel that, for he classed that as one of his most embarrassing memories. He'd been drunk, so he'd put it down to the booze. And what had a kid's movie been doing on at three in the morning, anyway?

But Castiel just put a hand on Dean's knee and squeezed it gently in a silent promise.

* * *

"Well, what did you think?" Dean asked once the credits began to roll.

"I liked it," he said.

"Good," Dean said, gathering the pizza boxes. "I'll go toss these in the trash."

"What about the leftovers?"

"Oh, that'll be lunch tomorrow. Or breakfast."

Castiel had the sneaking suspicious that Dean wouldn't see breakfast, if this morning had been anything to go by. "Today was... really good," Castiel told him when he came back.

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "I had more fun today than I've had in a long time."

"It was nice to forget, just for a little while."

"Good," Dean said, thinking that there was probably something more that he could say. "So much for going out tonight, eh?"
"This was a much preferable choice of evening, I think. But if you still want to go out, please, don't let me stop you."

"I might. Just for a quick drink."

"Alright," Castiel said as he began to make up his bed on the sofa.

"Are you going to sleep already?"

"I might watch some TV for a bit, if that's okay?"

"Sure. I guess this is your home, now, so treat it as such. But we'll go out another night though, yeah?"

"Maybe."

"Okay. Well I'll, uh, see you in the morning."

"Good night, Dean."

"Good night, Cas."

Castiel heard Dean as he brushed his teeth and grabbed his keys.

He heard Dean shout, "Bye!"

He heard Dean lock the door and run down the stairs. A minute later heard him drive away.

But though he stayed up for a couple of hours to watch some rubbish film on TV, he didn't hear Dean come back.
Chapter 5

Dean groaned as he opened his eyes and was blinded by the light streaming through a gap in his curtains. It must be about two o’clock, he reasoned. As he trudged, bleary-eyed, towards the kitchen, he glanced at the clock that hung next to the front door, which proudly announced that the time was eleven forty-five.

"Fuck..." he groaned. It was too early after the night he’d had. What had her name been? Nikki? Natasha?

There was light coming from under the living room door, which meant that the curtains were open, which meant that Castiel was up. He opened the door.

"Cas, do you want some toast? I'm going to—"

He looked around the empty room.

"Shit."

He walked back down the corridor and tried the bathroom.

"Cas?" he asked, knocking lightly on the door, but it swung open and the bathroom was empty. Dean had expected that Castiel would still be there this morning, considering how well they’d gotten on the day before. Had he done something? Said something to offend him? He couldn't think of anything, but then he couldn't think of much at the moment. Maybe Cas just didn't like him. He trudged back to the kitchen for a caffeine hit, seriously contemplating going back to bed, when he saw the note taped to the coffee pot.

Good morning, Dean!

He rubbed the sleep out of his eyes.

I haven't left, if you were wondering. I've gone to church. (I'm not sure what it's called, but we drove past on the way to the beach yesterday. Perhaps you know the one?)

Dean knew exactly which church to which Castiel was referring, and shook his head. It would have taken the guy well over an hour to get there on foot. He looked at the clock again, thinking about going to pick him up. What time would he get out? Scratch that – what time did church even start? He glanced back at the note.

I expect the service shouldn't finish much later than half past twelve, so I should be back around lunch.

Castiel

Half twelve. Plenty of time for a bite to eat and a quick shower, he decided.

An hour later he was running late and doing a u-turn on the street, before telling a surprised Castiel to get in the car.

"Thank you, but I could have walked."

"I know," Dean said, flipping the bird to the irate driver behind him who was honking impatiently at him.
"So how was it?"

"I'm sorry?"

"Church – how was it?"

"Oh. Yes, it was good. They're organising a fundraiser to raise money for the local home for the elderly."

"Well that's nice of them, I suppose."

"You suppose?"

"Well, I don't make it a secret that I'm not religious. Don't they usually preach against drinking, gambling, and premarital sex? I mean, that's basically ninety percent of my personality. They don't want you to have any fun. And I haven't even started on the fact that some of them are child-abusing homophobes."

"I hope you're not going to tell me that's the other ten percent of your personality," Castiel said quietly.

"What? No! I like women, not—" Dean cut himself off and cast a sideways glance at Cas, noticing the subtle twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Did you just crack a joke?"

Castiel smiled tentatively, but it was only when Dean laughed that it became a fully-fledged grin. Dean shook his head, still chuckling to himself. "Damn it, Cas. Don't look so serious when you're joking."

"My apologies."

"And quit apologising, man."

"Sorry."

"Aha," Dean grinned. "Caught you out there."

Castiel settled back in his seat and looked out of the window the rest of the way back to Dean's, absently tapping his feet along to the music that Dean put on to fill the silence.

When they got back to Dean's apartment they sat down in the living room to eat the leftover pizza from the night before.

"So did you have a good night?" Castiel asked.

"Yeah," Dean answered through a mouthful of crust.

"What did you do?" He was very interested to know exactly what kind of a man he was now living with for the time being.

Dean grinned. "Oh, you know – I drank, gambled and got laid! And she was legal," he added with a cheeky wink. He knew he was good in bed, but she'd certainly shown him a thing or two. Nancy? Natalie? He was sure her name began with an N. "Do you mind?" he asked, waving the remote at Cas.

"Not at all," Castiel said, picking up the crossword he'd abandoned the night before. He chewed
absently on the top of a pencil as he puzzled over the clues, brow furrowed in concentration, as Dean settled down with a beer to watch the football game.

Sunday afternoon was a lazy one, and Castiel managed to finish the crossword puzzle in between Dean trying to explain the rules of football to him.

* * *

The next morning Cas awoke to a loud bang.

"Dean?" he called.

There was no answer. He lay there and listened, barely breathing as he concentrated on the smallest of noises, and a moment later he heard the sound of a car driving away. He recognised it as Dean's, or so he thought. Now that he was awake there was no reason to stay in bed, so he tossed back the covers and padded barefoot into the kitchen. The linoleum floor was cold, but he hardly noticed as he read the note that Dean had taped to the kettle.

_I'm at work. You're living here now, so treat this place like your own and I'll see you between 4 and 5._

– _D_

For a moment Castiel wondered how many times Dean was going to tell him the same thing – _make yourself at home_ – but then he realised that he was still tiptoeing around like he didn't belong here. He was conflicted, because he desperately wanted to believe that he could make a fresh start here, but on the other hand he'd never be able to start over so long as he was lying to Dean – and by not telling him the whole story he was lying to him.

He shook those thoughts from his mind and dropped a couple of slices of bread in the toaster. If Dean wanted him to treat his apartment like his home, then he'd start by cleaning it. It wouldn't be enough to make up for everything Dean was doing for him, but it would be a start. And he didn't like living in the midst of such untidiness.

* * *

Dean took the stairs up for a change even though the lift had been repaired the day before, eager to work off his irritability before he walked through the front door. Sometimes he wished he had Bobby's lack of tolerance for idiots – some jerk had brought their car in five minutes before closing and instead of Dean telling them to bring it back tomorrow he's agreed to 'take a quick look at it' there and then. Forty-five minutes later he'd finished the job and was billing the guy two hundred and forty bucks for parts and labour.

"Cas?" Dean called as walked through the door.

"In here!"

Dean followed the voice into the kitchen where Cas was slumped over the table, head rested on his crossed arms, hair even more mussed than usual. He looked around the spotless room and whistled.

"Wow, Cas. Did the house elves drop by?" he laughed as he grabbed a beer from the fridge.

"No," Castiel answered, looking around the room as if to check he hadn't left anything lying around. "Just me."
Dean raised an eyebrow at Castiel's serious response, but let it slide. "So apart from cleaning the kitchen what else did you do all day, anyway?"

Castiel gestured around the room.

"You spent all day cleaning the kitchen? Dude, you need a hobby!"

Castiel shrugged. "It needed to be cleaned."

"I'm not going to argue with you on that one, but you didn't have to do it."

"But now you don't have to do it."

"True, but Cas – I didn't ask you to stay so that you could clean, alright?" Dean hurried to assure him.

"I know. I just wanted to do something for you."

Dean just looked at Castiel, because it had been a long time since someone had done anything for him. "Come on, let's get dinner sorted," he said eventually, moving towards the food that Castiel had left out on the counter.

"They're all past it's sell by date," Castiel said.

"Really?" Dean asked in surprise. He checked a few tins and packets and pulled a face. "Yeah, okay." He started looking through a few cupboards. "Dude, did you go through every cupboard?"

"Yes – they've all been thoroughly cleaned."

Dean nodded. "Everything's so... tidy."

"Oh, there was a mug in the back of a cupboard that was broken. It's by the sink."

"Broken?" Dean repeated, moving towards the sink. Castiel watched as Dean examined the destroyed mug and dumped it in the trash. "Why didn't you just put it in the bin?" Dean asked. "I mean, it's beyond repair."

Castiel looked at the table. "It's not mine to get rid of."

"I don't even know what's in half these cupboards. Some of it's mine, some of it's..." *Mom and Dad's,* he finished in his head. After the accident, he'd gutted the house and sold it, but had been unwilling to part with a lot of stuff so had moved it all into his small apartment. He should probably have a clear out. "A lot of this stuff could probably go, you know. It's just taking up room."

"You have three sets of kitchen scales," Castiel offered.

"Three?"

"Yes."

"I didn't even know I had one set – I never use them. Well, why don't you put two into that church thing you're doing?"

Castiel seemed to perk up at that. "Really?"

"Yeah," Dean said, knowing that the church sale thing would be the perfect distraction for Cas from
whatever problems he had. "It would be better off with someone who was actually going to use half
the stuff I've got lying around. Tell you what; anything I've got more than one of just look it out. I'll
go through it, but I reckon you'll probably be able to take most of it."

"Dean, that's very generous. I'm sure the church will be grateful."

Dean waved him into silence. "I'm not doing it for the church, Cas."

"But even still... Thank you."

"I'm going to jump in the shower – do you want to get pizza tonight?"

"Again?"

"Chinese, then?"

Castiel nodded. They couldn't live off of takeout forever, but at the moment there wasn't that much in
the cupboards.

* * *

Dean may have told him that he didn't have to clean the apartment, but Castiel threw himself into
doing just that over the next couple of days.

When Dean came home on Tuesday, the living room had been dusted and vacuumed, and the stain
on the carpet that had been hidden under a foot stool for several months had been scrubbed clean.
Also, it turned out that the small table sitting beside one of the sofas that the phone sat on was
actually a magazine rack, so a lot of the magazines that had been lying around had been neatly filed
away.

Castiel had also managed to scrape together enough ingredients to make a spicy pasta sauce for
dinner instead of takeout again, which Dean said was delicious but would have benefited from some
chicken.

On Wednesday, the bathroom was practically gleaming, and Dean tripped over the cord that was
trailing behind Cas as he vacuumed the corridor when he walked through the door.

Dean flicked the switch on the wall socket, and the machine whirred into silence. He watched as
Castiel froze before hitting the power button on the machine twice, but nothing happened.

"Dude, enough," he said.

Castiel turned to him, and saw the plug swinging from Dean's hand.

"You can't keep doing this."

"I like keeping busy," Castiel insisted. "And I want to earn my keep."

"You're not my housekeeper, okay? Cleaning the kitchen was one thing, but the whole damned
apartment? It's too much."

"What's wrong with wanting to help? You've helped me."

"Cas, you're a guest here. You don't have to clean up after me."

Castiel looked at him, with eyes slightly narrowed and his head tilted to the side in confusion.
"What?"

"Either I am a guest here, or I am to treat this as my home – which is it? Because I cannot be a guest in my own home."

Dean couldn't argue with that logic, so he dropped the plug and groaned loudly as he walked into the kitchen and sat down. He rubbed one hand across his face as he tried to figure out what to say. He looked up at Castiel, who was hovering in the doorway as if awaiting judgement.

"Sit down, man. You look like you're getting ready to run."

Castiel sat down obediently.

"Look," he sighed. "You want to do something to earn your way, then I don't have a problem with that."

"Good," Castiel said, standing. "If you'll excuse me, I'd like to finish the hall before we eat anything."

"I haven't finished either, Cas."

Castiel sat down again.

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"I haven't finished, Castiel."

"Yes, Father," he said, dropping his gaze to his feet.

"Not only are you going to withdraw from your college course until you are feeling better. It's probably for the best in the long run, anyway – I don't know why you even wanted to go in the first place. Twenty-four is too old to be going through a teenage rebellion phase. And anyway, college is probably where you developed your... condition."

His 'illness'. His 'condition'. His 'affliction'. All words his father had used to describe a part of who he was. He could feel the truth of it in his bones, no matter how much he wanted, or tried to deny it. But Castiel sat silently, listening to his father's every word and feeling the life being choked out of him with each one.

"You are also going to resign from your job. The Potters are nice people and they would lose a lot of customers if your condition were to become public knowledge. Do you want them to go out of business? That shop has been in their family for three generations, boy."

"I know, Father." Castiel hung his head. "I'll hand in my resignation first thing in the morning."

"Good. I'm glad you're being so reasonable about this."

Castiel rubbed his arm absently, still sore from where his father had grabbed him the day before.

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"Cas?"

Castiel looked up at him.

"Are you listening to me?"
"Yes."

"'Cause you don't have to do everything for me. I managed before you moved in."

Castiel nodded.

"But maybe you're right. Maybe you should be doing something to earn your way."

"I can try to find a job or something," Cas said quietly. "I don't have many skills, though."

"Sure. Great," Dean agreed. "But if you can't, it's not a problem."

They both fell silent for a moment.

"I enjoy cooking," Castiel offered eventually, when it was clear Dean didn't really know what to say next.

"Alright, then," Dean said, sitting back in his chair. "So how about you cook and keep the kitchen tidy, and we go week about cleaning the bathroom. Everything else you leave to me, okay? Sound fair?"

"Yes, Dean."

"Good." It was then that Dean noticed the boxes sitting in the corner that were filled with seemingly random stuff. "Cas?"

"Yes, Dean?"

"What's all that stuff?"

Castiel looked over. "You asked me to look out everything you didn't really need and was just taking up space."

"Oh, yeah. Right. I'll take a look through it later."

He didn't, however – after dinner he just sat in front of the TV and introduced Castiel to Star Wars as he drank an entire six-pack of beer.
Dean glanced at his watch. It was nearly lunch time, and then he could get home. Thursdays were his favourite day, because although he loved his work he also loved having some time to relax, so getting to finish up at the yard at lunchtime was a good thing.

He slammed down the hood and wiped his hands off on his overalls. "Bobby, that's me done!" he announced as he dropped the keys back into the office.

"Good! Now get out of here!"

Dean grinned as he stepped out of his overalls. Bobby wasn't the tough nut he appeared to be. He flipped his phone open and called home as he walked over to his car.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Cas. That's me heading home now, okay?"

"You told me this morning that you would be finishing at this time and – I quote – 'pigs will fly before I leave so much as one minute later', so I am not entirely sure as to the purpose of this phone call."

Dean laughed. "I'll see you soon, Cas."

"Goodbye, Dean."

Castiel seemed happier, Dean had noticed. Well, maybe more settled was the word. He supposed the fact that he had given him a place to stay would have helped a little, but he figured the church had probably had a lot to do with it. When your life was going to shit, it helped to have something else to focus on. He turned the key in the ignition and drove home.

* * *

When Dean had found that the cupboards were practically empty that morning, he'd bitten the bullet and announced that they would go shopping. But as he'd been about to leave he realised that Cas was in charge of the cooking, so should also be in charge of the groceries. So he'd told him to write a list of anything he thought they'd need (thinking it would give Cas something positive to focus on, and distract him from whatever it was that he was dealing with) and the rest they could just make up as they went along.

Unfortunately, it seemed that Castiel was reluctant to spend Dean's – or rather Dean's brother's – money, so when he got home the list consisted of milk, bread, and eggs.

"Really? The cupboards are empty and you think all we need is milk, eggs and bread?" Dean grinned, internally screaming because a short list meant more time wandering around looking for things, and more time spent wandering around meant Dean got more irritable because he hated shopping.

Castiel shrugged. He hadn't wanted to seem greedy by writing out a full shopping list, especially when he wouldn't be the one paying for any of it, and he didn't know how long he'd be welcome to stay – especially once Dean found out the truth about him – but now he realised that perhaps he'd gone too far in the other direction by only writing down the bare essentials. "I didn't know what you liked," he said quietly. That was true enough.
"I guess you're right," Dean acknowledged. "Well, come on – let's go."

Dean drove around the parking lot three times as he waited for a woman to finish loading her bags into the trunk. It was right on the end, and far away from the shop door, so there was less chance of his baby being knocked about by idiot drivers.

At first Castiel tried to ask Dean what he liked, but when Dean had answered with burgers and beer Castiel exclaimed, "You can't live off of burgers and beer!" before apologising for telling Dean what he could and couldn't do, but insisting that he was only concerned for Dean's health. (He wasn't too impressed when Dean joked that he got his vegetables on pizza.) However, they quickly fell into a routine that involved Castiel seeing something and deciding what he could cook with it, and then asking Dean if it sounded like something he liked, or would like to try, eating, but the time they were halfway round the store the contents of the cart were probably five times what Dean would usually buy for himself.

"How much do we have to spend again?" Castiel asked for the fifth time.

"Enough, dude. Just get what you think we'll need to last us the month."

Castiel chewed on his bottom lip.

"You know, I don't even know what half this stuff is!" Dean joked, because Castiel was radiating tension you could cut with a knife. "When I said 'get whatever you want' I thought you might buy something I actually recognise – fruit and veg, or something. You know, healthy stuff to improve my diet."

"This will improve your diet. Anything is an improvement on the lack of one you already have," he said, before his eyes widened in shock at his cheek.

But Dean just laughed and slapped him on the back. "Well you're not wrong there."

Castiel tensed as Dean struck him, expecting pain that never came. "Besides," he added after a moment, wondering if perhaps Dean was a bad influence on him, "you don't need to know what it is. I'll cook it, you just need to eat it and tell me if you like it or not, so I know whether or not to make it again."

"Yeah, but I'm not going to ask you to become my little housewife, or anything," Dean frowned.

"Well, hardly," Castiel said. "For one, we are not married, and two, I'm a man."

"Cas, that's not— Never mind," Dean sighed. "Look, you don't have to take everything I say so literally all the time, okay?"

Castiel nodded absently. "I'm glad I'll get to cook for you. Well, for us." He turned to him, eyes wide and sincere. "I like having a way in which to repay your hospitality."

"If I'd let you carry on the way you were going I'd have felt guilty about using you as slave labour!" Dean told him jokingly. "It'll make a change from burgers, anyway – it's about the only goddamn thing I can cook."

"Would kindly to not use the Lord's name in such a way?" Castiel asked. "At least not in my presence."

"Fine, fine! I'll just stand here and keep my mouth shut, while you spend all my brother's money on a load of groceries, half of which I have no idea what they are, so you can cook us up a bloody
banquet and I—"

"I'm sorry," Castiel interrupted him hurriedly. "I didn't mean to upset you."

Dean exhaled, mentally berating himself for getting all worked up and worrying Cas. "I'm not upset, Cas. I just don't like shopping."

Castiel looked in the cart. "I could put some of this back if you think your brother's money isn't going to be enough. I do not wish to impose on you."

"For the hundredth time, you're not imposing," Dean insisted, slinging an arm around Castiel's shoulders and hating the way his immediate reaction as to tense up at his touch. If Dean ever met Castiel's dad, Dean couldn't promise that fists wouldn't fly. "And for the fiftieth time, buy whatever you want to cook. I really don't want to have to come back here for at least— What the hell?" he asked, as Castiel suddenly dropped to the floor.

He looked up at Dean and pressed a finger desperately against his lips, motioning for him to stop staring at him. Dean shrugged, and pretended like he was suddenly very interested in – he looked at the shelf ticket – a butternut squash. After a moment he carelessly tossed back onto the pile (for Castiel had already added one to their shopping cart) and risked a glance down, to find Castiel was now peering over the trays of vegetables at a short blonde man who was selecting apples, with a basketful of chocolate and candy at his feet.

"Dude, what the hell?" he repeated in a whisper.

"My cousin," Castiel explained, gesturing in the direction of the man as he ducked back down again. *Oh crap, oh crap, oh crap...*

"And we're avoiding him because?"

"I do not know what, if anything, my father has told him."

"Riiight," Dean said, as if that explained why Castiel was crawling on the floor like a two-year-old.

"I do not want to get involved in a confrontation here – it would be embarrassing, for there are rather a lot of people here."

"And playing a one-man game of hide and seek isn't embarrassing?" Dean pointed out with a smile.

Castiel seemed to suddenly realise that other people were looking at him strangely, and when he looked up at Dean again his fear was obvious.

"And I... I cannot bear to see the look of crushing disappointment on his face if he knows the reason my father threw me out," Castiel said. Which was near enough the truth – if his cousin confronted him it *would* be embarrassing, but there would then be no way to avoid Dean hearing everything and Castiel couldn't put into words how much he didn't want to end up on the street again.

Dean looked over at Castiel's cousin again, waiting until the man wasn't looking. "Ok, look, stand up and walk beside me – if he looks over it won't be obvious it's you, because he'll just see someone walking beside me."

Dean gripped Castiel's arm tightly and held him close as they continued up the shop and turned into the next aisle. Once they were out of sight of Castiel's cousin the other man visibly relaxed.

"Thank you, Dean. I am sorry if I embarrassed you back there."
Dean shrugged off his apology. "I've done a lot worse to embarrass myself, believe me. Just don't ask what."

Castiel smiled.

Eager to change the subject from his embarrassing misdemeanours, Dean motioned to the overflowing shopping cart. "Dude, we've barely been here twenty minutes, and I swear you've bought half the shop!" he laughed.

"Well there are two of us now, Dean." Castiel cast a sideways glance at him. "For the time being, at least."

"Okay, would you stop with that!" Dean exclaimed, a little too loudly.

Castiel flinched at the harshness in Dean's tone.

Dean placed a reassuring hand on Castiel's arm, and when the man didn't tense at his touch he spoke again. But this time he spoke more softly, in the voice he used to use when he was a kid and Sam was too scared to go back to sleep after having been woken by a nightmare. "I said you could stay as long as you wanted, Cas, and I meant it."

"Thank you. I know I've done nothing to deserve it, but I cannot adequately put into words how grateful I am for your kindness."

Dean scoffed and looked at his feet as he shuffled from side to side awkwardly, a hand rubbing the back of his neck. Every time Castiel thanked him he just felt embarrassed, but he didn't doubt that Castiel would soon see him for the fuck up he really was.

"Well, if you can cook half as well as it looks like you can, I may never let you leave!" he laughed.

* * *

The rest of the shopping trip was uneventful – unless you include the small child who ran around pulling things from the shelves and throwing them on the floor being chased by a rather harassed mother putting everything back on the shelves – and Dean was more than happy to let Castiel unpack the shopping once they got back while he switched on the TV to see how the football was going. It was ten minutes before Castiel reappeared, and dropped the latest edition of *Busty Asian Beauties* in front of him, and Dean had the good grace to look abashed. Castiel sat down quietly beside him, not saying a word, but Dean knew he was itching to say something. After several moments of trying to concentrate on the game while seeing Castiel fidgeting out of the corner of his eye, Dean hit the mute button on the remote and turned to him.

"Spit it out, man, before you choke on it."

"Spit— What?"

"Whatever it is you're too damn polite to say."

Castiel's gaze dropped to the floor. "I would not presume to—"

"Spit. It. Out."

"Very well." Castiel squirmed uncomfortably. "I find those sorts of magazines to be highly disrespectful to women, and it pains me to see a good man such as yourself objectifying them in such a sexual manner."
Dean raised his eyebrows. "Dude, it's a porn mag. What do you expect?" He felt uncomfortable that Castiel had called him a *good man*, because Cas didn't know him at all.

"Still, I am uncomfortable with the idea of women being treated as objects for sexual gratification rather than as people."

"Okay, I see women as people," Dean started.

"How do you feel about women lusting after pictures of attractive, well-built men?" Castiel asked.

"I... Well... I mean..." Dean spluttered, suddenly feeling very self-conscious. He narrowed his eyes.

"How attractive?"

"Exactly. The women in these magazines do not accurately portray the vast majority of women in society, leaving them with unreachable dreams of conforming to the stereotypical male fantasy of what is 'sexy'."

Dean's tried to process what Castiel had just said, but he got distracted by Castiel's obvious discomfort and awkwardness as he said sexy – with air quotes. It was kind of hilarious.

"Look," he said eventually, "I know that most women don't look like that in real life – but at the end of the day, I just want something I can jerk off to."

Castiel closed his eyes and exhaled softly. His point had flown completely over the other man's head. Dean had said his brother was a lawyer, yes? So that meant Sam was intelligent, then – perhaps he'd been given Dean's share of the brains, and Dean had got the looks. But as soon as that notion entered his head, however, he berated himself for thinking such a thing.

"Come on – you've never jerked off over a picture of a hot, half-naked chick!" Dean pressed him with a grin.

"I can honestly say that I have not."

"What – never?"

"Never."

"Dude..." Dean shook his head. "You don't know what you're missing."

Dean's attention flicked back to the television for a minute, just in time to see the wrong team score. He scowled and punched the arm of the sofa in frustration.

Castiel tried a different approach. "Dean. These women have mothers. Some, children – how would you feel if some stranger was 'jerking off' to a picture of your mother?"

Dean's face hardened, and fist slammed unto the table in front of him as he leaned for ward to Castiel.

Castiel recoiled, half expecting Dean to lash out at him; however he just glared at him. "I'm sorry," he apologised quickly. "That was inappropriate."

"Damn straight that was inappropriate," Dean growled. "Let's get one thing straight – you don't ever talk about my mother – ever, at all, period. You got that?"

Castiel nodded. "I'm sorry, Dean."
Dean rubbed a hand across his face, and cast a glance up to the picture lying on the mantle. He'd lost count of the number of different scenarios that he’d played in his mind, despite the fact he’d only been four at the time he still felt that he could have – should have – done something more. He blinked back tears and looked back at Castiel, who was eyeing him warily, and Dean could have kicked himself. He leaned across and placed a reassuring hand on Castiel's arm, hating himself for the way he tensed at his touch.

"Well as long as we're clear on that," he said, his tone softer.

Castiel nodded.

"Look, I'm not saying it's perfect," he said, motioning to the magazine, "but it's better than nothing."

"But it would be better with someone else involved, yes?"

"Oh, yeah..." Dean grinned to himself for a moment, thinking about the girl he'd had in the back seat of his car the night he met Castiel. Then he shook his head. "Although it has to be said, it's not always great. Sometimes you can feel kind of... empty, after – you know?"

Castiel didn't. Although he had been warned about the 'sins of the flesh' and taught that such practices were wrong and sinful, Castiel had indulged in the act of self-satisfaction; however sex had never been something he'd had the occasion, or the inclination, to indulge in. "Perhaps it would be more satisfying if you cared for the woman in question," he suggested quietly.

"Probably," Dean said, and shrugged. "But I'm not really the settling down type."

"You don't want a family?" Castiel sounded surprised. He thought Dean would make a good father – he was kind, and certainly seemed to have a lot of love to give if the way he had taken Castiel in was anything to go by,

"Well, yeah, I guess," Dean said. "But I know I'm not cut out for family life – I wouldn't wish me on anyone. I know how fucked-up I am inside, and it's not a pretty picture."

"You don't seem fucked-up to me."

Dean scoffed. "You don't know me, Cas. Even my own brother got so sick of my shit he left."

He turned back to the television and turned the volume up – a sign that their conversation was over – so Castiel left him and started on dinner.

* * *

Dean came through to the kitchen after the game had ended. "Look, I'm sorry about earlier," he said.

"It's my fault," Castiel insisted. "I shouldn't have pried."

"I just don't like talking about my family, okay? I want you to stay, and I don't want you to feel like you're an inconvenience or that I don't like having you here because I do. It's just..." Dean sighed. "What I'm trying to say is that the topic of my family is not up for discussion. Anything else, you can ask me about."

Castiel nodded. "Once again I'm sorry if I upset you."

"Forget it. It didn't happen." Dean said with a reassuring smile. Castiel was always so quick to apologise, and Dean wondered if that was to escape his dad's fists. "Dude, I'm not your dad," he
added softly, without really thinking.

Castiel nodded, and then smiled.

Before Castiel could put up any kind of defensive wall and shut down he changed the subject. "So what smells so good, anyway?"

"Chicken and butternut squash curry," Castiel informed him as he loaded two platefuls and carried them to the table.

"Awesome!" Dean liked a good curry, but he was a bit wary of the butternut squash. He'd never had it, and really didn't want to disappoint Cas over his first cooking attempt for the two of them. He frowned and tentatively tried a mouthful. His eyes widened at the heat and he hurried to the fridge to grab a cold beer.

"Thanks!" he coughed after he downed several gulps of beer. "Wow. I didn't expect it to pack quite a punch. That's really good."

"I think I may have gone a bit overboard," Castiel said, face flushed red as he reached for his glass of milk.

"Well, maybe just a little bit," Dean agreed. "I'd like to still have my taste buds when I'm finished!" He laughed, but it took Cas a moment to join in. "Say, man – you've been here a week, now."

"Yes," Castiel agreed quietly, wondering if Dean was going somewhere with it.

"We should go out this weekend. Together. I know a few places, we can just relax and have fun. What do you say?"

"I'd like that," Castiel said automatically, and then realised that it was true. He wanted to get out of the apartment, but didn't really know his way around the area all that well, and it would be nice to go out with Dean.
Chapter 7

Castiel looked utterly miserable as he walked through to the kitchen the next morning.

"Dude, you alright?" Dean asked as he bit into a slice of buttered toast.

"My head feels like it's about to split open."

"Yeah, I get like that after a night out," Dean laughed.

Castiel just glared daggers at him, all thoughts of being well-behaved and polite momentarily forgotten.

"There should be some Paracetamol or Ibuprofen in the cabinet in the bathroom. Take two with a glass of water, then go lie down again. Watch some TV, read the paper, go back to sleep. Just take it easy, okay?"

"Dean, I have a headache, not the flu. I'll be fine," he insisted, as he poured himself a glass of orange juice.

"Still. You've been pretty busy this week. Put your feet up. Relax. I'll see you when I get back from work." Dean started to leave. "Oh, hey – I put the phone number for Bobby's yard next to the phone just in case of an emergency. I mean, it's programmed into the phone, but just in case you forget what I showed you about scrolling through the stored contacts. Okay?"

"Alright."

"See you later Cas!" Dean shouted, and when the door clicked shut behind him Castiel went to raid the bathroom cabinet. He was not fine. He felt like someone was squeezing his brain.

He moved shampoo and shower gel and deodorant and out of the way to find band aids and out several packets of pills. Removing them, he also found some condoms which he hastily put back. There were two packets of Paracetamol and a bottle of prescription painkillers. They were dated several years ago, and the container was still full. It didn't even look like Dean had taken any at all. He knew he should have put them straight back without looking at them, but he told himself that he was just concerned that Dean may have a serious illness that he might need to know about if he ever needed to call an ambulance, when in truth a small part of his mind was telling him that an overdose could be a painless way out.

The phone rang suddenly, and Castiel jumped. He took two Paracetamol out of the packet and tossed them back in the cabinet.

"Dean Winchester's residence," he said, looking at the bottle of pills as he twirled it around. Why hadn't he just put it back in the cupboard? "No, I'm sorry. I think you have the wrong number. ...

That's quite alright. Goodbye."

He placed the phone back in its cradle and returned to the kitchen for his orange juice before going back to bed.

He thought about Dean as he lay there. Dean had been good to him. Dean was the first person to look at him like there was nothing wrong with him since... Well. For a long time. He thought it was strange how quickly they'd developed a degree of familiarity with each other, but then he'd never had a friend like Dean before.
"Please," he whispered, staring at the ceiling and hoping that God was listening, "just give me this one thing." He knew he had no right to ask God for anything, but Dean's friendship was important to him. "Please."

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Castiel managed to get another couple of hours sleep, and the next time he woke up he was feeling much better – though whether it was down to the extra sleep or the Paracetamol he wasn't sure.

He still wasn't hungry, however, but he got up and tidied the sofa bed away – because he wasn't going to lie around all day like a slob no matter how ill he felt – and jumped in the shower. He shivered even under the hot spray, and hoped he wasn't coming down with a cold. It had been awful the last time he'd caught one.

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It was his second night on the street, and it was raining. It felt like he'd been walking all day. He pulled his coat tighter around him as he looked for a sheltered place to spend the night – or at least a couple of hours before the cops came upon him and told him to move along. It was another half hour before he found a shop doorway that offered little protection from the wind and rain, but it would do.

He'd barely settled down when another guy came over, and he looked like he'd been on the street for months.

"You're in my spot."

"I was here first," Castiel stuttered, not out of fear but from the cold. If it had been dry he'd have left without a fuss, but he was desperate.

"I said, you're in my spot," the guy repeated, moving closer.

"We could share?"

"What are you, gay?"

Castiel flinched.

"'Cause if you are, maybe we could come to some kind of arrangement. I prefer chicks myself, but your mouth's no different to theirs. So how about you suck my dick and we can share, hmm?"

Castiel grabbed his bag and stood. "It's all yours," he said, and ran. Laughter followed him until he crossed the street and turned the corner.

***

He'd slept on a park bench in the end, and woken up the next morning soaked right through with a cold that had lasted for a week. But that was before Dean had found him. Before Dean had taken him home, and wanted nothing in return. Dean was a good man.

He prayed to God for forgiveness as he jerked off under the spray, and he sank to his knees once he was done, his tears mixing with the water as they were washed away.

He got out of the shower before the water ran cold. As he went to get clean clothes from the cupboard in the living room that Dean had cleaned out for him one day, telling him that he wasn't
going to keep living out of a bag like he was just going to up and leave again, he passed Dean's bookcase. There were rather a lot of books, and once Castiel was dressed he took a closer look at the titles. Dean hadn't struck him as the reading type at first, but then looks could be deceiving.

There were several authors – Kurt Vonnegut, Stephen King and James Patterson being the most common. He'd read Vonnegut in the college library, while his father had been under the impression he'd been studying late. He had no doubts that his father would have burned the books if he'd found them at home. If a book wasn't for school (or work, though that didn't apply to Castiel) then the only book a person should read was the Bible, in his father's opinion. He chose one of King's to read, and he spent the afternoon on the sofa curled up in a blanket, only getting up to defrost some soup in time for Dean coming home.

Every now and then Dean would forget for a moment that Cas was living with him because he been on his own for so long, and tonight was one of those nights. His whole body tensed, ready for a fight, when he opened his front door expecting silence instead of the sound of the TV, before he exhaled and relaxed. It was only Cas.

"Hey!" he shouted.

"Hello, Dean," came Cas's reply.

"The Green Mile, huh?" he said, looking at what Cas was reading. You reading that or watching this?" he asked pointing to the TV.

"I just wanted to hear the news," Cas said. "You can change it if you like."

"No, it's fine. I need a shower. Bobby was moaning that he's going to need to give me a day off sometime soon if I keep working unofficial overtime. Hey, are you feeling any better? You look a bit peaky."

"I feel a little off."

"Do you mind if I head out tonight? There's a pool night on and I figured I could probably hustle up some extra cash."

"Hustle?"

"Yeah, you know. Pretend I suck and then when they bet big win the game."

"That's sounds very dishonest."

"Hey, it's their own fault if they fall for it. I've been caught out myself, and it's not often the hustler gets hustled. So, you okay with it?"

"I don't want to stop you from living your life, Dean."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes. Go. Have fun."

"You still owe me a night out, though," Dean reminded him.

Castiel nodded. "Soup's on the cooker, by the way. I hope you don't mind that I didn't wait for you."

"No. You look like you needed it. Besides, I probably should have called to say I'd be late, anyway."
It was about half past midnight when Castiel heard Dean come home. He quickly pulled on a t-shirt over his head and stepped into his jeans, before heading to the bathroom. He knocked quietly on the bathroom door, which swung open to reveal Dean hunched over the toilet. There was a glass next to the sink, so he quickly filled it with water and handed it to Dean.

"Thanks," Dean mumbled as he took several large mouthfuls.

He crouched beside Dean and rubbed a soothing hand on his back when he turned back to the toilet and started choking. "This isn't healthy, you know," he said eventually.

"None of the good things in life are," Dean answered.

"You can't keep doing this to yourself," he chided Dean gently.

"You shouldn't have to sit here with me, anyway. I'm not a pretty sight right now." He leaned back over the toilet and retched once again.

"It's alright."

"It's not alright, Cas. You weren't feeling one hundred percent today so you shouldn't have to hold me through my self-inflicted nausea. Go back to bed."

"Very well. If you're sure I can't get you anything else."

"'Night, Cas."

Good night, Dean."

In the living room Castiel stripped down again before getting into bed, and he paused when he felt the small bottle of pills that was still in his pocket. The sound of Dean throwing up again pulled him from his thoughts and he tossed the jeans aside until morning.

* * *

The next morning Dean was surprised to find Cas whistling in the kitchen as he cooked. "Dude, can you keep it down?" he winced.

"Sorry," Castiel smiled, but stopped whistling.

"You're happy this morning."

Castiel shrugged. "I feel much better today – it must have just been one of those 24-hour things. I thought you could use a cooked breakfast this morning."

Dean clapped Cas on the shoulder as a plateful of sausage, bacon and eggs was placed in front of him. "Thanks."

"You're welcome," Cas said as he sat down opposite Dean. "I hardly ate anything yesterday, so I could probably use this as well."

"Well, I'll go through that kitchen stuff for you today, so I'll drop you off at church tomorrow with it. Then there's a game on."

"There always seems to be a game on," Castiel commented.
Dean laughed. "I know. But what were you planning on doing today?"

Castiel shrugged. "I'd like to read a bit more, but other than that I don't know."

* * *

True to his word, Dean sorted through all the stuff that had been cluttering up his cupboards for years. Cas helped, and then the two of them took the boxes down to the car so that they didn't have to do it tomorrow morning. After lunch Castiel curled up to read while Dean shouted at the TV most of the afternoon, and once the game had finished (and Dean had ranted until he was red in the face about the appalling performance his team had put in) they sat and ate dinner in front of the television. Dean flicked through the channels until he found some hospital drama that featured a rather good-looking doctor, and with an exaggerated sigh declared, "Well, I guess this is it, then."

Two episodes later Castiel washed up and with a bit of gentle persuasion persuaded Dean to dry.

"So, Cas," he grinned, tossing the towel on the kitchen counter. "You ready to hit a few bars?"

"No, thank you," Castiel replied, picking up the towel Dean had carelessly dumped and hanging it over the radiator to dry.

"Aw, come on, Cas! It's Saturday night! It'll be good fun, I promise," he added.

"Maybe another night, Dean," he said. "I would really rather just have an early night."

Dean's face fell. "Yeah, sure, okay." A hand rubbed the back of his neck. "Do you want me to stick around, or..?"

Castiel was really going to have to learn how to stand by his initial decisions and not be swayed by other people. "Can we be back by eleven?" he sighed, thinking that the last thing Dean needed was another night of getting drunk.

But the way Dean's face lit up when he grinned was almost worth it.

"Yeah, course we can. There's this new club I've been meaning to try out. It's supposed to be really good!"

And so half an hour later he was leading a rather lost looking Castiel in the direction of an empty table, drinks in hand.

"I believe my father would describe this place as, 'a den of iniquity'," Castiel murmured as he sat down. He glanced around, not knowing where to look, before eventually returning his gaze to Dean. Dean, on the other hand, leaned back and sipped his beer as he eyed up the dancers on the stage. Oh, yeah, he grinned. He was definitely coming back here again.

Castiel chanced another glance around, but no – there was still far too much flesh on display. "I do not feel comfortable here, Dean," he told Dean after a moment.

Dean looked at him, relaxing back in his seat. "What do you mean? Booze, women, what more could you— Oh," he said, as Castiel's expression became slightly panicked.

He's figured it out, Cas thought to himself as he focused his attention on his drink. He knows what I am and he'll kick me out.

"Of course, your family's the religious type. Sorry, I didn't even think."
"I'll end up back on the street and— Wait, what? Castiel's eyes narrowed as he looked up at Dean in surprise.

"We'll go somewhere else, it's fine."

"But you just bought drinks," Castiel said, not sure why he was turning down the opportunity to go somewhere a lot less... sexual.

"Well, down it quick," he said, taking another sip of his beer. He froze as he watched Castiel take him literally; gulping almost his entire beer down as if it was tap water. "Damn it, Cas!" he exclaimed. "Take it easy."

Castiel could feel the flush in his cheeks and wasn't sure if it was embarrassment or the drink. He wasn't blind to the fact that for a man in his mid-twenties most people would consider him to be incredibly naïve, and he was grateful that Dean didn't seem to be the type of person to judge him for that. He had just opened him mouth to tell Dean so when a pair of arms snaked their way around his shoulders. He turned, and froze when he saw the woman standing next to him.

"Hi, baby," she whispered in his ear. "What's your name?"

His gaze wandered involuntarily down, and she was wearing the flimsiest white undergarment and – oh sweet Jesus, Mary and Joseph – it was transparent. He didn't know where to look. He was staring, he knew, and he knew he was supposed to be feeling something right now, but all he wanted was to stand up and offer her his coat but his feet didn't seem to want to move. He became aware of her waiting for him to say something, but he wasn't quite sure what he was supposed to say. Had she asked him something? He looked across at Dean pleadingly, eyes wide in panic.

If Dean didn't feel so sorry for Cas he might have laughed. "Cas!" he answered her suddenly, and a bit too roughly, causing Castiel to start. Dean turned to her. "His name is Cas. What's your name?"

"Chastity," she smiled.

Dean tried and failed to stifle the involuntary groan that escaped his lips, aware that Castiel was still staring at him. Instead he covered it by clearing his throat. "Chastity?" he repeated. "Wow! That's a great name, but we were actually just leaving—"

"What could I do to persuade you and your friend to stay?" she purred, as she stroked Castiel's cheek.

A thousand lewd images flew through his mind, but Castiel's anxious whimper dragged him back to his senses. "Nothing, sorry." He stood up and stepped closer to her. "Perhaps another night, though." He winked and tucked five bucks under her thong.

She grabbed his hand and looked at him. "I'll hold you to that, tiger," she promised, as she moved the money safely into her cleavage.

Dean couldn't help but look down and she laughed. With a peck on his cheek she disappeared into the crowd to find another, more willing client.

Dean sank back into his chair and groaned into his hands. "Cas, you're going to be the death of me."

"I'm sorry," Cas said seriously.

He laughed. "Come on – I know a quieter place that's more to your taste."
"You do?" Castiel asked with a sceptical raised eyebrow.

"Hey, hey, hey, come on, now!" Dean protested. "I'm not all booze and women. Sometimes I'm just the booze."

Castiel laughed with him, though it sounded hollow even to his ears, and allowed Dean to hold onto his arm as he guided them through the crown to the exit. Chastity offered them both a flirtatious wave as they left, but Castiel wasn't looking at her and Dean pretended not to notice.

Dean drove them across town, and Castiel was vaguely aware that they seemed to be travelling back in the direction of Dean's apartment.

"This is the Roadhouse," Dean announced as they pulled up.

Castiel recognised the building from when they'd had to pick the car up before going to the beach. He followed Dean in and they walked straight up to the bar where a young blonde girl was wiping it down.

"Cas, this is Jo."

"Hi," she smiled.

Castiel suddenly became rather flustered. "When Dean said Ellen and Jo, I thought... I thought Joe was her husband."

Jo was silent as his words sank in, and then she let out a delighted cackle. "Oh my God! No! Ellen's my mother!"

Dean laughed so hard he doubled over and had to grab Castiel's arm for support. "Speaking of your mom, where is she?" he asked once his laughter had trailed off.

"She's doing a stock take. You want to see her?"

"I'll catch her when she comes out. Can we just get two beers, please? The usual."

"Sure thing."

Castiel didn't miss the way Jo looked Dean up and down, and he turned to Dean. "Are you and her... courting?" he asked quietly.

_Courting_? It took a Dean a second for the penny to drop. "What? Me and Jo? No!"

Castiel straightened on his stool. "I see. My mistake."

"It's cool, Cas. She had a thing for me a few years back, but really she's like a sister to me, you know? And, eh," he looked over to Jo and tried to decide if she was out of earshot. "Don't tell Jo, but Ellen scares me."

"You're afraid of my mother?" Jo grinned as she brought their beers over.

Dean cast a look over at Ellen who had appeared from the back and was frowning at him. "I think so," he admitted.

"Who's the stiff?" Ellen called over.

"The stiff?" he echoed. He glanced at Cas, who was perched stiffly on the edge of his stool. "Ellen,
"I'm sorry?"

"Relax, Cas. There's no strippers here."

Castiel looked down at his drink in embarrassment.

"Dean, where have you been taking this poor boy?" Ellen sighed.

"Nowhere." Dean gave her his most charming grin. "Why would I go anywhere else?"

"Maybe because I don't hire strippers and you won't find any hookers standing around the corners 'round here?" Ellen teased.

Dean looked offended. "Ellen, I have never had to pay to get laid. But I could probably charge," he added with a grin.

Ellen rolled her eyes. "Just don't keep my daughter from her work. It'll pick up in here soon."

When Ellen went to help Jo wipe down the empty tables, Dean turned to Cas. "Ellen and Jo are great, and now they know you're a friend of mine they'll always have your back."

Castiel nodded. If he ever came here alone – which he doubted – that would be rather reassuring.

* * *

In the end it was half past one when Castiel finally managed to half carry, half drag Dean into the apartment. Castiel had stuck to soft drinks once he realised that Dean wasn't going to take it as easy as he'd promised, but having never drunk before his first few beers had gone straight to his head and he was feeling distinctly woozy. All in all they'd visited three bars, and he'd sat and watched a drunken Dean hit on anyone and everyone with breasts for the past hour.

Dean willingly collapsed face down onto his bed, and began snoring almost immediately. Castiel wrestled him out of his clothes, onto his back, and under the covers; keeping his eyes very deliberately focused on Dean's face as he did so. Green eyes opened and looked at him.

"Cas?" he mumbled, confused.

"Goodnight, Dean," Castiel said quietly.

A hand latched onto his wrist to stop him leaving, and his stomach tingled nervously.

"Cas?" Dean said.

"What is it, Dean?"

"I'm sorry."

Castiel's brow furrowed. Of course he would accept Dean's apology and forgive him, but he was unclear as to what exactly Dean was apologising for.

"Cas, I'm sorry," Dean said again, more insistent this time.

"For what?" Castiel whispered. 
"For scaring you the other day. I just don't talk about my parents. Not even to Sam," he mumbled.

Castiel suddenly felt very cold. He didn't know much about Dean, for he was very closed off when it came to himself, but he knew that ordinarily Dean would not have said this much.

"Cas?" Dean asked pleadingly.

"I forgive you, Dean," he assured him, and Dean smiled lazily.

"Good," he murmured, closing his eyes. "Don't want you to go..." And he was asleep again.

Castiel watched him sleep for a while, unable to move. Drunk Dean was far more open and honest than sober Dean, and to realise that Dean truly meant what he said about this being his home for as long as he needed lifted a great weight off his shoulders.

He smiled as he pulled the covers up to keep the chill off of Dean, and tiptoed down the corridor to make his bed up on the sofa. There was just something about Dean that made him... not happy, per se, but... at ease. While Castiel still thought about how much easier it would be to die, with Dean around he didn't seem to think of it half as much. His last thought before he fell asleep was that Dean was a good, kind man, and he couldn't understand why he seemed so unconvinced of it.

* * *

"You are an abomination, and will spend an eternity rotting in Hell if you fail to repent."

"Please, Father! I can't... I... I can't help it!" he choked out.

When his father threw down his belt in defeat, Castiel allowed himself to relax now that the beating had ceased. But he relaxed too soon, he realised, when his father grabbed him by the collar of his shirt and hoisted him to his feet.

"You are an embarrassment to this family; do you hear me, Castiel?"

"Yes, sir," Castiel answered quietly.

"You are nothing to me, boy! NOTHING!" he spat.

And then there it was – the stinging blow; as if his words didn't sting enough. Tears welled up in his eyes, but he stared resolutely at the spot on the wall where the force of his father's hand had spun his gaze, desperately trying to hold them back because men didn't cry.

* * *

Castiel woke with a start, his breath caught in his throat and the damp sheets clinking to his bare skin. He closed his eyes as if hoping to block out the memory, and suddenly realised that his cheeks were wet. Wiping his tears away angrily with the back of his hand, Castiel let out a frustrated sigh and buried his head deeper into the pillow. He tossed and turned for hours before he finally fell back into a fitful slumber.
Chapter 8

Dean took Cas down to church the next morning, because the trunk was packed with boxes of stuff for the sale. Rather than go home, he opted to kill time browsing through the local book store, but he’d read all the Vonnegut titles they had in stock so he made his way back to the church and waited for him in the car. Castiel was first out and didn't take his gaze from the ground as he walked right past the Impala. Dean gave a short honk of the horn.

"Cas!" he shouted out the half-open window.

Cas looked over at him and silently got in the car. Apart from a mumbled "Thank you" said nothing the whole ride home.

Dean frowned. Castiel had seemed to be in a more positive mood yesterday – or perhaps that had just been because Dean had distracted him from his thoughts and given him something else to focus on. But he still couldn't think what could have reduced Castiel to this. He'd only known him for a few days, but even when the dude had been hanging off the edge of a bridge he'd never been this quiet and withdrawn. His sudden change in attitude scared Dean, and brought his protective instinct to the surface once again. But Dean was useless with words unless he was using them to beat himself up about something, so he couldn't offer up any motivational words to inspire in Castiel some of that relaxed and happy outlook he'd had yesterday; though he did place a hand on Castiel's knee and give it a reassuring squeeze.

"I can't remember the last time I was up this early on a Sunday," he said conversationally. Small talk to fill the silence that, for once in his life, Dean couldn't bring himself to fill with classic rock music.

Castiel hummed in response.

"How was church?"

Castiel shrugged.

Dean let the silence reign again for a moment. "Is there anything you want to do today?"

Castiel shook his head.

Dean gave up. If the dude didn't want to talk, then Dean would leave him be. He thought he could make out a faint rattling when he pulled away from a set of traffic lights, and he scowled. He'd fix that. His baby deserved better, and he'd treat her right in her old age.

Castiel still said nothing when they got home; he just sat at the kitchen table and traced the swirls in the wood as Dean made them sandwiches.

"You want to talk about whatever's eating you?" Dean asked eventually, when Castiel still hadn't said a word during lunch.

But Castiel shook his head, not taking his eyes off the Sunday paper that he found so interesting. Dean would have grinned if he hadn't been concerned at the sudden change in Castiel since last night, for he only got the paper for the sports section and Castiel read everything but the sports pages. They were as different as chalk and cheese, but he thought that, for some reason, they seemed to balance each other out.

Understanding that Castiel wasn't going to talk to him any time soon, Dean grabbed his toolbox and
went outside to work on the Impala. One minute it was still early afternoon, and it wasn't until the light started to fade and he found himself squinting that he realised how late it had gotten. He'd fixed the problem a while ago, and was now just tinkering to kill time.

With a heavy sigh Dean finished up and headed back inside, where he was welcomed with the warm aroma of simmering spices.

"Damn it, Cas," he said as he entered the kitchen. "That smells awesome!"

"Thank you," Castiel said quietly, not turning round from where he was washing up.

"I'm going to get cleaned up," Dean said, motioning to the grease all over him. "Is that nearly ready?"

"It's ready now," Castiel told him, "but I'll wait for you before I dish up."

Dean thought that Castiel still seemed a bit off, but he didn't seem to look as depressed as he had been when he'd come out of church that morning. He didn't push him, because he figured that whatever had upset him he was working through, and instead the two of them spent the night watching the first two *Terminator* movies and drinking beer.

* * *

Dean had to drag himself out of bed the next morning, and he yawned all the way to the living room. Before jumping in the shower he poked his head into the living room to see Castiel curled up, still fast asleep. Dean smiled. He looked so different there – whereas he was usually so tense and uptight, lying there he looked almost peaceful, and kind of vulnerable. A sudden burst of protectiveness surged through him, which was crazy. Why should he care about a random guy he met on a bridge? Why did he care?

Castiel muttered something in his sleep that sounded like *stop it*, and Dean glared. Cas didn't deserve to be hurt. That's why he cared.

He let the shower run as he gave his teeth a quick brush, and swore when he jumped under the spray and it was freezing. God damn boiler! That was the third time this month Dean was going to have to fix it. He was just grateful he knew what he was doing and didn't have to call out a plumber every week, because he didn't have the money to afford the call out fee let alone the repairs, and he didn't fancy being stuck without any hot water.

He scribbled a quick note to Castiel before he left, apologising for the lack of hot water and that no, it wasn't his fault for being in the shower too long, and that he's take a look at the boiler when he got home at five. If Castiel wanted hot water for anything he'd just have to boil the kettle.

At work Bobby had a '95, seventh gen Impala with engine troubles for him to work on that day, but it couldn't hold a candle to his baby. While she was sleek and sexy and stood out from the crowd, this modern hunk of junk looked like damn near every other car on the road. Nevertheless, he was determined to have her running as smooth as silk.

As he circled round to the other side, however, he saw the scrapes and dents that ran along the right-hand side of the car. His blood ran cold as he absently trailed his fingers along the grooves – they'd been lucky; so much luckier than their dad. Sam got to go on, living his life, while he had to live with it every damned day. He punched the car door.

"Dean, that car had better not go back to its owners with more dents than when it arrived!" Bobby's voice called over.
"Sorry, Bobby!" Dean yelled back.

"Idjit."

Dean smirked, pretending he hadn't heard. Bobby was a good guy. Hell if anything, he was too good – he cared too damn much about everyone, Dean included. With his criminal record and drinking problem no-one else would hire him – but hey, who didn't have the odd drink when they got home at night... every night of the week... until they either threw up or passed out... But Bobby had given him a chance; got him back on the straight and narrow (sort of). So long as he worked hard, kept his fingers to himself, and didn't come to work drunk, Dean would be okay. He popped the hood and got to work and, completely in his element, the time flew by.

Dean spent most of the day bent over the engine, and was kept so busy that he didn't even have time to call home at lunch to check how Castiel was doing as he'd promised he would.

When he got home that night he went straight into the living room, and when Castiel wasn't there tried the kitchen. Aiming for third time lucky, he wrapped his knuckles on the bathroom door.

"Cas? You in there?"

There was no answer, and Dean turned the door handle. It was locked.

"Cas? You okay in there?"

Dean knocked louder, getting more worried at the silence on the other side of the door.

"Look Cas, buddy, if you don't open this door, or at least talk to me through it, I'm going to break it down."

He knocked one last time.

"Cas!"

The door opened and Dean immediately noticed the guilt in Castiel's eyes, not quite hidden under the layers of sadness and regret. As Castiel stepped away from the door a flash of light drew Dean's gaze down to his hand, and in an instant he held Castiel's wrist in a vice like grip away from his body, his other arm pressing across his body and pinning him to the radiator.

"Let it go, Cas," he growled. "Let it go."

The blade fell with a clink into the bath and Dean eased up on the pressure he was applying to Castiel's body.

"What the hell were you thinking?" he hissed, unable to control his anger.

"That I'm going to hell either way!" Castiel spat. "And that right now I have nothing worth living for!"

Dean let him go as if he'd been burned, his face an expressionless mask. "I thought we were friends. You don't think that's worth living for? But of course you're so eager to leave me – just like everybody else. Even my own brother didn't stick around!" Dean shouted, ignoring the tears pricking at his eyes. "You can leave any time you want – you're not a prisoner, here. So why the hell would you do it in my own bathroom AND LEAVE ME TO FIND YOU?"

Castiel stared resolutely at a point somewhere over Dean's shoulder, unable to look Dean in the eye.
"People die every day, Dean."

"And most of them don't want to. To just throw your life away like this disrespects *every single one* of them! You don't think I'd miss you? You have no idea how *stupid* and *selfish* that is Sa—"

"I COULDN'T FUCKING DO IT, DEAN!" Castiel screamed. "I couldn't..." he choked back a sob, and took a deep breath. When he spoke again, his voice only wavered slightly. "I couldn't do it."

All the anger and fear that Dean was feeling left him then at the defeat in Castiel's voice. At how weak Castiel sounded. "Good," he said faintly, still reeling from the fact he'd been about to call Cas *Sam*. What was wrong with him?

Finally Castiel looked at him, and Dean fisted his t-shirt in his hands and shoved him back, hard, against the radiator.

"Don't you *ever* do that to me again, you hear me? *Promise me!*

When Castiel nodded warily, Dean let his head fall against his shoulder, his grip on Castiel's t-shirt loosening. Damn it... It was just like Sam all over again, and he didn't think he had the strength to do it all again; being on edge all the time. If only he hadn't seen Cas on the bridge that night, then... But he had. And Dean, who needed someone to look after but pushed everyone away, had brought him home.

Castiel stood there awkwardly, uncomfortable where the radiator was pressing into his back. He felt like he should hold Dean – that Dean *needed* to be held – but wasn't sure that he'd want him to. He didn't understand why Dean was so closed off whenever it came to the important things, or why he seemed to determined to save him. His fists clenched and unclenched involuntarily at his sides as he mulled this over, but then Dean suddenly straightened and let him go.

"I thought you were okay. I mean, you've been pretty happy these past few days. Or at least, you've *looked* pretty happy."

Castiel felt a little guilty, then. Dean had been trying so hard, and not to change him. But then Dean didn't know anything about him, so he wouldn't know there was anything to change.

"Cas?"

"I'm not a TV, Dean," he said softly. "My feelings can't be turned on and off, or changed at the press of a button."

Dean nodded in understanding. "One day at a time, as if you were—" but he stopped himself before he said too much. "One day at a time," he repeated, and there was a slight question underneath his words.

Castiel frowned. Dean was almost *too* understanding at times. But he nodded, and let Dean lead him through to the kitchen where he sat him at the table and placed a steaming mug of hot chocolate in front of him a couple of minutes later.

"Okay, then," Dean said slowly. "So what happened today?"

Castiel shrugged, unwilling to discuss the nightmares he had of his father.

"Come on, buddy – you've got to give me *something* here. Or at least *try* to. I mean, I thought things were going good, yeah?"
"Yes," Castiel admitted. He'd allowed himself to forget what it was that had led him here. What he was.

"So, what? Was it something I did? Something I didn't do? Is there something you want me to—"

"Dean!"

Dean fell silent.

"It's not you, okay? I just... I have a lot of... There's so much..." he sighed, unable to find a way to say what he was trying to say without saying too much.

"You know what I think?" Dean asked quietly. "You waited until I came home. You wanted me to stop you, Cas. Even if you just don't know it yet."

Castiel didn't miss the hope and desperation in Dean's voice but said nothing, a part of him that wondering if maybe Dean was right.

* * *

Dean took care of dinner that night, successfully managing to defrost some of Castiel's chilli. (Well, he was counting it a success – he'd only burned a little bit that had stuck to the bottom of the pot.)

"Put on whatever you like," Dean said, tossing the remote in Castiel's direction.

Castiel immediately changed channels to the news. Dean opened his mouth to protest, but closed it again. He'd said 'whatever you like', and if this was what Castiel liked, then he'd put up with it.

"The body of missing seventeen-year-old Samina Abdul has been discovered in a shallow grave in the woods on the outskirts of her town. Police are looking at CCTV footage in the area."

"There are some real freaking monsters out there, you know that?" Dean commented.

Castiel merely nodded sadly.

They ate in silence after that, neither paying much attention to the TV, and Dean washed up instead of just abandoning the dishes in the sink. When he walked back into the living room Cas was curled up on the sofa, so he took the blanket that lay across the back of the sofa and draped it over him.

"Hey," he said softly, and Castiel moved to allow Dean to sit next to him. But Dean placed a hand on his shoulder. "Come here."

Confused, Castiel allowed Dean to manoeuvre him so he was lying down with his head on Dean's thigh – which wasn't as uncomfortable as he'd have thought it would be. Once he was settled, Dean still didn't take his hand from his shoulder; instead rubbing soothing circles through the thin fabric of his t-shirt with his thumb.

They sat like that in silence, neither paying the TV that much attention but each content just to sit in the other's company. Castiel mulled over the church sermon from the day before, and Dean talked himself out of interrupting the silence to ask the difficult questions (because he was a coward like that).

"God hates me," Castiel said suddenly.

Dean choked on thin air. "What?" he exclaimed. "Cas, I don't believe in the guy, but from what I hear God doesn't hate anybody."
Castiel shook his head in disagreement, but wouldn't elaborate any further.
The next day Castiel noticed that anything and everything sharp had mysteriously vanished. He supposed it was nice that Dean was looking out for him, but at the same time it irrationally pissed him off. Who was Dean to barge into his life and try to take control of it? But he didn't say anything when Dean came home, until he was trying to prepare dinner. Well, he didn't actually say anything; he just stood between the TV and Dean with his arms folded.

"Dude, d'you mind?"

"If you want to eat, I suggest you let me have a sharp knife. I simply cannot cut the vegetables with a butter knife," he complained, showing more of his irritation than he would have liked.

Dean looked slightly sheepish as he tried to explain. "Uh, yeah—"

"Dean," Castiel sighed, letting his arms fall to his sides. "Just don't."

Dean disappeared and returned with a knife. It wasn't the right one, but Castiel would make do. Dean hovered in the kitchen, totally not watching him, and Castiel briefly contemplated stabbing him with it. Instead he washed and dried it before handing it back to Dean without a word when he was finished with it.

"Sorry," Dean said, but took the knife back to wherever it was he was keeping it before returning to the living room.

Castiel sighed. He supposed he should be happy that someone cared enough about him to look out for him, but the last time someone had controlled his life under the illusion of 'looking out for him' he'd had his freedom stripped away, so it was hard to be grateful.

* * *

"Castiel, you are going to get married sooner or later – don't go thinking that by conveniently disliking every girl I bring here to meet you that you'll escape the fact."

"Father—"

"You are an embarrassment, Castiel! Why can't you see that I am trying to help you?"

And then Castiel's head snapped to the side as the back of his father's hand impacted with the side of his face. He blinked back tears as he turned back to his father.

"You should be grateful that I care enough to help you, boy!"

"You don't care about me, father – you care about your reputation in the community."

His father's gaze darkened. "You are a disobedient, rebellious, ungrateful little child! Everything I have done for you, you throw back in my face. One day you will go too far and I shall turn my back on you, Castiel, and so will God. Mark my words, son."

"I'm sorry, Father," Castiel said. Not for his words, which surprised him, but for disappointing him.

His father slammed the bedroom door, and Castiel could hear the click of the key turning in the lock.
"You will sit in here and think about how you can better serve the good Lord."

Castiel could feel his eyes getting wet, but he didn't cry. He never cried, no matter how much he sometimes wanted to. He was just so wrong, in so many different ways.

* * *

An hour later he was stuffed full and watching *Doctor Sexy, MD* reruns with Dean in silence. It seemed like silence was his best friend lately.

"Cas?" Dean asked during a commercial break.

Castiel looked at him.

"Have you ever, you know, talked to someone about this?"

Castiel frowned.

"Like a shrink, you know? I usually think they're full of themselves, but..." He sighed. "I'm not really making it sound like the right thing here. I'm not saying you're crazy, or that there's something wrong with you – I just think that... If you haven't got your family to talk to, and you won't talk to me, you should have someone you can talk to about it. What about the priest at your church? Can you talk to him about it?"

Castiel had suspected this conversation would come sooner or later, but it was not one he wanted to have so he shook his head vehemently. "No."

"Cas—"

"I said no, Dean!" Castiel was very definite in his decision, and his voice was almost a growl. "Can you just drop it? Please?" he added, slightly softer this time.

Dean sighed again, but nodded reluctantly. "Okay, yeah. If that's what you want."

"Thank you," he said, and they fell back into an uneasy silence.

* * *

It didn't matter that he'd told Cas he'd drop it – he just couldn't let it go because he was worried about him, so a couple of days later he spoke to the only person he had to talk to.

"Bobby?"

"Yeah? What is it?" Bobby asked gruffly.

"Have you got a minute?"

"What do you want?"

Dean shifted from one foot to the other. "I need some advice."

"Damn it, boy, do I look like *Dear Abby* to you?"

"Sorry, Bobby," he said, turning to leave. "Never mind. It doesn't matter."

Bobby sighed. "Dean... Take a break."
"But—"

"You've earned it. Come here."

Dean followed Bobby through to his office where he was ushered into a seat and a steaming hot mug of coffee was thrust into his hand.

"Okay, so talk."

And Dean did. He talked for twenty minutes and told Bobby everything. He told him about finding Cas on the bridge, about Castiel leaving and Dean taking him back home again, he told him that Castiel's father had beaten him, and he that he'd found him with a blade in his hand when he'd finished work on Monday and how didn't know what to do or how to help him, all while Bobby just sat there and listened.

When Dean finally finished, Bobby drained the last of his coffee and looked at him.

"Well?" Dean asked. "What do I do?"

"Dean," Bobby started, "I gave you a job because I knew your situation and I went out on a limb – I trusted you. Most people wouldn't have."

"I know."

"So you see where I'm going with this?"

Dean shook his head.

Bobby sighed. "You can't hope to help him until you know whatever it is that's eating him."

"Yeah, but he doesn't want to tell me—"

"You don't want to ask!" Bobby all but yelled back. "Just because you don't like to talk about things doesn't mean other people don't! It's about him, not you, so pull your head out of your ass and talk to him!"

"I know it's not about me!" Dean said defensively.

"Do you? Because it seems to me that you've done piss-poor job of actually sitting him down and asking him what's wrong! Some people don't like to be a burden. Sometimes you need to take the time to be a friend!"

"I..." Dean was speechless.

"Sit there and think about what I just said. I'm going to go finish putting the new brake pads on that Mustang."

Dean stood up. "But Bobby, that's my—"

"Sit!"

Dean sat.

"Think."

* * *
When Dean got back home that night he grabbed a beer and sat down on the sofa next to Cas. "So," he said casually. "How are you?"

"Do you mean am I liable to try to kill myself today?" Castiel replied matter-of-factly.

Dean visibly winced at the bluntness of Castiel's tone. He hadn't meant to sound so obvious. "Well, uh, yeah."

Castiel absently picked at a loose thread hanging from the cushion. "I don't think so."

Dean let out the breath he didn't realise he'd been holding. "Good. 'Cause, you know, I'd try and stop you again."

"Yes, I do."

"Talk to me."

"I am talking to you."

"I mean tell me what you're thinking – whatever it is you're not saying out loud. You can tell me."

Castiel shook his head. "No."

Dean tipped his head back and looked at the ceiling, a part of him thinking that if it were Sam he'd probably threaten to beat it out of him but knowing that that would just cause Castiel to retreat further into himself.

"Fair enough," he said instead. "But if you do decide you want to talk—"

"Thank you, Dean. But I will not burden you further by telling you all my problems."

"Dude, I asked, okay? I offered you a place to stay; I asked you how you are – that makes you about as far away from a burden as you can be."

"You don't talk about what it is that bothers you," Castiel pointed out. "Whatever it is that you keep bottled up inside you, the thoughts that you try to drown out night after night with all that beer. So don't you lecture me about talking about it – about what's wrong, and how I feel. Not unless you feel like sharing yourself!" he snapped bitterly.

Dean walked out then, slamming the door behind him.

Castiel immediately felt guilty. He went to bed early but lay awake, unable to sleep. Dean had been nothing but good to him, and yet all Castiel seemed to do was keep him at a distance and push him away when he got too close. He reasoned with himself that it would hurt less when Dean found out the truth and told him to leave, but it didn't change the fact that he liked Dean; liked having him as a friend.

He heard Dean stagger in at some ungodly hour, colliding loudly with something – possibly the telephone table in the hallway – as he made his way to his room.

"Shit!" Dean exclaimed in a hushed tone, to no-one in particular.

Castiel pulled the covers around his head as he willed himself to sleep, but tomorrow was a long, long way away.
Chapter 10

When Dean walked into the kitchen late Saturday morning he nearly walked into the drying rack Castiel had retrieved from the cupboard under the stairs. A couple of pairs of baggy white boxers and black socks were draped over the rungs.

"Morning," he yawned.

"Good morning," Castiel said, looking over his shoulder from where he was washing his t-shirts in the sink.

"There is a machine for that downstairs, you know."

"I only have a handful of things to wash - it's not worth it," Castiel shrugged.

Cas had probably washed his clothes three times already that week. Dean would have offered to lend him some, except Cas was slimmer than he was and would look too small in Dean's t-shirts. "Cas, you should think about getting some new clothes," Dean said. It wasn't the first time he'd mentioned that Cas needed new clothes - the ones he had looked tired.

"I'll think about it when I have money."

"You're not going to have money until you get a job," Dean pointed out.

Castiel tensed. "I know, I—"

Dean shook his head even though Cas wouldn't see him. "Don't worry about it."

Castiel bit his lip as he rinsed the soap out of his t-shirt. It wasn't that he hadn't been looking for a job, but he'd never finished college and couldn't drive, so his options were limited. He didn't want Dean to think that he was abusing his kindness, or taking his hospitality for granted. He was grateful. For everything that Dean had done for him.

Dean moved to the fridge and grabbed the carton of breakfast juice, drinking it straight from the container.

"So are we not talking about last night?" Castiel asked tentatively.

"What's there to talk about?" Dean asked.

"I was rather rude," Castiel said awkwardly.

"You were honest."

Castiel opened and closed his mouth, unsure how to respond to that. It was the last thing he'd expected Dean to say. He looked down at the t-shirt in his hands, thinking that it was looking rather faded and worn.

"What say you and me head out for lunch, hmm?" Dean asked, changing the subject.

"If you want to," Castiel nodded, smoothing out creases with his fingers.

"And then we could go clothes shopping," he chanced.
"Dean, we have discussed this," Castiel protested, looking up at him. "I will not let you waste your brother's money on me."

"Okay firstly, you discussed this, and secondly, I got paid yesterday. You can't dictate how I spend my money, and I want to buy you some new threads. You look homeless."

"I am homeless."

"You're not—" Dean sighed. "You have a home, okay?"

"You have a home. I sleep on your sofa instead of the streets."

Dean found himself walking over to Castiel without thinking and hugging him. Castiel tensed in his arms, still not used to the fact that with Dean physical contact didn't equal pain. Before meeting him, it had been a long time since someone had touched him with love. Not that Dean loved him, but—

"You have a home, okay?" Dean murmured in his ear.

Castiel nodded into his shoulder.

"Now I'm buying you some new clothes and that's that."

"Dean—"

"I can buy you clothes myself, or you can come with me and choose them – it's up to you. Either way, you're getting new clothes."

Castiel moved over to the drying rack and hung his t-shirt over it. It would be nice to have a couple more t-shirts, he admitted to himself, for then he wouldn't have to wash them as frequently. And the ones he had did look old. But he was already imposing enough on Dean, who had already done so much for him. He sighed. Dean was stubborn enough that he would go out and buy clothes for him if he refused, he knew that much.

"I supposed it wouldn't hurt to have a couple of new t-shirts," he conceded reluctantly.

"Good."

* * *

Dean had assured him he knew the 'perfect place' to go for lunch, though Castiel doubted his definition of perfect as they walked into a clichéd diner and slid into a cramped booth.

"Two double cheeseburgers and two Cokes please, Elizabeth," Dean grinned at the waitress when she came over. "So, do you want me to pick you up from church tomorrow?"

Castiel shook his head. "No."

"It's a long walk back, Cas."

"I won't be going to church tomorrow," said, eyes darting around the diner. Everywhere that wasn't at Dean.

Dean wasn't fooled by Castiel's attempts at looking casually around their surroundings. "Why not?" he asked, hoping that he could manage to coax a real answer out of Cas.
"It is not appropriate for me to attend any more," Castiel said sadly.

Dean leaned forward. "Cas, what happened?"

"Dean, I do not wish to discuss it," Castiel stated tiredly.

Dean sighed. "Alright. But feel free to talk about something else."

"Like what?"

"Like, I don't know!" Dean shrugged.

"Why don't you tell me about your work," Castiel suggested.

Dean's eyes widened in surprise at that, but he started telling him about Bobby and the yard, the Impala he'd been working on and how it wasn't as good as his baby, and Castiel listened intently the whole time as Dean started rambling about the differences in the engine and design of all the different generations of Impala and how the '67 was, in his mind, the very best.

Castiel may not have understood much of what Dean was saying when it came to the technical details, but he enjoyed listening to him speak – it was nice to listen to him speak so passionately about something he obviously cared about, given that he didn't talk much about himself.

It wasn't until Dean had polished off the last of his burger that he realised just how long he'd been talking. "I'm boring you, aren't I?"

"Not at all," Castiel replied, taking another small bite of his burger. Dean looked at him disbelievingly as he chewed and swallowed before continuing. "I find it very fascinating to hear you discuss your work. It is obviously something you are very passionate about."

"Engines are easy, dude – so much simpler than people. I get them."

Castiel smiled. "I think you underestimate yourself, Dean. You seem to 'get' me very well."

"Nah," Dean shrugged. "You just remind me of Sam, that's all - I get him. Or at least, I used to," he corrected himself quietly.

"Don't sell yourself short, Dean," Cas insisted. "I don't think you give yourself nearly enough credit."

Dean scoffed.

"Dean, may I ask," Castiel inquired quietly, "and obviously you do not have to answer if you are unwilling to discuss the matter, but... what happened between you and your brother?"

Dean's gaze hardened.

"I'm sorry," he said quickly. "I shouldn't have asked. It's just apparent to me that you both still love each other, and I guess I just don't understand how you could both be so prepared to lose that."

"Yeah, well... I guess sometimes love just isn't enough."

"I loved my brother – of course I did, for he was my kin – but I never loved him as much as you clearly love Sam. He is very lucky to have a brother like you."

Dean was about to tell Castiel that he didn't know Dean at all, and that he didn't know jack shit about
what happened between them and that he should keep his nose out of other people's business, when he remembered that if it wasn't for him Sam wouldn't have been able to finish his degree and graduate. His expression softened. "Maybe you're right," he said, "but I think he and I both know I'm more bother than I'm worth, most of the time."

"Not to me," Castiel said sincerely, as he finished the last of his burger and wiped his greasy fingers on one of the cheap paper napkins provided. "Shall we?"

Dean got the bill and the two headed for one of the smaller clothing stores. It turned out that Cas had never really had new clothes before – being from a cheap, religious family who donated to various charities and lived off the bare minimum, he'd always just inherited his brother's old hand-me-downs.

That really riled Dean, because no matter how much they'd struggled financially growing up with his dad moving from job to job, and drinking himself to sleep most nights, at least he'd always made sure he and Sammy always had food in their stomachs and clothes on their backs – their own clothes.

That was probably why he went a little overboard, and an hour and three stores later Castiel had a t-shirt for every day of the week, a pair of jeans (which Dean had informed him would be much more comfortable than the suit trousers that he'd been wearing), and some new socks and underwear. He was looking at a navy sweater when Dean reappeared carrying something with difficulty behind his back to keep it from Castiel's sight.

"Dude, no," he said, seeing the sweater he was eyeing up. "That looks like my grandfather would have worn it."

"I already have a sweater," Castiel said. He wouldn't have let Dean buy it for him anyway – it was far too expensive. Then he noticed that Dean was hiding something from him.

"Dean, I think I have more than enough clothes, now!" he exclaimed in frustration. He'd agreed one or two shirts, but Dean had just kept insisting, 'One more, Cas. Just one more.'

"Can we please just pay for these and leave?"

"Not until you see this," Dean said.

Castiel's jaw dropped when Dean revealed the tan trench coat he'd been hiding.

"I saw the way you looked when I told you yours had gone," Dean said, rubbing the back of his neck. "If you don't want it, or don't like it, I'm not saying you have to get it, but—"

"It's perfect!" Castiel declared with a smile. "But where did you find it?"

Dean shrugged. "Sale rack – it's old stock. I think it might be a bit big, though..."

Castiel swapped the pile of clothes he was carrying for the coat Dean held and tried it on.

"I was right – it's a bit big," Dean said, looking him up and down.

Castiel frowned. "So was my old one – I liked it that way," he said dejectedly.

"Hey, if you're happy, I'm happy," Dean said, eager to fend off another heated debate about clothes.

He laughed as Castiel turned to look at the back of the coat in the mirror. "You know, when we were kids Sammy had this god-awful denim jacket he wore everywhere – and I mean, everywhere! Come rain or shine or snow he'd be wearing that damn coat, and my dad couldn't get him to wear anything
else. Then one day he left it on the bus after a school trip – he was just too damned excited about that trip – and he refused to leave the house for a week. We never got the coat back and dad was getting pissed that he wouldn't go to school, so I bought him a new one with my pocket money and said someone had handed it in at the bus depot. He went right back to school the next day, with this great big sappy grin on his face. I didn't think he knew any different – he was just a kid – but when he got home that night he gave me this big hug and whispered, 'Thanks, Dean' in my ear. The little bitch knew. All day, he'd known. I thought I'd done so damn well," Dean laughed sadly to himself.

Castiel had stopped and was looking at Dean as he reminisced. He may have started telling the story to Castiel, but by the end he was telling it to himself; reminding himself of the better times when he and Sam were like two brothers should be. Castiel felt an odd twinge of jealousy. He had never had that closeness with his brother – Michael was too much like their father, though he believed more in the bonds of family – but listening to Dean made him feel like he, too, had lost something, and when Dean finished and Castiel saw the tears pricking his eyes, he moved towards Dean and wrapped his arms around him awkwardly.

"You did," he whispered in Dean's ear.

"Thanks, Cas," Dean murmured back gratefully. "Now stop being such a chick," he added lightly as he pushed Castiel off him, and Castiel immediately stepped back.

"Fags!" someone shouted and Castiel tensed, a faint blush tingeing his cheeks.

"Like your dad!" Dean yelled back in the direction of the voice. "Come on." He tugged Castiel over to the checkout before whoever it was came looking for a fight.

When they got home Castiel insisted on trying on all his new clothes again, which made Dean smile. He didn't tell Cas, but he'd blown at least half his pay packet on him. It was worth it, though. He figured he'd need to place another call to his brother soon. He sighed, and rubbed a hand down his face. What the hell had he become, scrounging of his younger brother every damn time he was struggling?
Chapter 11

When Dean walked into the living room the next morning he froze in the doorway – Castiel was on his knees, hands clasped and eyes shut, mouth moving in words too quiet for him to hear. When Castiel was finished he opened his eyes, and looked at Dean.

"What were you praying for?" Dean asked.

"That is between myself and God."

"Sort of like a birthday wish, huh?"

Castiel looked at him blankly.

"You know – you blow out the candles on your birthday cake but if you tell anyone what you wished for it won't come true?"

"I wouldn't know."

"You—" Dean shook his head. "You know, I keep thinking that your dad couldn't have done any more to ruin your childhood, but then he does."

"Dean," Castiel started warningly. They'd had this conversation before.

Dean held his hands up in surrender. "I'm just saying, you've missed out."

"You seem to be intent on changing that, though," Castiel pointed out.

Dean grinned. "So come on – what was it like growing up the way you did?"

"We had a lot of space. There were fields, and trees. Small houses. None of these massive apartment blocks. I kept bees."

Dean shivered. He'd had a bad experience with bugs, once. "Bees?"

"Yes. I would make honey, and sell it at the local market."

"You made honey?"

Castiel nodded. "Our community prided itself on being as self sufficient as it could be." He paused. "Presumably so there would be less for us to be tempted by, and it would be easier to control us and mould us into their image."

Dean didn't know what to say to that, and Cas didn't seem to have anything else to say on the matter.

"Dean…" Cas started.

"Yeah?"

" Forgiveness." At Dean's puzzled expression, Castiel elaborated. "I prayed for forgiveness."

"For what?"

But Castiel just shook his head.
Because Castiel didn't go to church that day they had an early lunch. Dean made burgers, and Castiel couldn't get enough of them.

"That's really good!" he declared through a mouthful of meat, juices dribbling down his chin. For once he didn't give a shit about table manners as he took a second bite before he'd swallowed his first.

Dean positively beamed, and made them a second one each.

"These make me really happy," Cas said, and he hummed in satisfaction. If it was possible, the second one was even better than the first.

"You're easily pleased!" Dean joked.

Castiel flashed him a small, sad smile. "Sometimes the simple things you take for granted are the luxuries another can't afford."

Dean narrowed his eyes as he tried to read between the lines, because Castiel was very good at not always saying what was on his mind.

"Have you ever been homeless, Dean?"

Dean shook his head.

Castiel ducked his gaze to his half-eaten burger. "If you wanted, you could make and eat burgers every day. When I was sleeping in shop doorways and side alleys, I didn't know if I was even going to scrape enough change together for a cup of coffee to keep me warm the next day, let alone a bite to eat."

He heard Dean suck in a breath as if he was about to say something, but Castiel kept talking.

"You can't imagine how difficult it is to try to get washed in the toilets at the bus station – and that's if you can get in, because sometimes there's a charge to get in and that's thirty cents that could go towards a sandwich, so you're forced to sacrifice your personal hygiene for nutrition." He finally looked up at Dean. "So yes, I may seem easily pleased to you, Dean, but that's because I know what it's like to go without these things."

Dean's mouth hung open as he shook his head, because that's not what he meant at all and he didn't know how to take it back.

"I'm sorry," Castiel said when the silence had gone on too long. "I know you didn't mean it like that, I just—"

"Hey, it's okay, Cas," Dean said, finding his voice at last. "You're right – I can't imagine what it was like for you."

Castiel just stared at him until Dean felt like he was drowning.

He cleared his throat. "What's say you and me veg out and watch movies all day, huh?"

"'Veg out'?" Castiel echoed.

"Yeah. Be still like vegetables," Dean laughed, eyes twinkling until he realised he was quoting Pretty Woman. It had been Lisa's favourite movie and he must have suffered through watching it with her.
at least twenty times. He tried to disguise his blush by coughing as he thanked the universe that Cas wouldn't understand that reference.

"Yes," Castiel said thoughtfully. "I think I would like to 'veg out'."

"Good. Terminator or Alien?"

"You choose."

"Terminator it is, then."

* * *

"Have you spoken to that friend of yours yet?" Bobby asked Dean on Monday, after hauling him into his office.

"I tried."

"Well try harder. It'll be too late when you're standing over his grave."

"Bobby!" Dean exclaimed, shocked by his bluntness.

"I'm just saying, boy. Talk to him."

"I did," Dean protested as he sat down.

"Again!"

"I will! But I swear it's like the dude's bipolar or something. One minute we're having a fun day out, the next he's moody, the day after that he's cleaning my apartment like a neat freak, then I find him trying to off himself. I just don't know what I'm going to get next with the guy." A sudden surge of emotion hit Dean, so he leaned forward, put his head in his hands, and took several deep breaths.

"You okay?"

Dean nodded, and sat up. "It's like my brother all over again," he admitted quietly.

"I don't know what happened there because you never told me, and I'm not going to pry into what's not my business, but do you even know this guy?"

"No. I told you – I just drove past him when he was standing on the edge of a bridge. The thing is, though, it feels like I've known him forever. Like he's always been there, you know?"

"Hmm," Bobby mused. "Well, there are some people who just slot right into your life like that." Bobby looked at his watch. "Look, I haven't got the money to pay you the overtime you've been putting in lately, so why don't you take off home now. We'll manage here, and you can talk to this guy. Cas, was it?"

Dean nodded. "Thanks, Bobby."

When he got in his car he'd barely put the keys in the ignition when his cell rang. He checked the caller ID before answering, and he couldn't hit the answer button fast enough when he read the name.

"Sam?" he said, a mixture of confusion and hope and fear fluttering in his stomach. Sam never called him – it was always the other way about.
"Dean." Sam cleared his throat. "How are you doing?"

"Same as usual. Are you okay?"

"Me? Yeah, I'm fine. And Jess is fine, thanks for asking."

Dean mentally kicked himself. He hadn't even said ten words and he's already riled his brother.

"Look, I just called to say that I've sent some more money your way."

"I didn't ask you to do that, Sam!" Dean growled. The money would come in handy, yes, but he was *not* a charity case! It was bad enough that he always went crawling to Sam when he had some 'money flow problems'.

"I know, I just— Is Cas still living with you?"

"Yeah."

"I just figured that you might be running a little low, soon, so..."

"We're fine," Dean said, his stubborn streak cutting off the reluctant thanks before it reached his lips.

"You know, you never said why he was staying with you."

"I think that's his business, Sam."

"Okay, okay," Sam backtracked, eager to keep the fragile peace. "How is he, anyway?"

"He's good. Better," Dean added. Which was true enough for the moment but he didn't go into specifics.

"Good."

"Yeah, it is."

"You know, I think having this friend stay with you is good for you too, Dean."

"Shut up, bitch," Dean said, thankful that he was having this conversation in private because he could feel his cheeks warming slightly.

"I mean it – you sound... I don't know. Happier, I guess. Content."

Dean grunted. But he supposed Sam was right. He *did* like having Cas around; it was nice having someone to talk to every day.

"Dean, just please don't do anything to fuck this up, okay?"

"Quit being such a girl, Samantha."

Dean could almost hear Sam's eyes roll.

"Whatever. Look, Dean, I've got to go."

"Yeah. Go get the bad guys off, Sam."

Sam sighed. "Everybody deserves a trial, Dean," he reminded him for the umpteenth time.
"Yeah, yeah," Dean grumbled. "Bye, Sam."

"Goodbye, Dean."

Dean tossed the phone into the passenger seat and let his head fall against the wheel. Somewhere along the line he'd fucked up, and he'd lost his little brother. He turned the key in the ignition and the engine roared to life. He fucked everything up, and lost everyone. But he was the only person Cas had, so surely even he couldn't fuck it up bad enough to lose him?

* * *

When Dean got home Cas was watching TV when he went through to the living room, so Dean switched it off and turned to him.

"I was watching that," Cas said lightly.

"We need to talk."

Cas sat up stiffly, then, because Dean was being unusually serious which probably meant he'd done something wrong. He quickly racked his brain for anything he'd done that could give Dean reason to be angry with him, but could think of nothing.

"Or rather, you need to talk," Dean continued, as he sat down on the coffee table in front of Cas. "About whatever's eating you."

"Nothing is 'eating' me."

"Cas, this whole thing with your dad—"

"I don't wish to discuss it," Cas said, leaning back against the sofa and hugging himself in an attempt to make himself look as small as possible. He hadn't realised how determined Dean would be to pursue the matter – as far as he'd been concerned they'd had this conversation three days ago.

"You may not want to, but I think you need to."

"You don't know me," Castiel declared stubbornly, looking at his knees. He just wanted to get up and leave, but wherever he went Dean would just follow. This was Dean's house, after all, and despite the numerous occasions on which Dean had told him to treat it as his own he still felt somewhat uncomfortable doing so. "You don't know me," he repeated, softer this time.

"That's because you won't let me! You've been here for almost three weeks now, and I still don't know where you come from!" A sudden realisation hit him. "Cas, I don't even know your last name."

"Milton," Castiel stated quietly. "My last name is Milton."

Dean knew he'd fucked up by bluntly asking him outright as soon as he'd walked into the room, and he supposed this was why he'd avoided trying to talk to Castiel about it. He needed to try and channel some of his brother's tact and patience – something that Dean sorely lacked – and he was unsure of exactly how to get Castiel to open up to him without pushing him away even further.

"Look, do you want to talk about what happened with your dad?" he tried again, more softly this time.

"No."
"I'm worried about you."

"Thank you for your concern, Dean, but it is unnecessary. I am fine."

"You're not fine, Cas."

Castiel looked at Dean. He knew he wasn't fine, but talking to Dean would be a risk he wasn't willing to take. He had a roof over his head, and he didn't want to lose it.

"You're bottling everything up," Dean pressed him.

"You said I could talk to you, so if I wanted to talk I would have come to you," Castiel told him, fidgeting under Dean's piercing gaze. Lying was the least of his concerns when it came to sinning.

"Would you, Cas?"

Castiel looked at him, but then his gaze dropped to his lap.

"I didn't think so. I didn't press you because I didn't want to have to talk about things. But it's not about me. So come on, dude. Unless you're a serial killer on the run from the law, I can pretty much guarantee you it's not going to change the way I see you."

Cas chewed on his lower lip. Dean seemed sincere enough, but if Castiel told him then he might ask if he was attracted to him, and he couldn't lie – not to Dean – and then Dean would get uncomfortable and ask him to leave. No.

Cas was avoiding his gaze, so he leaned forward and put his hands on the other man's knees. "I really think you need to talk about it."

Castiel's body went rigid at Dean's touch, and when he lifted his legs up onto the sofa, shuffling away, Dean took the hint. "This isn't something you can fix, Dean."

"How do you know if you don't try?" Dean fighting his instinct to regain the physical ground with Castiel and instead let him have some space. "You can't keep bottling all this up, Cas. Take it from someone who knows," he said, almost regrettably. "I mean, I bottle shit up, and look where that got me."

"Yes – a steady job, your own apartment—"

"My brother and I used to be inseparable," Dean cut through Castiel's sarcasm, "but now we barely talk. I spend my nights either getting drunk or getting laid, sometimes with a woman whose name I can't remember in the morning. Cas," Dean said, "I don't want you to end up alone. I didn't think I had a problem with the way I lived my life until you came along. My life... isn't much of a life. I don't want you to end up like me, keeping colleagues at arms length and having no friends."

Castiel furrowed his brow. "You have me," he said quickly, before thinking that maybe Dean didn't view him that way.

But Dean smiled softly. "Yeah. Yeah, I do." He hesitantly put a hand on Castiel's knee again, ready to take it away if he tensed up. He'd always been one to communicate better with actions rather than words. "I didn't realise how alone I was until I found you." Shit – that had come out wrong. It made him sound selfish. "You're a good guy, Cas, and I like having you around. Talk to me. Please. I'm worried about you. I just want to help."

"You have helped me, Dean."
"Not in the way that matters."

Castiel sighed again. He seemed to be doing that a lot lately. He lowered his eyes to where his hands were clasped in his lap. "But, what if it's too late for that?" he asked, more to himself, before looking up at Dean and catching his eye.

"It's never too late, Cas. Trust me on that."

Castiel sat in silence for a moment, aware of Dean's gaze burning into him as he twisted the fabric of his t-shirt in his hand. "Do you think that you and Sam will ever sort out whatever bad blood there is between you?" he suddenly asked quietly.

Castiel was so focused on his t-shirt that he missed the way Dean flinched at Sam's name, something that Dean was grateful for. He swallowed the lump in his throat and spoke through gritted teeth. "You don't know what went on between me and him."

"You're right I don't know what went on between you and your brother, and frankly it's none of my business; but you keep trying to tell me I can fix this but maybe it isn't broken! You wouldn't know, because you don't know what's wrong with me!"

"Damn straight I don't know what's wrong with you, Cas! Because you don't trust me enough to tell me!" Dean snapped back.

"It's not about trust, Dean!"

"Then what is it about?"

"Why don't you take a look in the mirror and ask yourself? You've got unresolved issues with your brother that I can't even begin to understand. You want to talk about trust? You've made it perfectly clear that I'm not allowed to know anything about your family, but you expect me to tell you everything about mine, and the way you talk about Sam it's like he died—" Castiel stopped abruptly at the way Dean's face hardened, afraid that he'd said too much. Afraid that Dean was going to hit him.

They both stared at each other in silence, wary of saying the wrong thing.

"You say you're worried about me, Dean – I'm worried about you," Cas said softly, hoping to undo any potential damage he may have done with his sudden outburst.

Dean's face softened at the fearful stare Castiel was giving him, knowing that if he snapped now he'd lose what little progress he might have made so far in trying to get through to Cas. "You don't have to be, Cas."

"As you don't have to worry about me!" Castiel insisted.

"Cas, you didn't catch me about to jump off a bridge, or about to slit my wrists in the bathroom."

It was Castiel's turn to flinch, and he took a few shallow breaths. Oh God, please don't let me cry, he thought to himself. Men didn't cry. Men didn't cry, and men didn't like other men.

Dean rubbed the back of his neck. He felt like they'd taken one step forwards and two steps back, and he's not sure exactly why. "Talk to me," Dean urged softly.

At that moment Castiel knew he had to say something, or else Dean would never let it go. "My father is religious, and rules our family with an iron fist," he started slowly. He'd need to choose his
words carefully in order to tell Dean the bare minimum, and avoid raising any questions he didn't want to answer. "To him, the Bible is law. I wouldn't say I necessarily questioned him, but I was different from what he wanted me to be." Castiel took a deep breath. "To him that meant I was disobedient and ungrateful, and he beat me. As punishment, or as a way to reshape me into something better, I don't know. I didn't matter. I was his son, but I don't think he loved me the way he loved my brothers. I was a disappointment to him. He's probably happier without me around."

"Oh, Cas," Dean breathed, pulling him into a tight – if awkward – hug before realising that it was a bad move. He leaned back, giving Castiel space. "You don't need to change, Cas. I mean, look at you! You're selfless, and you've got the patience of a saint if you can put up with me. And," he added, mumbling slightly like he was unused to admitting his true feelings, "you matter to me."

Cas bit his lip, unsure of Dean's sentiment and how to react. Physical gestures of affection were not something that his family indulged in, and he hadn't failed to notice that Dean was more comfortable communicating through physicality rather than words; but while Dean might be able to give out hugs freely and easily, Castiel wasn't comfortable doing so. It had taken a lot for him to embrace him the other day in the department store. He lunged for Dean's hand and squeezed it, before jerking his hands back. "You matter to me, as well," he told Dean, for that much he could be completely honest about.

Dean looked at the floor as his cheeks grew warm. He liked Cas. Maybe Cas would be different and stick around. Maybe. "I guess when I took you in, I looked at you like Sam."

"I'm not Sam," Castiel stated coldly, retreating from whatever moment they had just shared. If that was the only reason for Dean's kindness then he didn't need it – it was bad enough his father wanted him to be someone else, without Dean treating him like someone else as well.

"No, I know," Dean said, leaning forward and taking one of Cas's hands in his own in an attempt to reconnect with him. "But I had to take care of him for a while, and being alone for so long maybe I just wanted someone else to look after. But you don't need looking after, Cas. You're stronger than me. I know you can move past this whole thing with your dad, so no more trying to kill yourself, okay? Please?" Dean begged.

Cas relaxed slightly, but couldn't help the small chuckle that escaped his mouth. In a twisted way, he found it funny that Dean – a damn near stranger – cared more about his wellbeing than anyone else in his family ever had, and the thought made his stomach twist. "You're a good man, Dean."

Dean's stomach clenched at the almost bitter chuckle that Cas had let out. Cas couldn't leave him. He needed him. Not to look after, but just to be there. He didn't want to be alone again. It was weak of him, and he knew he was being selfish, but there had to be a way they could make this better. There had to be. Castiel couldn't promise him, however, so perhaps Dean needed to make him believe that his life was worth living. He just didn't know how, or even if he could.

Castiel looked at Dean, the way his jaw clenched as he sat deep in thought drawing his attention to the strong line of his jaw.

No.

No.

Castiel's father had done his best to beat that out of him. His nibbled the inside of his lip, hoping Dean hadn't noticed the fondness with which he was looking at him.

A flicker of something flashed across Castiel's face that Dean couldn't identify, and he wished he
knew what Castiel was thinking. He licked his lips, unsure if what he was about to say was the right thing or not. "If you... stick around," he started hesitantly, "where do you see your life going? I mean, what do you want to do?"

"Dean, my life has always been dedicated to serving God and helping those less fortunate than I—"

"What about yourself?"

Castiel looked at him, the gentle furrow in his brow the only indication that he didn't understand what Dean wanted or expected him to say.

"Cas, man, helping others is all very well and good, but... What about doing something for yourself once in a while?"

"You mean I should be selfish?" Castiel asked, seeking clarification.

"No, Cas, just... I guess what I'm trying to say is that your life shouldn't be solely focused on what you can do for other people. You're just as important as they are."

There was another flicker of emotion behind Castiel's eyes, though Dean couldn't put his finger on it, but then Castiel nodded in understanding and smiled sadly. "Where were you when I needed to hear that?" he asked.

"I'm here now."

* * *

Dinner was pizza, because it was simple and neither of them could be bothered cooking. The TV was really just background noise until the news came on, and they caught the main headline.

"The father of missing the missing school girl Samina Abdul has admitted to the honour killing of his daughter. Mohammad Abdul says that her relationship with Jonathan Martin had brought shame on the family."

Dean switched the TV off. "Poor kid," he said sadly. "Family's supposed to look after each other." As soon as the words were out of his mouth he shot a horrified look at Cas. "Sorry."

Castiel shook his head. "It's okay. I think you're right."

Dean switched the TV off and started to gather the plates together. "I'll wash, you dry, alright?"

Cas didn't answer, instead staring at the blank television screen.

"Cas?" he said softly, as he sat back again.

"I suppose I'm lucky, really," Cas said emotionlessly. "My family could have killed me, but instead they just disowned me. At least I still get to have a life."

Dean swallowed, not really sure what to say to that, but then Castiel reached into his pocket and withdrew a small tub and tossed it to him. He caught it deftly in his left hand, and frowned when he realised what it was. "This is mine," he said.

"Yes," was Castiel's single-word response.

"Where'd you get this?" he demanded roughly.
"It was in the back of the bathroom cabinet," Cas replied. "I don't know why I took it, or why I didn't put it back. I figured you didn't even know it was there."

Dean had been given the painkillers on prescription a few years ago, after a car accident he'd been in with Sam and his dad. "You were right," he said quietly. "I'd forgotten all about them." He'd been a stubborn ass and refused to take them, no matter how bad the pain got. "Have you taken any?"

Castiel's head jerked up. "What?"

"Have you taken any, Cas?"

"No."

"How many?"

"None!"

Dean nodded, seemingly satisfied with this.

"I don't think I want to die," Castiel said quietly, with the dawning realisation of someone who'd been calling black white all his life.

Dean felt all the tension he didn't even know he'd been carrying leave him in that moment. "Well, good," he said awkwardly.

Castiel looked at him. "I don't think I ever really did," he frowned, and it was like he could finally see the possibility of a future for himself for the first time in a long time. "I was just so lost, and so alone, that I couldn't see any other path to take." Tears fell down his cheeks. "Dean," he gasped, feeling like he couldn't breathe as it suddenly hit him that if he'd died he'd never had been able to have a second chance at everything. Dean had saved his life in more ways than one.

"Hey," Dean said, moving to sit beside Cas and wrapping an arm around him. "It's okay, Cas."

"I nearly died..."


Cas let Dean manoeuvre him into his arms, too shocked at how far he'd fallen to protest, even if he'd wanted to.

"I tried to kill myself, Dean!"

"You couldn't do it in my bathroom, Cas," Dean whispered. "I don't think you could have jumped."

Castiel's fingers fisted desperately in Dean's t-shirt, crinkling the fabric. "I don't want to die," he repeated faintly.

"I know," Dean told him. "I know."

Life with Dean was so different from life with his father. "My father didn't raise me to have a life – he raised me to serve the Lord. So what do I do now?" Castiel asked, looking up at him with wide eyes. "I can't go back to my father, so tell me, Dean – what do I do?"

Dean licked his lips, and Castiel swallowed. He didn't have an answer. He'd be a hypocrite if he did. "You're going to stay here with me, Cas, and we're going to find you a job," he said eventually.
Days became weeks, and it didn't take long for Dean and Castiel to slip into an easy routine. They balanced each other out, and the bond between them only got stronger, until at times it felt like they'd been living together all their lives.

Castiel was quite happy to do all the things Dean hated to do around the house – the cooking, the cleaning, the washing up, the laundry, the ironing – though Dean did do his fair share. Castiel insisted that seeing as he didn't yet have a job to contribute to the household finances (though not from a lack or searching and applying), he was happy to do what little he could to pull his weight.

Dean, on the other hand, went to work every day and continued to go out and get drunk most nights – though he did try to limit the number of times Castiel had to hold his head over the toilet to once a week. He tried almost every night to get Castiel to come out with him, but was only occasionally successful in persuading him – he seemed perfectly content to sit at home and read. It was like having his brother around again, Dean told himself, and if he caught himself staring at him, or holding his gaze that moment too long, or smiling to widely at him, or laughing too loudly at him when he didn't realise how damned funny he was, then well – it was only because he missed having Sam around.

Castiel hadn't found a job but he did have several rejection letters though, all saying the same thing – they were sorry but they were looking for applicants with more experience and/or qualifications, but they wished him luck.

Dean could see that it was getting him down. Cas had been happier lately, so he knew he needed to do something before he came close another downward spiral. He didn't know what though, until a flyer left in his mailbox offered them two for one entry to the bowling alley.

It was only after he had paid for their games at the desk, however, that he thought to ask if Cas actually knew how to play; which was why he was hurriedly trying to explain the objective of the game to Castiel before they got any further.

"You roll your ball down the lane – but be careful not to put your foot across the line – and you try to aim your ball so it knocks all the pins down. You get more points the more pins you knock down, and at the end of the game the person with the most points wins. It's fun."

"Fun? Throwing a ball to knock some..."

"Pins," Dean prompted.

"... Pins down, is fun?"

"Yeah."

Cas shot Dean a look as if to say, your idea of fun is getting so drunk that you throw up and forget the night's events, so why don't I believe you?

"Trust me?" Dean asked.

Castiel had nothing to lose (except perhaps his dignity) so nodded.

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. "Good. Now we need to get some shoes."
Castiel followed him over to another desk, and tilted his head in confusion when Dean began to untie his laces. "Dean?"

"Take your shoes off, Cas."

Castiel looked at him like he was mad, but Dean was too preoccupied with a knot in his laces to notice.

"Hand them over at the desk," he continued, "and tell the guy your size."

"And he'll give me a pair of shoes?" Castiel said sceptically.

"Yeah."

"I do not understand."

Dean looked up at him. "What?"

"I already have shoes, but I must give my shoes to a man who will take them from me, and then he'll give me shoes?"

Dean looked at him for a moment. "You're right," he said eventually. "It sounds mental when you put it like that."

"But why do I have to give him my shoes?" Castiel pressed.

It suddenly hit Dean why Castiel was so interested in giving away his shoes – he only had the ones he was wearing. "Your outdoor shoes can mark the bowling alley," he explained, "so they give you bowling shoes to minimise scuffing. You swap them back when you've finished your game."

Castiel seemed happy with this explanation, but still held off on giving away his shoes until Dean had handed his over and received his unattractive red and white bowling shoes.

Dean programmed both their names into the machine, and then helped Cas find a ball he felt comfortable with. "Thumb, middle finger, and ring finger," he told Castiel as he pointed at each of the holes in turn.

Dean went first, and Castiel watched intently as he took two three long strides and let the ball roll out of his hand gracefully. He shook his head. This was not going to go well for him. He imagined himself getting his fingers stuck in the ball and being dragged down the lane, and was so caught up in his imaginary embarrassment that he missed Dean's second shot. It was only when he whooped after he got a half strike that Castiel realised it was his turn.

"Keep it out of the gutter," was all the advice Dean gave him.

Swallowing, Cas stepped past Dean and eyed the newly set pins like they might attack him at any moment. Fun, he told himself. This was supposed to be fun.

He gripped the ball tightly, and tried to replicate Dean's movements. He didn't trip up, he kept his foot behind the black line, and the ball left his hand with a slight thump onto the hard, glossy surface. He watched as the ball veered left, and left, and left, and... straight into the gutter. His shoulders slumped.

"Good moves!" Dean called.

"I hardly think mocking me on my first attempt is considered good sportsmanship," he grumbled.
Dean never meant him any ill will, so perhaps he thought he was just being funny.

"No, I meant— Grab a ball and come here," he said.

"It's not back yet."

"So pick another. If it's the same colour and has the same number then it's just the same."

"I want my ball, Dean."

Dean held up his hands in surrender and rolled his eyes. "Okay."

"I don't need to be looking at you to know you're rolling your eyes at me, Dean."

Dean narrowed his eyes at Castiel's back. "You know me too well."

Cas grabbed his ball from the ball return rack and moved towards Dean, tensing when two firm hands suddenly placed themselves on his hips and gripped him tightly.

"Loosen up," Dean told him, shaking him.

"Dean, I—"

"You're too tense, Cas."

Castiel let Dean sway him from side to side, feeling like an idiot.

"Okay, good. Now you're approach was good, but your release was terrible." Dean marched him forward until they were a couple of steps behind the foul line. "Well done for keeping your foot behind the line, though."

"Er, thank you?"

Dean chuckled, and his breath was warm on the back of Castiel's neck. He shivered.

"You cold?"

"No."

"Okay." With his left hand still gripping Castiel's waist he moved his right to just below Castiel's elbow, and slid his hand down until it lay over the back of his hand. "Right, we're not going to let the ball go just yet, okay?"

Castiel nodded dumbly, his attention solely focused on the fact that Dean was pressing right up against him as if it was the most normal thing in the world. He was pretty sure that this wasn't how you got taught to bowl, but he wasn't going to argue.

"Cas?"

"Hmm? What?"

"Did you hear a word I just said?"

"Um, yes, but could you—"

"Yeah, sure. Straighten your back, bend your knees slightly. No, don't squat, Cas!" he joked lightly.
Castiel turned to glare at him. "I am *not* squatting!" he protested.

"Okay, okay," Dean laughed. "But remember, don't let it go just now – we're just going to swing it a few times."

Castiel was surprised that Dean couldn't hear his heart thumping in his chest, even over the dreadful music that was playing over the sound system. (He knew it was terrible because Dean had complained about it the moment they'd set foot through the doors.)

"Left foot forward," Dean said. "Good. Now step forward with your right foot, as you let your arm swing forward – keep it straight – and keep your left hand underneath it to support it. Good. Now let the ball start to swing back as you move your left foot forward, and then as your right comes forward it should be swinging back. Just like that, and as you *slide* your left foot forward you're letting it go —"

The ball hit the floor with an awkward thump.

"I'm sorry," Cas apologised. "I didn't mean to—"

"It's okay, Cas."

They both watched as the ball crawled down the lane and knocked down the two pins on the far left, and Castiel turned round and hugged Dean. "I got them!"

Dean wrapped his arms loosely around Castiel's waist and grinned. "Great, Cas. Now let's aim for three next time, eh?"

Castiel stepped back. "Don't ruin my fun, Dean."

"Oh, so we're having fun, are we?" Dean teased. "Maybe," he hedged.

Castiel sat back down and watched as Dean took two shots to hit nine pins. "Are we losing our touch?" Castiel asked with a sly grin.

"Watch it," Dean growled, but there was no real menace in it.

Castiel picked up his ball, and stopped. It was bad, so bad of him, but... Castiel turned back to Dean. "Could you just show me again?"

Dean leapt to his feet and Castiel took that as a yes. It was easier to relax this time around, and he let Dean move him through the motions as he enjoyed the way Dean's hand was all but holding his own.

"Six is a definite improvement on two," Dean said. "I think you've got the knack of the swing now, so it's just practice, practice, practice!"

Castiel smiled, but already he was missing the feeling of Dean's chest pressing against his back.

* * *

Dean was very good and quickly won the first game by a large margin, but when Castiel told him so he shrugged the praise off dismissively. "Anyone would look good next to you, Cas!" he joked uncomfortably. "I haven't played in a long time. It's good to get the chance to come here, play a couple of games, and have a laugh." But Castiel was still of the opinion that Dean was a good
player, even when he managed to win the second game by a mere three points.

"Beginners luck!" Dean grinned as he gave him a congratulatory clap on the shoulder. "But really, you're a quick learner. You'll be whipping my ass in no time!"

"You're a good teacher, Dean."

Dean flushed. "I don't know about that, man," he said, rubbing the back of his neck. He did this whenever he felt uncomfortable, Castiel had noticed, and he did every time Castiel tried to tell him he was good at something.

"Did you let me win that last game?" Castiel asked one they were back in the car.

Dean looked over at him, not sure what to say. "Was it really that obvious?" he settled for.

Castiel smiled. "I'd still have had fun even if you beat me," he said.

"Yeah, well, I guess I just didn't want you to feel like you sucked at it," Dean mumbled.

"It was my first time, Dean," Castiel reminded him. "I didn't expect to be good at it."

"You also didn't expect you'd have fun," Dean smirked.

"Well given your usual idea of fun you can't deny I had good reason to be a little wary."

"I suppose so. I'm sorry I'm such a shit friend, Cas."

"You're not a shit friend, Dean," Castiel said sincerely. He paused before he continued, wondering if it would be too much. "You're the best friend I've ever had."

A thick lump formed itself in Dean's throat, and though he wanted to tell Cas that he could have far better friends than Dean, he couldn't get the words out.

"Everyone has their own problems to work their way through," Castiel went on, not realising the effect his words were having on Dean.

"Yeah," Dean agreed hoarsely, thinking that he'd never tried to work his problems through. He'd created more problems for himself while solving his brother's, and then refused help to solve his own. His head had been stuck in the sand these last few years, if he was being honest.

"Pizza?" Dean asked as he drove out of the parking lot.

"Oh, yes please! I'm starving." As if to prove his point, Castiel's stomach let out a low grumble.

Dean chuckled. "I was going to suggest one each, but I think you might need two to yourself. Hey!" he protested when a hand hit him lightly on the thigh. "I'm driving here!"

"And you're being a dick."

"Well that is my middle name," Dean grinned.

"Liar."

* * *

Three hours later two empty pizza boxes lay on the coffee table, and Dean and Cas were sprawled
side by side on the couch. Both were stuffed full, Dean was slightly drunk, and neither could muster the energy to reach for the remote to put the TV off. Instead, the title screen music of the DVD was playing on loop.

"That was a truly dreadful film," Castiel complained.

"Yeah," Dean agreed.

"I mean, fifty tonne rocks don't move on their own."

"Dude, I think you might have just quoted the film."

"I did?"

"Yeah."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't be. I know one line I'll be quoting at every opportunity—"

"Oh, no, Dean!" Castiel protested weakly. "Please, don't." Dean just chuckled in response so Cas was content just to lie there, eyes closed and stomach bloated. "Dean?" he said a minute later.

"Cas?"

"Can we go bowling again sometime?"

"Sure," Dean smiled. "When I've got the money."

"I'm sorry," Castiel said after a moment. "But I am trying, Dean."

"Hey, I know you are, Cas. It's not easy finding work right now, so don't stress it too much."

Castiel nodded. "I just don't want you to think I'm taking everything you've done for me for granted."

"Cas, you find a different way to thank me every day – I don't think you take it all for granted. I know how grateful you are. I took you out today to take your mind off it, anyway."

"You did?"

"Yeah. I figured you could use a bit of cheering up."

Castiel let his head roll to the side until it was resting on Dean's shoulder. "Thank you."

"Don't mention it, Cas."

"It might be the nicest thing anyone's ever done for me."

"Oh, dude, come on!" Dean groaned as he sat up and turned to look at Cas. "You're serious," he stated when Castiel frowned at him.

"Yes. We weren't really allowed to play like the other children did."

"Your dad's a dick."

"'He's still my father, Dean."
"He's a poor excuse for one."

"I'm not disagreeing, Dean, but can you please refrain from insulting him? At least to my face."

"Yeah, sure. Sorry."

Castiel didn't say anything, and Dean yawned. "Well I'm beat," he declared. He stood up and leaned over Cas, pressing a kiss into his ruffled hair. "Good night, Cas."

Castiel watched Dean's retreating back, quite sure that it was nothing other than a perfectly innocent (if drunken) gesture of friendship, but wishing is meant something more.
Chapter 13

Dean had tried to call his brother before he went to bed the night before, but it had been Jess that answered so he'd had to endure another lecture about being a shit-head brother (his words) and a useless, waste-of-space layabout (her words). She was a massive pain in Dean's ass, though he was grateful that she'd stood by Sam when he went off the rails for a while. She'd even forgiven him for the whole Ruby fiasco. Dean may not get on with her, but he admired that about her – if he was ever in a relationship and his girlfriend cheated on him he honestly doubted if he'd be able to forgive and move on. Sometimes he'd find himself drinking alone and wondering when his brother was going to grow the balls to pop the question. Yet even after all Dean had done for Sam during his downward spiral, Jess *still* talked down to him like he was a child.

Dean was still in a foul mood over it when he awoke the next morning, when poor Cas had to bear the brunt of his irritability. He'd calmed down a bit during his shift, but busying himself with work hadn't helped to clear his head as much as he'd hoped. By the time he was putting the finishing touches on the engine of a 1995 Ford Explorer, he had only managed to push it to the back of his mind and was eager to be done with the entire day and relax at home with Cas and a beer.

"That should do it," he said with a sigh.

Pulling himself out of the engine, he grabbed a dirty cloth and wiped the worst of the grime from his hands, tossing the rag to the ground decisively.

He brought the hood down with a gentle *thud* and slid himself into the driver's seat. When he slipped the key easily into the ignition and turned it, the engine roared to life and, after Dean stopped revving it, settled into a steady purr.

"Perfect," he grinned, feeling at peace for the first time that day.

Another quick turn and the engine fell silent. He dropped the keys back into the outer office and was about to leave when he heard Bobby curse from the other room.

Dean stuck his head round the door of Bobby's office. "Bobby?"

"What?"

"You alright?"

"I'd be better if I had some peace and quiet!"

Dean stepped further into the room, knowing Bobby was all bark and no bite.

Bobby sighed. "It takes a lot out of me to be staring at numbers all night. I'd be fine if I could just get the damn things to tally up."

"You plus or minus this week?" Dean smiled.

"Smartass. How about this – if I'm in the red, I'll take the difference out of your pay check."

"Yeah, sure you will," Dean grinned. "You need anything before I go?"

"What – so you can put in for the extra time? I don't think so," he said gruffly. "Unless you've got a better brain for numbers. I'd take that."
Dean laughed. "Sorry - not me. Good night."

"'Night, boy. You drive safe!"

"Always do!" Dean grinned. He'd taken less than five steps when he turned back. "Bobby?"

"How is it every other employee manages to clock out with a wave and a 'see you tomorrow'?

Dean sat down opposite his boss, who sighed and put his pen down.

"What if I could get you some help balancing the books?"

Bobby leaned back in his chair. "I'm listening."

* * *

"No," Castiel said resolutely.

"What do you mean, no?"

"No, Dean. I do not need your charity. I am perfectly capable of finding a job by myself."

"I'm not saying you can't -- just that you could do this while you're looking, and you'd be doing Bobby a massive favor --"

"That he'd be paying me for --"

"— that he'll pay you for your time! It's not even a real job -- I mean, it's not like you need to be in the office nine to five. It would just a bit of help."

Castiel eyed Dean carefully. "And exactly whose idea was it?"

"Both of ours."

Castiel cocked his head to the side sceptically.

"Bobby said he needed some help, and then I thought maybe you could do your selfless religious thing and help him out. Bobby's the one who's insisting on paying you! Apparently he doesn't do 'slave labor'," Dean said, making exaggerated air quotes.

Castiel's brow furrowed as he considered it. Dean had done enough for him, but accepting would be useful experience in his hunt for a job.

"I mean, come on -- I know you're good with numbers," Dean pressed. "You do those Sudoku things in minutes!"

"It's hardly the same thing, Dean," Castiel said, but he looked contemplative.

"And maybe I'll even let you pay me back for those clothes you keep bugging me about." He tacked on an overly dramatic sigh for effect.

Castiel nodded eventually. "I suppose I could do it, but only as a favor to your boss."

"You've made his day, Cas," Dean sang as he dug out his cell to call Bobby.

* * *
The next day Cas stood wide-eyed in Bobby's office, surveying the several piles of documents piled up to two feet high and balanced precariously on desk corners, staplers, and various other uneven surfaces.

Dean clapped him on the shoulder. "Not quite as easy a job as you'd hoped!" he exclaimed. "I'll just, eh..." He disappeared and left Castiel staring sadly at the beckoning paperwork. He started on the nearest pile, intending to skip through and see what sort of order everything was in before starting, before realizing that they weren't arranged in any sort of order at all. He sighed.

"How's it going?" Dean asked, poking his head into the room half an hour later.

"It's a mess!" Castiel hissed. "There are papers here from yesterday mixed with those from last year! There are delivery notices mixed up with the invoices, and I don't even know where to begin. This is all your fault," he declared.

"So they're all out of order then?" Dean said sympathetically.

"They can't be out of order if there is no order."

"What are whining about?" Bobby grumbled. "I have a system."

Castiel went red. "I'm sorry, I—"

"Don't get yourself in a knot, boy – I'm just pulling your leg." He cleared his throat. "What do you think? Can we can sort out this mess?"

When Castiel glanced around, gesturing helplessly to the many piles, Bobby cast Dean a surreptitious wink.

"So I guess this is going to take a while, then?" Bobby answered himself.

"Longer if I keep getting interrupted," Castiel complained, looking pointedly at Dean.

"Come on, idjit!" Bobby said loudly. "Back to work. Give the boy some peace."

Once they were out of earshot, Bobby turned to Dean. "That ought to keep him busy for a few weeks – longer if I can persuade him to work half-days. Afternoons, hopefully, because that's when I need a bit of help answering phones."

"Thanks, Bobby," Dean said, clapping the older man on the shoulder.

"Yeah, yeah," Bobby grumbled, trying not to sound too pleased. "Now get back to work."

Dean worked hard all day, losing his shirt before lunch in the sweltering summer heat – it felt like the sweat was pouring off him. His stomach was started to grumble, and he reckoned it must be near lunch time. Well, he'd stop for food once he was finished up here.

"That boy works himself to the bone," Bobby commented to Castiel, looking out the window at him. "You should go out, make sure he stops for lunch."

"Dean, forget to stop for food?" Castiel laughed. "I don't believe it."

"It's happened," Bobby said. "I've lost count of the number of times I've had to drag him away from some car he's working on to remind him to eat."

"So he doesn't eat with the others, then?"
Bobby shook his head. "Dean keeps himself to himself – I reckon he doesn't know the names of any of the other guys in the yard. he only knows mine 'cause my name's on the sign!" He looked over at Castiel. "You should go have lunch with him – remind him to eat."

"We eat together at home all the time," Castiel pointed out. "I think he'd prefer some time away from me."

"Cas," Bobby began, "or... Castiel?"

"Either is fine."

"Cas, in the three years I've had him working here, the past couple of months or so have been the most alive I've seen him. Now I wasn't going to pry – it's none of my business, so long as he gets his work done – but that doesn't mean I didn't worry about him. He wasn't unhappy as such, but I reckon you're a breath of fresh air. You're good for him."

Castiel cocked his head to the side. "Do you really think that?"

"Course I do. Now get out there and make sure he eats something."

When Castiel emerged from the office, he couldn't help but stop and stare at the half-naked Dean. There was something incredibly beautiful about the way his taut muscles moved while he worked, and when he pulled something – a wrench? – from his back pocket, leaving a smudge of grease across the seat of his pants, Castiel felt an uneasy warmth spread through him. Trying his best to quell whatever it was, he approached Dean.

"Dean?" he asked quietly.

"Hmm? Oh, hey Cas. What's up?"

"If you tell me where this café is, I could run and get us some lunch."

"Nah, I'll get it – just let me finish up here, first."

"I could go and be back by the time you've finished."

Dean looked at his watch and then back at Cas. "Alright. It's just round the corner – grab my wallet out of my back pocket, would you?"

Castiel swallowed, gingerly pinching the protruding corner and gently tugging it free.

"Jeez, Cas, grab my ass, why don't you!" Dean joked. "No seriously, man, I'm not gonna break. Were you a master pick-pocket in a past life or something?"

"Yes that sounds exactly like me," Castiel shot back, deadpan.

"Just grab the stupid thing," Dean said. "And get me a cheeseburger and a coke."

Castiel nodded.

"Make it a double cheeseburger and a coke," Dean changed his mind as his stomach growled at him.

"I don't know where you put it all," Castiel chuckled, feeling strangely at ease.

When he returned with their lunch Dean was still buried up to the elbows in the car's engine. Cas grinned. Putting the bag of food down, he crept up to Dean and tucked his wallet back into his
pocket, before slapping it.

Dean jumped and yelped. "What the—" Seeing Castiel's grinning face he relaxed. "Oh, it's just you," he said with a laugh.

Castiel ducked his head as he retrieved the bag of food.

Dean stared at him like he was a riddle to work through, the hint of a smile tugging at the corners of his lips. "Just when I think I've got you figured."

The longer Dean stared at him the longer Castiel had to worry that perhaps that hadn't been the right thing to do, but then Dean slammed the hood down. They ate together, leaning back against the windshield.

Castiel listened intently as Dean told him about what he was doing to the car. He had no doubt that in a few weeks' time he'd actually understand some of what Dean was saying to him, but in the mean time he was content just to listen.

"Dean?" Castiel asked when Dean fell silent.

"Yeah, Cas?"

"I was wondering..." Castiel trailed off uncertainly.

"What?"

"Would you... I mean, how would you feel, about—"

"Well, boys!" Bobby's cheery voice interrupted them. "Having a pleasant afternoon picnic, are we?"

Dean jumped up, ushering Castiel off the front of the car. "I'm just about to get back to—"

"Oh, don't get your panties in a bunch, Winchester – I know you've still got ten minutes left of your lunch break."

"I don't, though," said Castiel quickly. "I should get back to—"

"Nonsense – you're not my employee, Cas. Well, at least not officially. You don't have to stick to an hour."

"All the same..." Castiel hurried back into the office, carrying their trash back with him.

"He's a good 'un," Bobby noted, casting a sideways glance at Dean. "He's lucky he ended up with you."

"Yeah..." Dean said, watching Cas through the office window. Then the second half of Bobby's comment sunk in. "Wait, what?"

"I said he's lucky he ended up with you. Or you with him."

"What's with the look?"

"Nothing, nothing," the older man said, scratching at his beard. "You look happier, is all."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Bobby, what are you getting at?"
Bobby made a dismissive noise and walked away, grumbling, "This is why I stay out of other people's business."

Dean watched his boss leave, feeling slightly unsettled that Bobby had paid enough attention to him to realize that he was happier – he preferred to keep his head down and just get on with things. He brushed the thought away and popped the hood again, keen to fill his mind with engine parts.

By the end of the day he'd forgotten about the exchange with Bobby – a newly discovered oil leak on top of the list of repairs he already had to do had kept him busy for most of the afternoon – but when he was washing up and heard Bobby shouting goodbye to Castiel, it popped right back to the front of his mind because really, it was none of Bobby's damn business where Dean was happy or sad so long as he did his job, and who knew what the old man and Cas were saying about him? He decided not to dwell on it and waved Castiel over.

"Are you nearly ready to go?" Castiel asked.

"Ready and raring," Dean confirmed, and the two started walking towards Deans car. "Listen, did Bobby say anything to you about working hours?"

"You mean that from next week he wants me to start working half days?" Castiel asked, a hint of bitterness in his tone.

"Yeah. You don't sound too impressed by that - most people would love to work half days all the time!"

"But the longer I'm needed here the longer it'll take me to get a job," Castiel protested.

"Hey," Dean said, grabbing his wrist lightly.

Castiel jolted to a stop.

"This is a job. You might not like it, but—"

"It's not the job, Dean," Castiel cut him off.

"Then what is it?"

Castiel stared at the ground sullenly.

"Look, everyone needs a little help now and then. Like when you needed a place to stay?"

"That was different," Castiel said quietly.

"How so?"

"I don't want to talk about it," Castiel said, moving towards the car once again.

Dean stared after him, unable to see what Castiel's problem was. He hurried after him, and once they were in the car, Dean's hand froze on the ignition. "Cas," he said slowly.

"I said I don't want to talk about it."

"No, it's not that," he said, his hand moving to join the other on the wheel. "Just... At lunch, was there something you were going to ask me?"

Castiel stared at him.
"Cas?" Dean frowned when Cas didn't answer. "You okay buddy?"

"What?"

"It sounded like you were going to ask me something before Bobby came over."

"Oh. Oh!" Castiel's eyes widened in comprehension. "It was nothing."

"Out with it, Cas," Dean said.

"How do you do that?"

"You're a terrible liar. And stop changing the subject."

"I was wondering, if perhaps..."

Dean's hands tightened their grip on the wheel; he could feel the nerves rolling off Castiel in waves. He wished he'd put some music when they'd gotten in the car.

"...you could teach me how to drive? If I got my learner's permit," he added hurriedly.

Dean's pulse pounded in his ears and he wiped sweaty palms on his jeans. "No," he said thickly. Suddenly the car, able to carry five people, felt too small for just the two of them. He couldn't breathe. His hand fumbled with the window crank and he rolled down the window, brushed the back of one hand across his brow as he sucked in a breath. "No."

"Oh." Castiel looked disappointed. "No, that's fine—"

"I would if I could, Cas," he said apologetically, "but I just can't, okay?"

"Yes. Of course."

"Cas, I just don't think I'm really the right person to be asking," Dean went on, hating feeling like he was letting Castiel down.

"I understand," Castiel said quietly, not pointing out that Dean was the only person he had to ask.

Castiel couldn't understand, not without knowing the real reason Dean had said no, and Dean couldn't help but feel bad for him, sitting there looking so damn sad that Dean had knocked him back. He gave Bobby a quick wave as he pulled out of the yard.

* * *

Castiel had been quiet ever since they left Bobby's. Despite the fact he had assured Dean that he completely respected his decision, Dean was convinced that he'd hurt Castiel by saying no. When he finished his dinner he let his fork drop to the plate with a clatter, Castiel's eyes immediately looking up at him.

"We should go out tonight," he said. "Celebrate you having got yourself a job of sorts."

"Dean, I don't really think—"

"No. No, Cas – I'm not taking no for an answer. You and me, we're going out."

Castiel didn't seem too enamoured by the idea, but Dean figured that once he got out he might start to enjoy himself.
He left Castiel washing up and went to freshen up. Once he'd brushed his teeth and scrubbed the last of the grease and oil out from under his fingernails, he changed into a snug black v-neck t-shirt and a dark red shirt. He was still rolling the sleeves up when he came to an abrupt halt just inside the living room door.

"Haven't you got anything better to wear than that?" he asked when he saw what Cas was wearing. Castiel looked down at himself. "No?"

Of course he didn't. Dean knew that – he'd been there when they'd gone shopping. "Come here," he said, dragging Castiel down the corridor and into his bedroom.

"What are you doing?"

"Finding you something better to wear than a t-shirt for a band you don't even listen to."

"I— You picked out this t-shirt!" Castiel accused. "You said it would make me look, and I quote, 'cool'. Whatever that's supposed to mean," he muttered under his breath.

But Dean was too busy sliding coat hangers across the rail to rise to the bait.

"Ha!" he exclaimed when he found what he was looking for. Then he pulled out a few more for choice. "Try some of these," he suggested.

"I still don't see what's wrong with what I'm wearing," Castiel grumbled.

"Just try them," Dean said, leaving no room for argument.

Castiel didn't move.

It took Dean a moment to realize that Cas was uncomfortable with the thought of disrobing in the same room. Dean's eyebrows shot up. "Cas, we're both dudes here. Don't make it weird," he grumbled, turning to face the wall.

Behind him there was the noise of fabric being rustled and then a moment of silence before Cas stiffly stated, "Okay."

Dean turned and shook his head immediately. "No. Green is not your colour. Try the grey."

Castiel sighed dramatically. "The AC/DC shirt was grey."

"Name one AC/DC song."

Castiel face screwed up as he thought. "That one about rambling?"

Dean screwed his face up at he tried to work out what song Cas was referring to. "Ramble?" he echoed. Then, "What the— You better not be talking about Ramble On, or so help me—"

"Yes, I think that's the one."

Dean deflated. "That's... That's Zeppelin, dude!" he exclaimed, sounding mildly heartbroken and not even concerned about it. "How do you not know that?"

"Sorry," Castiel shrugged, not looking sorry in the least.

Dean shook his head sadly. "You're a terrible friend," he said deadpan and threw the grey t-shirt at
him. "Try that."

Castiel smiled a little and motioned for Dean to turn around again. Cas needed a music lesson, and he needed one pronto! Movement caught his eye in the mirror and he automatically tracked it, his heart skipping a beat when he saw a pale stretch of skin showing between denim and ruffled cotton. He looked deliberately down at a smear of grease on his shoe and coughed as noisily as he could to cover up the sound of potential nakedness, and he very definitely wasn't going to look again because that had just been weird.

Somehow, his eyes met Castiel's in the mirror. Damn it!

"No," he said, turning round and staring at the front of Cas's t-shirt. It was stupid, but he felt like Cas would know he'd been staring if he looked him in the eye. Not that he'd been staring. He'd only looked. Glanced, even. For a minute—a second. "Try this."

Castiel grabbed the new shirt directly from Dean's hands and turned his back on Dean.

"Oh shit," he said when Cas let him see. Cas looked damn good in blue, and for a moment Dean's words got caught in his throat as he stared. "That's better," he said thickly, and nodded approvingly. "You look... better," he finished lamely.

"Good."

"Yeah. You look good. Clean."

"Clean?" Castiel echoed, unsurely.

"Tidy," he said gruffly. "Whatever, dude. Let's go."

* * *

To Dean's credit he stuck with Cas most of the night but, as usual, was drawn into the cloying action of the pool table and its admirers. It was always the same, Castiel thought, tracing the rim of his empty glass. Dean was an experienced player and the teenagers Dean was currently hustling out of their money were drunk and distracted by their girlfriends. It wasn't all Dean's fault. Castiel was perfectly dreadful as a 'wingman' and he hadn't the first clue how to play pool. Watching Dean had only taught him that you hit balls and make lewd remarks to throw off the competition. Or maybe that was flirting. Castiel would have been content to sit quietly with Dean while they poked fun at each other, but when Dean stepped into the bar it was clear: he had to be doing something.

Castiel turned his attention to the rows of bottles behind the bar, only able to identify one or two. He accidentally caught the bartender's eye and the man approached, asking "Another?"

Cas pushed his empty glass towards the bartender and shook his head. "No, thank you."

"I'll take one," said a voice from on Castiel's left.

He turned and saw large green eyes flecked with brown, framed in long dark eyelashes. Castiel barely caught himself from falling off his barstool in the other direction.

"Snuck up on you, did I?" the man laughed. "Sorry, man. I didn't mean to freak you out."

His cheeks had a sprinkling of freckles across high cheekbones, and his eyes crinkled cheerfully. Damn, the man was beautiful. Castiel's heart began to race and he automatically glanced behind him for an escape route. Dean was nowhere to be seen. He tried to swallow his panic and turned back,
folding his hands onto the tacky surface of the bar and studying them intently.

"You drinking alone?"

Castiel glanced sideways at the newcomer. He was still smiling slightly and his mouth looked pouty.

"N-no. I'm with my, uh, Dean," Castiel motioned towards the pool table, where Dean was still obscured by the throng of tipsy players.

"Oh yeah. I get it. It's rough when they bring you out and then find something else to do, huh?" He nodded towards the pool table. "I don't really get the appeal, myself. Drinking seems like a better way to lose money," he added, winking.

Castiel felt his heart pound even harder and he clenched his hands to keep them from shaking. "Excuse me." Castiel slipped off his stool and sidled past tables and chairs until he reached the toilets.

Eyes flicking over to see Dean still engrossed in his game of pool he pushed the door open and ducked inside.

When he reached the bright fluorescent sanctuary of the toilet, he felt foolish. What was wrong with him? There was no reason for him to be acting like this. He ran cold water in the sink and washed his hands in the cold water far more thoroughly than was necessary. Once the last of the soap had swirled down the drain he cupped his hands under the tap and splashed his face.

The door opened behind him, letting in the din of the bar.

Castiel splashed himself with another handful of water. When he looked up, he saw the man from the bar in the reflection of the mirror. "Hello again." Droplets of water dripped from his face into the porcelain sink.

"I just wanted to check that you're okay," he said, vaguely apologetic. "I really didn't mean to freak you out. I just..." The man shrugged.

Cas took a deep breath and squared his shoulders before turning to face him. "No. It's fine. I... haven't been out much lately."

He smiled. "It's kinda loud, right? You wanna go somewhere quieter?" he asked, taking a step towards the sink.

Castiel was once again drawn to the man's eyes. "No. I'm fine."

The other man reached behind him and Castiel pressed himself up against the sink, breath caught in his throat as the other man pressed against him, his gaze dropping to the man's lips; thin and pale.

As soon as the pressure was there it was gone again, and a paper towel was being offered to him. He took a deep breath.

"Your face is wet."

"I know," Castiel replied, dapping the paper down across his face but almost afraid to blink because the other man was still right there.

"So look, uh, I've been out of the game for a while. How about we go back out there and start over. Maybe let me buy you a drink?"

"I was just about to leave, actually."
"Well, I could leave with you, if you want some company. Maybe find a way to make your Dean a little jealous, no?"

Cas could feel the sweat prickling at his scalp as he pivoted towards the door. "I really don't think that's a good idea."

When he was close enough, he backed into the door and forced it open, rushing back into the darkness of the bar and bumping into two people in his rush to get outside. Just as he was about to clear the last table, a hand gripped his forearm and spun him around.

Castiel kept moving backwards, pulling the stranger with him as he tried to wrench his arm free. "Let me go!" his plea was swallowed by the noise in the bar.

He could feel the cool outside air tickling his ankles from behind and his vision began to darken.

Dean appeared out of nowhere. "Hey!" he called out, his voice cutting through the bar like a gunshot. "What the fuck is your problem?"

"None of your business."

"Like hell it's not!" He turned to Cas. "Is this guy hassling you?"

"I..."

The stranger released Castiel's arm to stand square with Dean.

"And who the fuck are you? His boyfriend? Back off!"

Dean lunged at the stranger and shoved him backwards through the doors. Castiel followed, disoriented, just in time to see the stranger swing a punch at Dean's head.

"Stop!"

Dean paused, clenched fist raised ready to strike back in retaliation, and looked over at Cas. Castiel shook his head, silently pleading with him to just walk away. The man from the bar ran at him, a blow to the gut knocking the air out of Dean's lungs, and he fell to the ground.

"Stop it!" he shouted again.

The stranger straightened his jacket. "You ought to keep your boyfriend on a leash," he said to Cas as he headed back into the bar.

Castiel's blood ran cold. "I'm sorry," Castiel apologised, not really sure what for. He looked down at Dean where he was still sitting on the cold concrete trying to catch his breath. "I'm so sorry." He walked backwards until he stumbled, then turned and fled. He blinked back tears as he ran, not knowing where he was heading – except straight to Hell.
Castiel ran until his thighs burned, coming to an ungraceful stop and throwing his arms around a lamp post for support while he caught his breath.

He was on his own again.

He didn't know how long he stood there, a part of him wishing that he'd hear Dean's voice telling him to get in the car. He wondered what Dean would be thinking right now. Would he feel disgusted? Betrayed? He hoped that at the very least, Dean wouldn't regret saving his life. It sounded clichéd, but the past couple of months had been the best of his life.

He shivered. He didn't even have a coat with him, and it was forecast to rain tonight.

A part of him had grown to believe that perhaps he could start over - that perhaps God had answered his prayers and granted him a second chance. He'd grown so comfortable with Dean that the prospect of spending another night wherever he could find a place to lie down left him feeling lost and unprepared.

He started to walk, tucking his hands under his armpits to keep them warm.

Forty minutes later he arrived at the old industrial estate on the edge of town. He'd stayed there before, in one of the many buildings earmarked for destruction. They had been left standing, however, because although the land had planning permission for over seventy new houses the economy had slumped. But now the economy was getting back on track, and as he surveyed the flattened ground in front of him he wondered how he could have missed the news that they had now been destroyed.

* * *

With nowhere else in the area to offer shelter he'd turned back to the town. It was getting late and he was starting to feel tired, so when he walked through a park and saw an empty bench he took it. It was hard and uncomfortable beneath him, and it took him several minutes to find a position that wouldn't cause some part of his body to ache.

Castiel watched his breath mist in the air, seeming to hang there for a second before dissipating. He was so cold.

Time had no meaning as he lay there, but though he was tired sleep evaded him until he was numb enough that he could no longer feel the cold. He wondered what Dean was doing at that moment. It was late, so he'd probably be tucked up in bed, warm and snoring, dreaming about something nice. Strippers and beer, maybe. And pie. He couldn't forget the pie. Perhaps it was apple pie. It had been the first one he'd made for Dean. Or cherry. Or pecan. And so he began listing pie fillings in his head as some might count sheep.
He wasn't sure how long it had taken him to drift off, but he was woken after what didn't feel like very long by rain falling on his face. It took him a moment or two to realise what it was, and once he had he dragged himself up off the bench and hurried to find somewhere that would provide even minimal shelter.

He found a doorway just as the rain really started to chuck down that, if he sat upright, would at least keep his head dry. Again it wasn't comfortable - the concrete step a literal pain in the ass - but at least it was slightly dry.

* * *

"You can't sleep there."

He'd slumped in his sleep and pain shot through his shoulder as he straightened up.

"I said you can't sleep there," the police officer repeated.

"I heard you," Cas growled, angrier than he'd meant to sound. He was just so tired. He screwed his eyes shut and recoiled as a flashlight was pointed at his face, covering his face protectively with his arm.

"Are you drunk?"

"No."

"High?"

He lowered his arm slightly. "What?"

"High," the officer repeated. "Have you taken drugs?"

"No."

"Then get up and go home."

Home. For a brief time that word had had a meaning for him. Castiel hauled himself to his feet and shoved his hands in his pockets, trudging down the street with no idea where he was going. It had been nice to have a home again, even for a while. The key to Dean's apartment was cool against his fingers, and he pulled it out to look at it. If he was truly leaving he should take his belongings.

Grateful that it had stopped raining while he'd slept he peered up at street signs, trying to work out where he was. Choosing a direction he began to walk, hoping that he was heading in the vague direction of somewhere familiar.

* * *

It was almost 4am when Castiel made his way up the three flights of stairs to Dean's front door, not wanting to take the elevator. He grimaced as he turned the key and opened the door, every creak sounding ten times louder in the silence. He didn't want to have to face Dean. He didn't know what to say - how to explain himself. He just wanted to be gone. He tiptoed into the living room, hand reaching in the darkness for the light switch and attention focused solely on the corridor behind him, fearful of waking Dean up.

"Where the hell have you been?" Dean's voice exclaimed sharply in front of him.

Castiel jumped back, shoulder hitting the wall painfully. His eyes took their time adjusting to the
harshness of the light and he didn't move.

"Cas?" Dean tried again, tone softer than before.

"Just... walking," he said quietly.

"Walking?" Dean echoed sceptically.

Castiel shuffled uneasily under Dean's gaze. This was exactly what he had been hoping to avoid. He and Dean simply stood there, looking at each other for several long moments; Cas unable to hold Dean's gaze for longer than a few seconds at a time.

"Cas, what happened back there?" Dean asked softly, frowning as he moved towards him.

Castiel took a breath. He'd come back with the intention of collecting his things, but if he was ever going to trust Dean then this was the time.

"Are you alright?"

"I just came back to get my things," Cas heard himself saying.

Dean stopped, caught of guard. "Where..." He licked his lips. "Where are you going?"

"Dean, please – I don't want a fight," Castiel pleaded, taking a step backwards. It was dark in the hallway, and somehow that felt safer right now.

"Neither do I, Cas, I just want to know where you're going. I thought you didn't have anywhere else you could go?"

"I don't," he whispered.

"Then where the hell are you going?"

"I don't know," Castiel shrugged, eyes brimming with unshed tears. He hadn't known where he was going when he left home, either.

"Cas," Dean whispered softly. "Come here."

Castiel's treacherous feet took a couple of steps towards his outstretched hand. "I..." He looked everywhere but at Dean, trying to work out what the right thing to say or do would be. His eyes locked onto the sofa bed, pulled out and made up for him. _Dean_ had done that. Dean had had faith that Castiel would return. He looked at Dean, who raised his eyebrows questioningly.

"Talk to me," Dean pleaded, his sincerity obvious.

His hands clenched and unclenched at his sides. "I'm not like you," he started hesitantly.

"I know."

"No, I mean... You pick up women and you go home with them."

"Cas, if you don't want to pick up chicks that's cool. I'm not gonna judge you for it."

Dean was trying. God, Dean was trying. He tugged at his collar, feeling a hot flush come over him. "I don't look at women — No. I don't think of women that way."
"So, what? You're just... not into sex? Like, at all?"

"I think about sex," Castiel insisted.

"Well, good. That's healthy. Not that it would be unhealthy if you didn't, I mean I know that some people—"

"With men!" Castiel blurted out before slapping a hand across his mouth.

Dean's eyes went wide.

"You..."

Dean waved a vague hand at him and Castiel had no idea what that was supposed to mean.

"With men?"

Castiel couldn't breathe. He nodded once, sharply.

"Oh."

Oh. *Oh.* What did 'oh' mean? Castiel pulled at his collar again, feeling lightheaded and a little sick.

"So you're... gay?"

Castiel wanted to roll his eyes, but he couldn't tear his gaze from Dean. What was so difficult to understand about him being a sick, twisted, disgusting pervert? He wished Dean would just tell him to leave already instead of drawing it out.

Dean's mouth opened and closed several times, before he said, "Sorry I took you to a strip club with chicks."

Castiel must have misheard him. "You're... sorry?"

"Yeah. I mean if it's not your thing, then... What did you think I was gonna say?"

"That... That I should..." Castiel started shaking. He was cold and he was tired and Dean didn't hate him. *Dean didn't hate him.* His breathing was fast and shallow as he gasped Dean's name. "Dean?"

Dean moved towards him and without thinking Cas opened up his arms, latching onto his friend tightly as Dean pulled him into a hug.

"Cas, you're my friend," Dean said softly, rubbing a soothing hand up and down his back. "Or at least, I *thought* we were friends. Why do you think that'd change just 'cause you prefer guys to women?"

Castiel didn't answer, instead burying his face in Dean's shirt.

"That's why your father kicked you out, isn't it?" Dean breathed softly, more of a statement than a question.

Castiel mumbled an affirmative.

"Cas, you're my friend," he repeated in a whisper. "And I'm not going to kick you out, you hear me?"
Castiel nodded against his shoulder, and Dean's shirt felt a little damp against his skin.

"And your dad shouldn't have, either."

"He did what he believed was right—"

"Don't defend him, Cas." Dean stepped back, keeping a firm grip on Castiel's shoulders as he looked him in the eye. "Look where you ended up."

"That was my weakness, Dean," Castiel insisted strongly.

Dean shook his head. "No, he abandoned you. And no dad should abandon their kid," he said fiercely. Castiel moved out of Dean's embrace. "I know it's wrong, but... I can't change the way I feel."

"It's not wrong, Cas. You shouldn't have to change."

"But in God's eyes—"

"Cas," Dean cut him off, and sighed. "Look, I don't do religion – I don't believe in God, and I don't believe in Heaven or angels or any of that other crap. But you do, and I respect that, but Cas... Can you honestly tell me that your God would want you to lie about who you are and be miserable for your entire life? 'Cause I just don't buy that."

Castiel looked at Dean as he allowed his words to sink in. All his life he'd been raised to think that the only good people in the world were the ones who obeyed and worshipped God, but then they'd turned their backs on him and he'd met Dean – Dean, who might be reckless and a drunk, with had a tendency to act first and think later, and who revealed a violent streak when you crossed him or his family out of some twisted sense of loyalty, but who was also patient, and despite not ever wanting to talk about his feelings was kind and caring, and absolutely the most decent man Castiel had ever met.

Dean, taking Castiel's extended silence to mean he still wasn't convinced, tried again. "Cas, the way I see it, as long as you're not hurting anyone, God shouldn't have a problem with whatever – or whoever – you do."

Castiel let out a sound that was a cross between a laugh and a sob, and for a moment Dean thought he was going to cry.

But then Cas looked at him with a small smile and nodded, because he was sure that only Dean could turn a motivational speech into a sex talk. "Thank you, Dean," he said, eyes closed as he tried to focus on the heat of Dean's palms through his shirt, because if it wasn't for Dean's hands on him he didn't think he'd be able to stand up. Tonight was just too much, and he still couldn't think straight, and he was so cold he couldn't feel his skin. It felt like Dean's hands were all that was stopping him from either falling down or floating away.

"Alright. Now if you think I've got a problem, just ask me about it."

Castiel nodded, still unable to believe that he hadn't passed out somewhere and that this was actually happening.

"Okay, good. 'Cause I've got a something I want to say to you," Dean said seriously.

"Alright," Castiel replied warily.
"Please don't stay out half the night again without telling me where you are."

Castiel stared at him. "Dean, were you... worried about me?"

"No," Dean denied gruffly, his cheeks tinged pink.

"Because if you were, thank you," Cas smiled.

Dean smirked reluctantly. "Alright, alright – now what did I tell you about chick flick moments?"

They stared at each other for a long moment before Cas finally said, "I'm really tired."

"Same."

Dean hugged Cas one last time before going to bed himself, and as Castiel tucked himself in between the sheets he felt completely relaxed and safe for the first time in far too long, and he slept better than he had in a long time.

* * *

He tucks himself back into his pants and washes his hands in the sink. When he glances up at himself in the mirror, Dean is staring back at him.

"You shouldn't have to change," Dean tells him.

His breath gets caught in his throat as Dean steps closer, and he turns to face him.

"Dean, I——"

Lips silence him.

His eyes flutter closed as he kisses back, fingers curling through Dean's belt loops to keep him close.

Firm hands grip his hips as soft lips trail kisses down his neck, the short stubble along Dean's jaw scratching at his skin. It took him a moment to realise that the soft whimpers and needy groans he heard were his own.

"Dean..." he breathes.

A knee nudges his legs apart, and a thigh slips between his parted legs. The gentle pressure against his cock has his hips moving forward, searching for something more, but all he gets is a warm, breathy chuckle in his ear.

"Dean..."

* * *

Cas woke up the next morning with Dean's name on his tongue. As he pulled the covers over his head to block out the harshness of the sunlight he hated himself – for drinking too much the night before, for running away, for failing to live up to the expectations of those around him. But Dean hadn't turned his back on him, so if Dean didn't hate him then why couldn't he stop hating himself? Castiel wanted so badly to believe that Dean was right, and that there was nothing wrong with him. Last night it had been so easy to believe him, but now it was morning the seed of doubt was growing in the back of his mind.

No.
Dean had no reason to lie to him. If Dean had faith in him, then he could have faith in Dean. There was nothing wrong with him.

"There's nothing wrong with me. There's nothing wrong with me. There's nothing wrong with me," he muttered to himself like a mantra as he got out of bed.

That's when he saw the glass of water and two small white pills sitting on the table next to a scrap of paper.

*I don't know how much you drank last night but if you've got a hangover this will help.*

– D

He took the tablets appreciatively, feeling guilty that Dean would be at work for it had been almost half past four in the morning when they'd finally gone to bed, which meant that Dean was going to be running on three hours sleep at the most and it was all his fault. If he'd only had the strength to stand up for himself, instead of running away like a coward... He sighed. Why had Dean even bothered to wait up for him?

*Because he cares,* a small voice inside him said. A voice which Castiel immediately dismissed by thinking, *not the way I want him to.*

He buried his head in his pillow as he realised that he couldn't keep ignoring his feelings for Dean. Dean who had saved him, given him a roof over his head, found him a job, and who saw something in him worth looking out for. It would be so much easier to not be attracted to Dean if he was a jerk, he lamented to himself. But Dean was kind and caring and handsome, and every time he thought *this is Dean's limit – this is the point at which I'll have to move on* – he was proven wrong. He looked over at the clock for the first time, shocked to realise that it was nearly lunch time. Dean would be back soon to take him down to Bobby's.

He hurried down the corridor to the bathroom and ran the shower while he brushed his teeth, his stomach grumbling in protest at the lack of breakfast. He ran a quick hand over his face, deciding that he really didn't have time to shave. It would only be Bobby and Dean who saw him anyway, because none of the other mechanics came into the office. He hissed when he jumped into the shower and the hot water scalded his skin, and fumbled desperately for the knob that would add some cold water to the spray.

As he washed himself, he closed his eyes and imagined his own hands were Dean's – stroking him and touching him in all the ways he'd dreamt of last night, when it had been Dean pressing up against him in the toilets.

He'd been in less than five minutes when he heard the front door slam shut and Dean's voice calling him.

"Shower!" he shouted loudly.

Dean opened the door a crack; just enough to speak through. "You about done in there? I brought lunch."

"Nearly," Castiel answered.

"I'll get your bed tidied up," he said, and shut the door again.

"Don't bother! I can—" He sighed. "Do that," he finished to himself.
He hung his head under the spray in shame as he wrapped his fingers round his cock and stroked quickly.

He groaned Dean's name as he came, leaning against the wall until the warm water ran cold, silently rebuking himself while mentally apologising to Dean, and to his father, and to God, until another bang on the door startled him.

"You coming?"

"Yes," Castiel croaked. He cleared his throat. "Yes! I'll be out in a moment."

Castiel shakily stepped out of the shower as Dean's footsteps retreated.

"I thought you'd fallen asleep in there!" Dean joked once Castiel appeared in the kitchen.

Castiel shook his head, quietly eating the sandwich Dean had brought back for him.

Dean narrowed his eyes. "You feeling okay?"

Castiel nodded.

"Tired?"

"Not as much as you," Castiel pointed out as Dean yawned.

"Nah, I'm used to it – I have this thing about strange beds, so if I go home with a chick the night before I usually don't get much sleep."

A bitter feeling of jealousy mixed with longing reared its ugly head in Castiel, and he pushed his half-eaten lunch to the side.

Dean frowned. "You're not hungry?"

"Not really."

"Can I…" he pointed towards the sandwich and Castiel nodded. "Not going to let good food go to waste," he proclaimed with his mouth full. "I told Bobby you had a late one last night – he says you don't have to go in if you're not feeling up to it."

"I am not going to forgo my obligations just because I stayed out too late the night before," Castiel insisted.

Dean shrugged. "I wish he'd have offered me the day off."

But after two hours of staring, bleary-eyed, at page after page of numbers Castiel was beginning to wish he'd never gotten out of bed.

"Did the two of you have a fight?" Bobby asked loudly as he entered the office.

"Pardon?"

"You and Dean – did you two fight about something?"

"No."

"Oh. Just he looks right miserable today, and so do you."
"We both just had a really late night last night," Castiel explained.

Bobby sat down across from Castiel and pulled the papers out of his hands. "You don't know me, but if you want to talk I'm not going to judge you," he said softly.

Castiel tensed, and could see that Bobby had noticed. "Thank you, but no. I'm fine. Really."

"Now I know there's something wrong – that's what Dean says when there's something bothering him and he's bottling it up."

Castiel looked at him. "Is it?" he asked.

"You haven't noticed?"

Castiel shook his head.

"You've been around that boy too long. You might think he's the strong one, taking care of you the way he does, but I reckon he needs for you to take care of him just as much," Bobby said. He cleared his throat awkwardly. "Anyway, I can see you've been making a dent in the paperwork. Keep working hard!" Bobby moved to clap him on the shoulder but paused, and gave it a gentle squeeze instead before he left.

* * *

At the end of the day Dean hovered awkwardly at the door to the office, not saying anything, and it took Cas a moment to register his presence.

"Are you ready to go?"

"Yeah. If you're not finished I can wait—"

"No," Castiel said, standing up. "I can pick this up tomorrow."

"Are you sure?"

Castiel looked at Dean, who was looking around Bobby's office as if he'd never seen it before. As if he was avoiding Castiel's gaze.

"Yes."

"Okay."

He followed Dean over to the car, waving to Bobby as they crossed the yard. He hadn't really seen much of Dean that day - after lunch Dean had wanted to get back to work pretty quickly and Cas had been stuck in the office all afternoon. It was boring work, and he'd been longing to stretch his legs, but he still wasn't one hundred percent sure where he stood with Dean so had wanted to avoid any awkwardness in front of Dean's colleagues.

The drive home was loud; the music playing at levels that would make any attempts at conversation difficult. Castiel took the hint.

By the time Dean pulled up outside his apartment block Castiel's head was thumping, and he let out quiet sigh of relief when the cassette player fell silent. The elevator felt smaller than normal, more cramped even with just the two of them in it, and Castiel pressed himself into one corner as they were jolted up to the third floor.
Once inside, Castiel moved on automatic. They were running low on groceries so dinner would be something simple - poached eggs on toast, he decided upon seeing the contents of the cupboards.

Sound from the television drifted through and Castiel didn't realise his irritability was manifesting itself in his actions until Dean appeared.

"Are you trying to break my cupboards?" he asked, but his joke fell flat with the concern creeping into his voice.

"Sorry."

"Are you okay?"

"Fine," Castiel muttered. He was, wasn't he? He still had a roof over his head, which was... Unexpected.

Warmth spread through his shoulder as Dean's hand touched him, and he subconsciously leaned into the touch. It seemed that almost immediately Dean took his hand away.

"Why don't I do this?" Dean asked. "And you can go watch TV?"

"I want to do this," Cas said, even though it wasn't true. He ran a hand through his hair. He was tired and taking out his insecurities on Dean. Sitting down would be nice, but wouldn't earn him his keep. "I want to do something." Something to take his mind of the fact that Dean knew his secret and didn't seem to care, because everyone cared; everyone thought it was disgusting and wrong.

"Alright," Dean said, retreating back to the living room.

Castiel closed his eyes and exhaled, because Dean had done exactly what he had wanted him to do and yet a part of him wished that he'd stayed and pushed Cas just a little more.

The smell of burning interrupted the flow of his thoughts, and it took him a moment longer to realise it was the toast. Dean's toaster was a piece of shit and he yanked the plug out of the wall before he electrocuted himself unjamming the blackened bread with a knife. Thankfully Dean was too busy shouting at football players who couldn't hear him to notice the smell, so he simply threw the burnt toast in the trash and dropped two fresh slices of bread in the toaster.

The second attempt went much better than the first, so a few minutes later he carried two plates of food through to the sitting room. Dean started moving the cushions next to him to make room for Cas, but after handing one plate to Dean without a word he sat on the other sofa.

Dean's expression turned guarded for a moment, but he passed the remote over to Castiel. It looked like a peace offering, but Cas just shook his head.

"Are w— Are you alright?"

"I'm tired," Castiel said, which wasn't exactly a lie.

"If you want an early night you can take my bed, and I'll sleep out here."

Dean's tone was cautious, and Castiel irrationally wondered how many times a former lover had banished him to the sofa. It was an absurd thought of a man who favoured one-night-stands. But the offer was tempting...

"Maybe," he said. "And only if you're sure."
"Yeah, dude, go for it."

They ate in silence after that, both occasionally glancing unnoticed at the other. After an hour of staring numbly at the television screen and not taking anything in, Castiel took their dishes through to the kitchen and washed them up. He stared for a long moment at the knife in his hand, eyeing his reflection distorted by the water on the blade. Nothing felt real. The whole day had felt like a dream that he couldn't be sure wasn't a nightmare.

He left them dishes to drip dry and padded back to the living room.

"I think I will take your bed," he yawned. "For tonight."

"Okay. 'Night."

He noticed Dean turn the volume down and was grateful. In less than five minutes he was ready for bed, and sank into Dean's bed with a sigh. It had been a long time since he'd last slept in a proper bed, and though it was nice it did feel a little weird that he was in Dean's bed. After a moment he reached for Dean's clock, noting the time change to 19:37 as he turned the alarm off so he wasn't awoken too early. He settled down again and when he turned over he got a whiff of Dean off the covers he smiled.

He was asleep by the time the clock read 19:38.

* * *

At some point he woke, bleary-eyed, to find the room in darkness and a shadowy figure sneaking around the room.

"Dean?" he mumbled sleepily, fumbling for the bedside lamp.

"Shit," Dean whispered. "I didn't mean to wake you. I needed my clothes."

Castiel flinched as he found the switch and the light hit his eyes, and it took a moment for them to adjust.

"Did you sleep okay?"

"Until now."

"Sorry."

Castiel squinted at Dean, who seemed to be staring at him. He glanced down at himself, and the cover thrown back to the waist. Dean's room was a lot warmer than the living room. He pulled the cover up to his chin.

"I'll see you at lunch," Dean said quietly, backing out of the room. "Go back to sleep."

Castiel switched the lamp off with pleasure and rolled over, sleep claiming him again almost instantly.

* * *

When Dean came home at lunch he paused before opening the front door, hand clenching the handle.

Cas was being weird.
Not that he could blame him. Dean didn't think he'd be too happy if he'd been boxed into a corner and forced to out himself - not that he swung that way - but then shouldn't Cas be *happy* that Dean wasn't a homophobic douche?

He opened the door a little too roughly and stepped inside.

"I'm back!"

Cas didn't answer, but Dean could hear noise from the TV. He walked through to the kitchen to find soup simmering on the cooker. He dished himself up a bowlful, grabbed a couple of slices of bread, and joined Castiel in the living room.

"Hey."

Finally Castiel acknowledged his presence, looking up at him and saying, "Hello."

Dean hesitated before sitting down next to him, careful to leave a decent amount of space between them.

"How was work?"

Dean smirked at his lunch, because that was such a couple-y thing to say. *Hey honey, how was your day?* 'He tore off a chunk of bread and dunked it in his soup, wondering why he was casting Cas in the role of his wife. "Same as usual. People needing us to fix their cars because they can't be bothered learning basic maintenance." He ate the piece of bread in his hand and looked at Cas. "Of course, I can't complain - they keep me in a job. The soup's good."

"Good."

Dean eyed the space between them as he ate, wondering when the hell he and Cas got to being comfortable in each other's personal space and missing that aspect of their friendship.

"So, uh, what did you get up to this morning?"

"I made soup," Castiel said.

"Ah. Yeah. It's good soup."

"You said that already."

"Yeah. Right. Well it is."

"Thank you."

"So what's this?" he asked, nodding at the TV.

"Some rubbish movie about—"

"Is that a shark or an octopus?" Dean exclaimed as a woman was eaten by a bad CG monster.

"I believe they're calling it a shartopus."

"Dude, do you make a habit out of watching crappy, low-budget TV movies when I'm at work?"

Castiel shrugged. "It's that or soap operas," he said lightly.
Dean pulled a face. "Well then, I think you made the right choice. But it would still be nice if the people in these things could actually act."

Beside him Castiel huffed a short laugh.

Dean smiled, because if Cas was still laughing with him then he couldn't be *that* pissed at him.
Castiel gave Dean space for the next few days, consciously putting distance between them and making a point of doing other things. He ate his lunch alone in the office, and he went to the library when Dean was at home the morning of his half-day and spent over an hour browsing the shelves, despite being in the middle of reading one of Dean's, before coming home with a library card application form and the intention of changing the address on his state ID.

Dean also seemed to be ignoring him, not striking up meaningless conversations about football scores or his work at the garage like he usually would, and turning the music volume up in the car an extra couple of notches.

He saw an ad in the paper one day from a woman offering psychic readings, and he found himself wishing that he could read minds – or at least one mind. Everything was hanging by a thread just as he felt like he was finally settling in. It didn't help either that Bobby, despite his insistence that he didn't meddle in his employees' personal lives, kept asking if he and Dean were having "difficulties".

He tried not to let it bother him, reminding himself that Dean had hugged him - not hit him - when he found out he was attracted to men, but the longer Dean seemed to hold a part of himself back the more Castiel started to worry that maybe Dean wasn't as okay with him as he made out to be. The thought of being made homeless again kept him awake at night, and he'd often be sitting bleary-eyed in the kitchen drinking his third cup of coffee when Dean woke up.

The lack of sleep affected his concentration, meaning that he was unproductive and grumpy at work, and the final straw was when he dropped the plate he was drying after dinner one night.

"Son of a bitch!" he screamed, sinking to his knees and sobbing as he thought bitterly that of course the first words that flew out of his mouth were Dean's regular curse.

Heavy footsteps hurried through and Dean stopped abruptly in the doorway, surveying the mess.

"Are you alright?" he demanded, coming as close as the furthest fragment of plate. "Cas?"

Castiel was aware of pieces of porcelain crunching underneath Dean's boot and warm hands gripped his shoulders.

"Cas?"

Dean sounded worried.

"Are you bleeding?"

Dean carefully took his arms, turning them over and checking for cuts.

"'M fine," he mumbled.
"Liar. You never lose your rag like this," Dean told him, but he sounded relieved. "What happened?"

"I dropped a plate."

"And that requires tears?" Dean asked lightly, gauging the mood.

"I'm tired all the time and I feel like I can hardly breathe."

"Are you sick? Do you need to go to hospital?" Dean asked, starting to stand up. But Castiel shook his head and he knelt back down.

"It's this apartment. It's claustrophobic. Something's different. Something's—"

"—changed," Dean finished for him.

Castiel looked at him and swallowed. "Yes."

"Cas, I wish I could give you a decent answer but I'm trying, buddy, but you just keep pushing me away and I don't know what else I can do."

"I keep pushing you away?" Castiel echoed incredulously.

"Yeah."

"You don't talk to me!"

"I..? You're the one who got all weird! You've been avoiding me all week and when you're here it's like you're not, you know? You put space between us and it's like you can't even stand to be in the same room as me. Now I get that you might not have wanted me to find out yet - or at all, hell I don't know - but I did and I'm still here."

Castiel stared at Dean unseeing, and wiped his wet cheeks with the back of his hand. "I was giving you space," he said quietly.

"You were what? Why?"

"To come to terms with me. You might have changed your mind and decided that you weren't really okay with sharing your apartment with me."

Dean shook his head adamantly. "I don't need time, or space, or any of that crap, okay? I just need you. Here."

Castiel's eyes, wet with tears, widened in a hope that he couldn't fully quash.

"You're my friend. My only friend, which I guess makes you my best friend."

Cas huffed a small, sad smile.

Dean sighed heavily. "You know, Cas," he said, moving to sit beside him. "I thought you were going to leave."

"You did?" Castiel sniffed.

"Yeah. And I'm glad you didn't." Dean smiled at him, thumbing away a tear that was hanging from
his chin. "I mean we're friends, right? That shouldn't have to change."

Castiel smiled, and gave him a small nod. "No, it shouldn't."

"Good. So does this mean you're going to stop being weird around me?" he teased, slapping Castiel's knee with his hand.

"Me?" Cas let out a choked laugh. "I'm not the only one being 'weird'."

"Alright, I'll stop being weird if you stop being weird, alright?" Dean grinned, nudging Cas with his shoulder.

"Alright," Cas agreed, nudging him back playfully. His attention focused on Dean's hand, still resting on his knee. "I've been a bit of a fool, haven't I?"

"Maybe just a little," Dean smirked. Then he turned serious. "But I guess after the way your dad reacted, you could only assume the worst."

"I'm sorry."

"It's okay. I get it."

"I should have more faith in you. You're a good man."

Dean cleared his throat and got to his feet. "Well anyway, now we've sorted that out maybe Bobby will shut up."

"He's been badgering you, too?" Cas asked.

Dean looked at Cas in surprise; apparently he hadn't realised Bobby had been talking to Cas as well. "Nosey old man," Dean chuckled. "Now are you going to help me clean this up or are you just going to sit there?" he asked holding a hand out to Cas and helping him up.

"I should do that," Castiel insisted. "I broke it."

"Alright, you do that and I'll finish drying, then we'll watch a movie. How does that sound?" Dean asked, already reaching for the dish towel.

"Aren't you watching the football?"

"It's baseball, but you know what? I think my team's going to lose," he grinned, shooting Cas a wink.

"Thank you, Dean. I mean it."

"I know you do."

"But I don't really feel like watching a movie. I'm too tired to concentrate on anything."

"Oh," Dean said, looking disappointed.

"But I'll come through and watch the baseball with you."

"You hate baseball. Which is shocking given it's one of America's favourite pastimes."

"I don't hate baseball," Castiel corrected him. "I just don't understand why people get so excited
about men hitting a ball and running around a square."

"Diamond."

"What?"

"It's a diamond, not a square."

"Whatever. I'll probably fall asleep anyway," Cas said, dropping the broken shards of plate into the trash.

"You look like you could use it."

"I do. I've hardly slept all week."

"Well no wonder you're a mess."

"Says the one who still had oil smudges on his face."

"What? Where?" Dean asked, rubbing at his cheeks.

"Here," Castiel said, rubbing his thumb across his forehead, just below the hairline. He suddenly realised what he was doing and pulled back. "There. All gone."

In the living room Dean grinned when Castiel sat beside him and he could the warmth radiating off his body. After just ten minutes of play Castiel's head dropped heavily onto his shoulder. Dean glanced down, a soft smile spreading across his face as Castiel began to snore.

"You need it, buddy," he said quietly, turning the volume down.

* * *

The next night Dean took Castiel out again, though this time he drove them into unfamiliar territory. The Impala crawled along the street, allowing Castiel to take in the bright lights of the bars and bright costumes of the patrons. Everywhere he looked there he could see gaudy shirts, sequins, glitter, and feathers.

"Where are we?"

"Queen Street."

"I've never heard of it."

"Well, that's not really its name. It's more of a nickname, 'cause this is where all the gays hang out."

"So it's a derogatory nickname?"

"Look, I didn't coin it."

"But you use it."

"Well sure, everyone does."

"I don't."

Dean shrugged in exasperation. "Fine! I don't know, I just thought this place might be more your type."
"When have you ever known me to wear psychedelic t-shirts or— Castiel stopped talking and stared out the window. "Is that... a man?" he asked, eyes wide as he gawked at what he'd thought had been a woman in a big wig and tight dress.

"He - or she, I don't know - is a drag queen. How'd you think 'Queen Street' got its name?"

Castiel humphed and turned his attention back to Dean. "Do you expect me to start wearing dresses?"

"No!" Dean chuckled in exasperation. "I know Jo sometimes comes down here with one of her lesbian girl friends, so I subtly asked her if she ever felt a bit weird being down this way. She said the first time she came out with Charlie they went somewhere quiet, just until she got used to the people."

"Did you say... You didn't tell her..."

"About you?"

Cas nodded.

"Jeez, no! I mean, it's not really my place, is it?"

"But you say one of her friends is a... is..."

"Gay, yeah. She was a bit suss at me asking about it, but I reckon she'd be cool with it if you told her, but it's also cool if you don't. This looks more like it." Dean pulled at the curb beside a bar on the corner that looked quieter the some of the other bars and clubs they'd just driven past. "You want to go in?"

Castiel nodded. It felt strange to be somewhere knowing that he didn't need to be afraid of people finding out his sexuality. "Is this going to be weird for you?" he asked Dean as he got out of the car.

"No. No! I'm a grown ass man. I'm used to getting checked out."

"By men?"

Dean swallowed. "I'm used to getting checked out," he repeated, sounding slightly less sure of himself than before.

Castiel touched his arm. "Thank you."

"I need a drink."

Castiel laughed. "I think I do, too."

The inside of the bar didn't seem that different from Ellen's, if he was being honest - except there were far fewer women around. Most of the guys looked no different from Dean or himself; there were none of the loud patterns and garish colours that they'd passed outside.

"Can I get two beers, please?" Dean asked the barman.

Two bottles were uncapped and placed before them by the bearded man behind the bar, sporting a painful looking cut on his forehead.

Dean payed for them before the barman turned to greet the delivery man who had entered behind them. He turned to Cas. "If you want to go talk to anyone, just go for it. Don't worry about me."
Castiel gripped his bottle tightly as he looked around. He supposed some of the men were attractive, but the most attractive one was sitting right next to him. He shook his head, because he couldn't spend the rest of his life comparing men to Dean or else he'd grow old and die alone. And besides, he was supposed to be trying to resist his urges. His stomach knotted as he tried not to think of his actions in the shower that morning.

"Excuse me," Castiel said, slipping off his chair and making his way over to the toilets.

There were two men pressed up against the outer wall of a cubicle, tongues in each other's mouths and hands down each other's pants. They were each so invested in the other that they hadn't noticed him come in. Castiel blushed as he realised that maybe they just didn't care.

His heart seemed to swell to twice its normal size in his chest, squeezing painfully against his ribs at the realisation that one of them looked rather familiar - almost like the man currently waiting for him at the bar. Short brown hair, broad shoulders across which freckles danced under the white tank top that clung to his muscular frame, showcasing the muscles in his back and arms.

He blushed even harder and all but tiptoed past them and into the furthest away cubicle. Only once he slid the bolt home did he feel like he could breathe; except now he was trapped in a toilet cubicle because there was no way he could leave until the men rocking the rickety wooden frame of the stalls had left.

"God, help me," he mumbled into his hands.

The thought of pinned against a wall and kissed like that was positively sinful and he liked it - the idea of it being Dean was enough to rip his heart into shreds because he knew it would never happen, but it didn't stop him from wishing for it.

* * *

Alone at the bar Dean took the opportunity to look around. There were a lot of guys there that didn't look gay, but then what did gay look like? Because apparently it wasn't all camp voices and drag queens. A bearded guy with some sort of orange cocktail with an umbrella in it was looking over at him and okay, the drink looked a little gay. Guys shouldn't drink things with umbrellas in them.

Ever. He wondered briefly if he could join in a game of pool without some guy chatting him up before deciding that it would probably be better if he just stayed where he was.

As he took a second look around the room, umbrella-drink guy gave him a little two-fingered wave. Dean turned back round to the bar and hunched over his drink, muttering, "Oh hell no," to himself.

A moment later a hand touched his shoulder lightly.

Dean coughed awkwardly. "Look, dude, I don't swing that— Oh," he breathed, relaxing when he saw Cas squinting at him. "It's just you."

"Who were you expecting?"

"Nothing. No-one."

Castiel seemed to squint even harder before he sat down again.

They drank their way through two beers each, with Dean's attention split between Cas and the football game showing on the TV behind the bar. He didn't realise how much time had passed until the game was finished, and he turned to Cas who hadn't moved in over half an hour.
"Are you alright?" Dean asked him.

No. No, he wasn't. "Yes," he replied.

"Are you sure?"

Castiel stared at him, his expression blank. "Yes."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Okay." He turned to look at the crowd. "I've never really been anyone's wingman before so I might be doing this wrong but, uh, does anyone take your fancy?"

A hysterical giggle that didn't suit Castiel escaped his lips before he slapped a hand across his mouth. "What?"

"They're not potato chips! It's not like I'm walking into a shop and have to decide whether I fancy cheese and onion or salt and vinegar!"

Dean grinned, his head falling forward as he chuckled. "Okay, let's just say I make a terrible wingman!"

"Dean, I appreciate the thought – I do – but even if I wanted to... to..."

"Have sex?"

"I wouldn't want to base the experience solely on their looks."

Dean looked in his bottle as he swirled the dregs of his drink around. Castiel's words were making him feel slightly shallow. "Yeah. No, I get that."

Castiel was aware that Dean was just as much a fish out of water there as he was, so rested his hand on Dean's arm. "Dean? Could we please just go?"

"Yeah. Sure."

Dean got to his feet, his skin crawling with the feeling of being watched, and he looked over his shoulder to find that umbrella-drink guy was still looking at him. Dean backed into his seat, then was halfway to the exit before Castiel had even retrieved his coat from the back of his chair.

He was aware of Cas shouting at him as he barged outside to where the air wouldn't crowd him. "Dean! Dean, wait!"

As he got closer to the Impala he stopped dead in his tracks. In the car next to his, two beefy guys were making out in the front seats, obviously unable to keep their hands off one another long enough to get home. He knew he shouldn't stare, but found he couldn't tear his gaze away.

"Dean!" Castiel shouted, hurrying after him.

Dean spun round, making a big deal out of searching his pockets for his keys. He froze as Castiel grabbed one side of his open jacket, reaching into his inside pocket and pulling out his keys.

"I'm sorry."

Castiel nearly dropped the keys, staring at him while his mouth opened and closed his mouth several times. Clearly he hadn't expected Dean to apologise. "It's okay," he heard himself saying.
Dean almost looked more upset at that, and Castiel didn't know what else to say, so instead of saying anything he just made his way around the car and into the passenger seat. "Why don't we go to Ellen's?" he suggested once he'd clicked his belt buckle into place. Dean always liked it there.

Dean said nothing, but soon Castiel recognised their surroundings and that they were indeed heading to the Roadhouse. He automatically headed for the bar when they walked in, but Dean cleared his throat behind him and headed for a booth.

"This is different," he remarked, sitting down opposite Dean.

Dean just shrugged.

After a few minutes Jo came over to take their orders. "I saw you sitting there and thought you'd brought a date before I saw it was Cas you were with!" she laughed, and turned to Cas. "He only ever takes a booth when he's on a date."

"So that you and your mother can't stick their noses in."

Jo moved to sit beside Dean, digging him with her elbow until he moved over to give her space.

"So is this a date?" she teased.

Castiel felt his cheeks grow warm.

"No!" Dean growled.

Jo chuckled. "I'm kidding, Dean! Jeez, who stole your sense of humour? So what can I get you?"

"I'll take a whiskey and Cas'll take a beer."

"Cola," Castiel said, shaking his head.

"Sure thing."

Dean wasted no time in sliding back along the seat once Jo had stood up.

"My 'people skills' might be a little 'rusty', but was that not rather rude?"

Dean frowned and looked up at him. "What?"

"You were rather short with her."

Dean looked almost a little sad, and turned his attention back to the scratches on the table.

Castiel folded his arms on the table and leaned forward. "Dean, what's wrong?"

Dean sat there glumly, looking like he wanted to say something but couldn't find the words.

Dean's hands were warm when he held them with his own cool hands. "Dean, I appreciate what you did tonight, even if it was too soon" Castiel told him honestly. "But thank you for trying."

Dean squeezed his fingers, staring at their hands on the table. "I just want you to be happy."

Castiel opened his mouth to assure him that he was happy, but was caught off guard when Dean jerked his hands back roughly.

"One whiskey, and one soda," Jo said, sliding beer mats in front of them and placing their glasses
dead centre.

"Thanks," Dean said, digging in his pocket for his wallet.

"I'll get them," Castiel said, moving for his own.

"Are you sure?"

"It was my idea to come here."

He paid Jo, counting out the exact change and noticing the way she kept stealing glances at Dean.

"If I didn't know any better I'd think she liked you," he said quietly once she was out of earshot.

"Are you jealous?" Dean grinned playfully.

He hoped his cheeks didn't look as red as they felt. "Don't be absurd."

"What - am I not your type?"

"I don't know if I have a 'type'. All I know is I'm just not as interested in 'hooking up' as you."

"Dude, stop with the air quotes."

"The what?"

"The," Dean said, making air quotes with his fingers.

"Oh."

"The what?"

"Baby's roar when I rev the engine."

A fond smile spread across his face. He loved how much Dean loved his car. "Whatever makes you happy."

"You do."

Castiel's eyebrows rose in surprise, and he straightened in his seat.

"I mean us," Dean said hastily. "Our friendship."

"Of course," Castiel said, even though hearing the word 'friendship' almost broke his heart. "You make me happy, too."

* * *

When they walked through the front door Cas went straight to the DVD shelf.
"What are you looking for?" Dean called over to him as he hung his jacket up.

"Well we watched the Star Wars trilogy," he said, his eyes still scanning the titles. Then he turned back to Dean. "Didn't you say something about prequels?"

Dean laughed as he sat down on the sofa. "Oh, no! You're not wasting your time with them."

Cas frowned from where he was crouched.

Dean heaved himself up again. "We should have watched them in Machete order..." he sighed. "Move over."

Castiel moved out of the way so Dean could find the DVD.

"Just don't blame me when you realise they're not as good as the originals."

Castiel grabbed the disc from Dean. "I'll put it on. You get the popcorn."

"Alright, Mr Bossypants!" Dean chuckled, heading towards the kitchen.

Castiel smiled as he slipped the DVD into the machine, because he didn't like it when Dean was unhappy. He'd been more than unhappy enough for both of them since he'd moved in.
As the weeks passed Castiel was finally feeling like he was beginning to make some progress with the paperwork, and he put some of the money Bobby had paid him towards a cell phone – just a basic one that allowed for phone calls and text messages, for he didn't need anything fancy – but it meant that he could contact Dean in an emergency if he went out. And he did start going out more – usually with Dean, but some nights he ventured out on his own. And having a phone meant that he was able to keep in touch with anyone he met, so after he bumped into Balthazar one night (literally – his drink had ended up all down his shirt) and they got talking and hit it off, he was able to arrange to meet up with him again.

"Balthazar?" Dean repeated sceptically when Cas told him he was meeting up with a guy he'd met.

"Yes."

"That's a weird name."

"No weirder than Castiel," Cas pointed out.

"So is this like... a date?" Dean asked uncertainly.

"No," Castiel said.

"Just a few drinks between friends?"

Castiel paused. "I guess."

"Well, just be careful."

* * *

Castiel tried to be careful, though he wasn't really sure what he was supposed to be careful of. He found Balthazar really easy to talk to – although perhaps it was the alcohol, for he ordered brightly coloured drinks with strange names that made him feel a little fuzzy – but he couldn't tell him everything. God knows not everyone could be as accepting as Dean was.

Balthazar regaled him with elaborate tales of Mediterranean cruises and wine-tasting in Italy, of skiing in the Swiss Alps and parachuting over the tulip fields of Holland, of surfing in Hawaii and scuba-diving in the Great Barrier Reef – oh, and that time he met the Queen of England. He had enough stories to tell that Castiel didn't think he'd ever hear them all, and he felt a little embarrassed that he had no exciting stories of his own to share, but Balthazar didn't seem to care.

* * *

Cas met up with his friends regularly, going out two (or sometimes three) nights a week, and Dean was torn. On the one hand he was glad that Castiel was making friends and going out and having fun
– he deserved it after all, and he was happier – but it left Dean home alone. He'd gotten used to quiet nights in with Cas, so after a couple of weeks of watching shitty late-night movies meant to be watched drunk or moping around the pool tables at Ellen's, he made sure Castiel took his key with him and headed out himself.

He didn't realise he'd decided where he was going until he pulled up outside the strip club he'd taken Cas to.

"Hey," he nodded to the guy at the bar. "Is Chastity working tonight?"

"Nope. Sorry, pal."

"Damn it," Dean muttered to himself. "Never mind. Just give me a shot of Jack."

"Sure thing."

Dean cast a look around the room as he waited for his drink. There were two different stage areas open to customers - three if you included the back rooms, where private dances could set you back a day's wage. The first area, where you entered off the street and in which Dean now waited for his drink, held the bar and several small, round stages spaced throughout the room. On these stages scantily-clad women danced, spinning and twirling and bending around the polished poles. The second area held the main stage, on which dancers stripped and tempted clients into parting with more than just single dollar bills.

Dean had enjoyed a private dance on a few occasions but tonight, however, he had a wad of singles burning a hole in his pocket and an itch begging to be scratched. It was still early, so the place was quiet. He grabbed his drink and wandered past the pole dancers into the main stage area, nodding at the man in the black t-shirt with SECURITY emblazoned across his chest that guarded the door. Dean knew better than to get drunk and disrespectful, but more than once had witnessed men getting their asses handed to them when they started treating the dancers like cheap hookers. The número uno rule - no touching. Sober and sensible, Dean passed through without incident, sitting down in one of the many seats near the stage that wouldn't sit empty for long.

A blonde cowgirl was strutting her stuff on stage, tipping her hat in Dean's direction as he dropped into his seat. Her hips swayed fast and slow, never losing their rhythm as they moved in time to the beat. Her fluid, sensual movements prompted more whistling and catcalls, and shouts of "Over here, baby!" "Yeah, that's it!" and "Take it off, girl!" had Dean clenching his jaw. Without batting an eyelid at them she smoothly wrapped one leg around the pole and spun round it. Dean was impressed by her flexibility; less so by the cat calls of his fellow audience members.

Undeterred she continued thrusting her hips and squeezing her breasts for the overweight businessmen who probably had wives and children at home (and possibly a girlfriend or two), but they tipped well and so long as you had a supply of one dollar bills no-one cared who you were or where you came from.

When she made her way over to Dean he sat up in his seat and shook his head because while she was as beautiful as any of the other dancers she wasn't what he wanted tonight. He didn't know what he was looking for - just that he'd know it when he saw it. But she set her Stetson on his head and pouted, so he passed a dollar bill her way and she moved on with a smile.

The hat was off, and then the clothes quickly followed suit. There was little foreplay and a short-lived performance, but with plenty of more girls in the wings it kept things moving and the audience wanting more. Dean knew how these places worked – hell, he'd visited them often enough – but he was still lured in by the soft curves and perky breasts every time.
She tottered off the stage to raucous applause as the lights went down, and as Dean waited for the next dancer to arrive on stage his phone vibrated in his pocket alerting him to an incoming message. He didn't have to wait long, and soon the back wall came alight with projected flames and a dark haired devil hurried on stage. She shook her ass in the direction of a rich-looking businessman, making sure to bend over and give those on the other side of the stage a view down her cleavage. Judging by the several piercing whistles it was much appreciated, but Dean found himself looking for something that wasn't there.

While she was busy schmoozing the sharply dressed man on the other side of the stage, Dean reached into his pocket for his phone. A quick check showed that there was no word from Cas; the message being from his operator asking him what he thought of his cell coverage. He deleted the message without a thought, turning his wandering attention back to the stage.

Cas was probably too busy enjoying himself with Balthazar to think about Dean. He knew he wasn't the most fun guy to spend time with - he appeared sociable and outgoing but it was mostly just a mask he'd been wearing for so long that he'd forgotten who he was beneath it - so it was probably better for him that he'd found someone better to socialise with. Not that he could blame Cas for moving on – everyone else did. Dean reached for his glass and, realising it was empty, looked for one of the serving girls to fetch him another. He ran a hand through his hair. He shouldn't blame Cas as if making friends was a crime – it was good that he was getting out more – but he'd meant it when he'd told Cas that he hadn't realised how alone he'd been before he met him. He was happier now, but he also missed Sam a lot more.

Impatient, he gave up trying to catch the eye of the blonde waitress flirting with another businessman flashing the cash. Instead he carried his empty glass back through to the first room, ignoring the security guy's suspicious stare. Once in the main room clients tended to stay there for some time, but now that Dean was out of the apartment he wasn't sure he was in the mood for much of anything. Sex had always been a source of relief when he was stressed, and a pick-me-up when he was down, but sometimes it just made him feel worse. He'd get drunk, he'd shack up, then he'd say adiós...

But when you get down to it, what's the big deal? Sure, there's the physical pleasure. The chemical reaction in your brain that tells you you feel good - really good - but what about in between? It did nothing to fill the emptiness inside him that he'd spent too many years trying to fill with junk food and alcohol.

He lost count of the amount he drank as his head spun with thoughts of Sam and Cas and everything he'd lost and found, until two long legs in red leather boots commanded his attention.

The girl's moves became more meaningful; filled with purpose now that she'd caught his attention. She danced for him and only him, drawing him deeper under her spell, and his gaze fell to the cleavage nestled between the sequined stars and stripes that adorned her skimpy top.

Dean uncurled another single from his fold of dollar bills. He always kept a few tucked away for nights like this, when he wasn't in the right headspace to flirt and seduce.

She moved in front of the pole, grabbing it above her head and sliding down, the wide spread of her legs leaving little to the imagination. A wild strand of thick dark hair fell in front of her face as she plucked the offered dollar from his fingers, and for a split second their eyes met.

Bright blue eyes that looked all-too-familiar, and narrowed as the woman tilted her head in confusion at the change in his expression.

Dean's heart skipped a beat because he knew that squint. He stood up quickly, spilling the dregs of his drink across the stage.
"Hey!" she complained, her cry catching the attention of one of the security guys.

"Sorry," he apologised, forgetting about the fresh beer he's just paid for and barely remembering to grab his jacket from the chair. "Sorry."

* * *

That night strippers dance through Dean's dreams. A blue-eyed devil takes centre stage, moving and bending in ways that should be impossible, the room getting smaller and smaller until it morphs into a private room.

Dean closes his eyes, a lazy smile spreading across his face as long red nails scrape down his chest leaving tracks on his skin. His stomach muscles contract under her fingertips, the ghost of a laugh passing his lips before she slips lower.

A firm hand grips his cock - when did he lose his pants?

* * *

Dean ran a hand through his hair as he walked into the kitchen the next morning, yawning.

"Good morning," Cas greeted him without taking his eyes from the paper.

"Morning," Dean replied gruffly. "You know, you can eat in the living room."

"But here I can lie the paper down to read it while I'm eating."

"Whatever." Dean poured himself a cup of coffee and leaned against the counter to drink it.

"You know, you can sit down to drink that."

Dean smirked.

As Castiel stared back, confused lines creasing his forehead, Dean's dream came crashing to the forefront of his mind. He stared at Cas without seeing him, his jaw hanging slack as his brain replayed every graphic detail in slow motion. When he jolted back to the present he opened and closed his mouth several times.

"Damn it, Cas," he muttered to himself.

Castiel frowned. "What?"

"Hmm?" Dean realized he'd spoken out loud. "Oh, nothing."

"It sounded like something."

"No, you just reminded me of this girl from last night."

Castiel stared blankly at him as he processed that. "Are you... saying that I look feminine or—?"

"What? No! No, nothing like that." Dean studied Castiel's face. Okay, so his eyes were wide and crystal blue, but his nose was straight and a little too long, and he had a strong jaw shaded by
morning scruff. Cas was definitely not feminine.

"Dean."

"Yeah?"

"You're staring."

"Am not," he protested, digging his spoon into the sugar before stirring it aggressively into his coffee.

He could just about hear Castiel smiling.

Dean took a sip of his drink and grimaced. He didn't even like sugar in his coffee – he'd just needed a reason to stop looking at Cas.

"So how was your night? I didn't hear you come in."

"It was wonderful."

"Wo—" Dean turned back around to look at him. "Wonderful?"

Castiel nodded enthusiastically. "Yes. I had a most enjoyable evening. Balthazar is dating an actor, so we went to see his play."

Dean's eyebrows rose. Cas and the theatre? He took another sip of his coffee without thinking before letting it dribble out of his mouth and back into the mug.

"It was a very strange tale, about a woman who claims to have had an immaculate conception—"

Dean may never have gone to church, but he knew how the Nativity story went.

"—but when the archangel Gabriel informs her of this she isn't sure she want to keep the baby, and then the devil turns up—"

Okay, he was pretty sure that wasn't the Nativity he knew.

"—along with her ex-boyfriend and her best friend, and... You're not really interested, are you?" Cas asked, realising Dean's eyes had glazed over.

Dean blinked. "What? I, no— I've never been to the theatre before. Not really my thing, you know?"

"How do you know it's not 'your thing' if you've never been?"

"Touché," Dean conceded. "But I did see this play that Sam was in at school. Our Town, I think it was called. He was good. The play wasn't."

Castiel hummed, apparently not completely satisfied with Dean's answer.

"But you had fun?"

"Oh yes," Castiel said. "I'm not entirely sure the play wasn't blasphemous, but it was amusing."

"Good," Dean said, his voice breaking over the word.

It was good, wasn't it? Cas should have someone who could show him a good time. Dean just kind of wished it could be him. Guilt niggled at his conscious as he realised he found the fact that
Balthazar was seeing someone reassuring.

As Castiel refocused his attention on the newspaper Dean poured his coffee down the sink because it was disgusting. "You need a haircut," he commented, changing the subject. He playfully ruffled Cas's hair as he moved past him to grab the orange juice from the fridge.

Castiel smoothed a hand through his hair and looked up. "I know."

"It's almost as long as my brother's is. Was," Dean corrected himself after a moment's pause. "When I last saw him, at least."

Castiel had the decency to look away from Dean when he noticed the pained look that clouded his face, but then Dean glanced down at the paper in front of Cas to see that he had been looking at the apartments for rent.

"Hey, are you looking for somewhere else to stay?" he asked, trying to keep the disappointment out of his voice.

"Hmm?" Castiel looked at the paper in his hands as if he hadn't seen it before. "Oh, no."

"It sure looks like it," he accused, trying to ignore the twist in his gut at the thought of being left alone again.

"No, I just wanted to see how much apartments are going for."

"Because you're looking to get your own place," Dean finished for him, clenching his jaw.

"No," Castiel reiterated. "I couldn't afford my own place even if I wanted it. I just thought I should contribute to the rent now that I'm earning something."

Dean raised his eyebrows in surprise, not entirely at ease with the sense of relief that flooded through him. "Oh."

"I like living here, Dean. I like living with you."

"I like having you here," he smiled, his gaze dropping to his bare feet. He watched his toes tap out a nervous rhythm on the floor. "But you know," he added, "you do contribute in other ways."

"I know," Castiel said. "But I want to."

Dean got the feeling he was fighting a losing battle. "Okay, fine. But we'll do work it out by ratio of income." He frowned in confusion when Castiel started chuckling. "What?"

"And just who's going to do the math? You?"

"Shut up," Dean grumbled.

He stole a slice of buttered toast from Castiel's plate, ignoring his 'Hey!' of protest, and moved to the living room to eat.

A few minutes later hesitant footsteps followed him through.

"Are you angry?"

Dean looked behind him. "No," he grinned. "Come on here," he said, reaching a hand out to Cas until the other man came closer.
The sofa shunted slightly as Castiel flopped down beside him. "You came in late last night."

"Were you worried about me?" Dean teased.

"No," Castiel told him. "You can take care of yourself."

Dean laughed.

"Did you... meet someone?"

"You mean did I pick up some pretty chick, show her the best night of her life, and then leave?" Dean grinned.

Castiel made a big deal of looking unimpressed, but there was something else that looked a lot more like hurt in his eyes.

"No," Dean answered softly.

An uneasy feeling spread through him as he thought about the turn the night before had taken. After he'd left the strip club he'd driven out of town, past the bridge where he'd first met Cas, and up to the top of the hill where he'd parked up and just looked down at the urban lights. It was an uncharacteristically quiet night, for him.

A gentle nudge jolted him from his thoughts. "You'll be late for work if you sit here staring at a blank TV screen all morning."

Dean hummed, almost to himself, in response. He sat a moment longer before he started towards the bathroom.

Castiel coughed obviously.

"Next you'll be teaching me to fetch," Dean complained lightly, coming back to take his empty glass to the kitchen.

"Good boy," Castiel teased.

"Hey," Dean warned playfully. "You might find I bite."

* * *

When Balthazar texted later that day to ask if he wanted to go out and see a movie with some of his friends that night Castiel agreed, and though Dean offered had him a ride down he chose to take the bus.

Balthazar and his friends were already gathered outside when he arrived.

"I'm not late, am I?" Cas asked.

"No, you're fine," Balthazar assured him. He quickly listed names and pointed at various people, and Castiel tried his best to take them all in. "And this is Meg," Balthazar announced, as if he was leaving the best for last.

Castiel swallowed and smiled. "Hello," he said.

"Hi," she smiled back. "Balthazar tells me you're something of an angel."
Castiel's eyes narrowed in confusion. "Is that a flirtation?"

Balthazar nudged him gently. "I think you'll like her!" he winked.

Castiel smiled weakly as he followed Balthazar into the theatre, because if that wink was anything to go by tonight was going to be awkward. He held the door open for Meg, who looked at him in surprise.

"Well, thanks," she smiled, looking him up and down before heading in.

Castiel just nodded, and he exhaled slowly once she'd passed him. This was going to be a long night.

Meg paid for her own ticket, but Castiel bought her popcorn. Or rather, bought them popcorn to share at her request even though he really didn't want any. They were watching some film about a man who hunted monsters in a world filled with angels and demons – which all seemed a bit far-fetched to Cas – and it seemed that every time he reached for some popcorn his fingers would brush against Meg's in a way.

When the hero of the story and the damsel in distress finally hooked up, Meg moved her mouth closer to his ear without taking her eyes off the screen and whispered, "He makes my nethers quiver."

Until that point her hand had been resting on his knee, but when it began to inch towards his crotch he jumped in his seat and knocked the last of the popcorn everywhere.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry," Castiel said, only to be shushed by someone two rows in front of them. He crouched down and tried to sweep the popcorn back into the container. "I'm so sorry."

He glanced up to find that Meg had him trapped between her legs, and he stared at her with wide eyes.

"What'cha doing down there, Clarence?" she purred.

"It's Cas," he corrected her, standing up.

"I can't see the screen when you stand up," she said, her hands moving uncomfortably close to his dick. "Maybe you should get back on your knees."

He jerked away from her touch. "I need to urinate," he stuttered, before sidling out of the row and all but running down the stairs and out into the corridor. He walked into the toilets in a daze and locked himself in a cubicle.

"Fuck," he hissed, wishing that Balthazar hadn't tried to play Cupid. He knew his reaction had been extreme, and could only hope that the others were too engrossed in the film to wonder why.

Being in such a small space helped calm him down, but he waited another five minutes before splashing his face with cold water and heading back into the movie screen, where he sat on the end next to Balthazar's friend – Bart? – until the film was over.

* * *

"You could have told me your friend was a prude," Meg snapped at Balthazar before getting into her cab and slamming the door shut.

"So you two didn't hit it off, then?" Balthazar asked.
"No," Castiel said through gritted teeth.

"Okay. Sorry." He looked at the ground. "Is your flatmate coming to pick you up, or do you want a lift? Because the last bus was twenty minutes ago."

Castiel looked at his watch in surprise, for he hadn't realised it was so late. "Yes, please," he said, moving towards Balthazar's car.

Balthazar could tell that Castiel wasn't in the mood for talking so spent the ride to Dean's apartment spouting trivia about the film and the actors in it, regardless of whether or not Castiel was actually listening.

"We're here," he said, when Castiel didn't get out of the car.

"Hmm?" he asked distractedly, looking out of the window. "Oh."

"Are you okay?"

"Why wouldn't I be?" Castiel asked, not waiting for an answer as he stepped out of the car.

As he walked up the steps he waved to Balthazar, who honked his horn before driving off. When he walked through the front door he could hear the shower going, so he collapsed on the sofa and sighed. Going out with Balthazar could be fun, but very different from going out with Dean.

"Hey, you're back," Dean noted as he walked into the room a few minutes later, towelling his damp hair.

"Yes," Castiel agreed.

Dean stopped where he stood. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes."

"It doesn't sound like it."

Castiel sighed. "Balthazar set me up with someone."

Dean would never admit to being a little disappointed that this Balthazar guy was having more success at getting Cas laid than he was. "Oh?" was all he said.

"Yes."

"Was he nice?"

"She was very nice."

"I thought you were gay?" Dean said without thinking.

Castiel just stared at him.

"Sorry. So, what? You swing both ways?"

Castiel's eyes narrowed. "I have no idea what that means but just because I think she's a nice person doesn't mean that I am interested in pursuing a relationship with her."

"Right."
Castiel waited a moment before speaking again. "But perhaps this is God offering me a second chance."

"Whoa, hold on. I thought we agreed that you liking men wasn't such a bad thing?"

Castiel looked away, because Dean was trying so hard but he just didn't get it. The sin wasn't about having feelings for men, but where those feelings led. "Perhaps not, but that doesn't mean I have to act on it."

"Cas, I don't think this is such a good idea," Dean started.

"Then what would you have me do?" Castiel snapped. "Condemn myself?" He closed his eyes and took a deep breath. "You don't understand."

"Cas, I'm not going to tell you what to do, okay? But I guess you need to decide whether or not seeing this girl will make you happy, because if it doesn't... If she doesn't, you could do better than her. You deserve better. And so does she," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Castiel nodded to himself. "Thank you, Dean. I think I'll go shower, now."

"Sure. I'm going to go to bed, so I'll see you in the morning, okay?"

"Okay. Good night, Dean."

"Night, Cas."

* * *

That conversation played on Dean's mind for a few days, until he decided to press the matter from a different direction.

"Cas," Dean asked when they were eating lunch outside, "I've been thinking—"

"Well don't strain yourself, boy," Bobby chuckled as he walked past.

Dean just rolled his eyes and turned back to Cas. "Is the reason you never went back to church because you're gay?"

"Sh!" Castiel hushed him frantically, casting a fearful glance over at the other garage. "People might hear you!"

Dean looked around but none of the other mechanics were paying them any attention and Bobby was out of earshot. "Cas, so long as you're not trying to get into their pants none of them should give a damn what team you bat for."

"But I don't play baseball," Cas frowned.

"You—" Dean slapped a hand across his face and groaned. "It's an expression. Never mind."

But when he heard a small chuckle he peeked through his fingers to see Cas smiling. "You're not funny, you know," Dean told him when he realised Cas was winding him up.

"Your grin would indicate otherwise."

"Yeah, well," Dean huffed. "What I'm trying to say is it's none of their business if you like dick." He paused, before adding, "If that is the reason?"
"I... Yes," Castiel conceded reluctantly, when it became clear to him that Dean was waiting on an answer. "It was stupid of me to go in the first place."

"No, it wasn't—"

"People like me aren't welcome there. That was made clear to me when it was preached that we should not tolerate those who sin simply because the government has made it legal, for legality and morality are two different things."

As the last piece of the puzzle dropped into place, Dean slung his arm around Cas's shoulders. "If you could go back, would you?"

"Of course. God is very important to me."

Dean nodded.

"But I can't change who I am, Dean."

"No, I didn't mean that you should change. Just... I guess, if they changed, or something. I don't know."

"I see."

"Cas, you're fine just the way you are."

Castiel huffed a small, sad laugh. "I think God would disagree with you. But thank you." He glanced at his watch. "I have to go back to work, now."

"Yeah, okay."

Dean watched Castiel return to the office, and kept staring after him for several minutes even once he'd disappeared from sight.

* * *

Bobby paid them the following Friday, and Castiel dutifully held out fifty dollars to Dean.

"What's that for?"

"Rent."

"Dude, no," Dean said stepping back and shaking his head. "I am not taking your money, damn it!"

"You agreed that I could pay my way."

"I just said that - I didn't think you'd actually try to pay me!"

Castiel glared at him. "Take it!" he insisted, thrusting the money at Dean.

"No!"

"Dean, please."

"I... No! Cas, I'm not taking it. Put it towards groceries or something if you feel you have to, but don't give it to me!"

Castiel looked visibly upset.
"Look, I... You don't earn anything like I do, and what I make it just enough to get by. You should keep it for something you really need."

"What could be more important than a roof over my head?" Cas snapped.

"You've got that even without money," Dean promised. "Now come here."

Cas reluctantly allowed himself to be pulled into another one of Dean's bear hugs, silently vowing to himself that that wouldn't be the end of it.

* * *

On Sunday morning Cas walked into the kitchen and flushed in embarrassment.

"Oh good—Dean!"

A very naked Dean spun round in shock, one hand covering parts that Castiel had no business seeing, so Cas very determinedly focused his gaze out the window over Dean's shoulder.

"Do I even want to know what—"

"I spilt my coffee."

"And, what? You couldn't find the dishcloth?"

"No, it was either get naked or suffer second degree burns on my dick."

Castiel slapped a hand over his eyes and shook his head. "Go," he said. "Put some clothes on. Please."

"Yeah, you're right. 'Cause, uh... I wouldn't want to ruin you for other men."

"Dean!" He could practically hear the smirk in his friend's voice.

"Alright, alright," Dean said, heading for the door. "Besides, we're going to have to hurry up if we're going to get out of here."

"Are we going somewhere?" Castiel asked, daring to peek through his fingers. He wasn't entirely sure it was relief he felt to find Dean's hand still protecting his modesty.

"Yeah, so hurry up."

* * *

"Dean..." Cas trailed off anxiously once he saw where they were. "No."

"Cas—"

"I can't be here! I don't belong here," he added more quietly. "Please, can we go somewhere else? Or just back home?"

Dean smiled sadly. "You know, I think that's the first time you've called my place home and meant it?"

Castiel licked his lips and looked from Dean to the church again. "I can't," he said. "I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, okay Cas? Can you just trust me on this for one minute?"
Cas took a deep breath. "Dean, I can't. What happens when they find out that I'm... What I am?"

"I promise you they won't care."

"Dean, what I feel is wrong. I thought you understood why I can't go back—"

"Trust me? Please?" Dean pressed.

Castiel bit his lip as he took in Dean's sincerity. Dean truly believed he was doing the right thing, and he'd never let Cas down, so reluctantly he stepped out of the car and the two of them made their way to the door, Cas keeping several steps behind.

There were so many things Castiel wanted to say to Dean: "We're early," because there was no-one else here yet; "I thought you weren't religious?" for he didn't understand why Dean was coming in with him; "I hate you for this." But he said nothing.

As they neared the door, the priest came out to greet them.

"Dean!"

"Father Reynolds," Dean smiled, taking the other man's hand and shaking it firmly.

"And this must be Castiel," Father Reynolds said, turning to him. "Why don't we go inside and have a little chat?"

At this, Cas took a step back and stared at Dean, eyes wide in a mixture of panic and betrayal because if the priest wanted to have a little chat Dean must have told him something.

"Son, we believe that God loves us for everything we are, for it's everything he made us to be," Father Reynolds assured him, his tone warm and kind. "Now why don't head inside before people start arriving for service?"

Cas was speechless and stared blankly at him, but nevertheless allowed himself to be led inside while Dean went back to the car and hit play on the cassette player.

* * *

Castiel said nothing about his conversation with Father Reynolds or the service all the way back home, so when they got out of the car Dean leaned across the roof and looked at Cas.

"Well?"

Castiel frowned, shutting the passenger door but otherwise not moving.

"How did it go?" Dean prompted.

"You had no right to do that."

Dean's face fell. "I thought... But you said you wanted to go back?"

"I did. And I do, but..."

"I was just trying to help," Dean told him. "It didn't go well?"

"It was... enlightening," Cas settled for. "I've never heard the word of God interpreted that way before."
"Well that's good. Isn't it?"

Cas didn't answer.

"Look, I'm sorry, okay?" Dean apologised softly.

Castiel shook his head, but wouldn't look at him. "You don't need to apologise for trying to help, Dean. But some warning would have been nice."

"I didn't want to freak you out."

"So you thought cornering me would be the better option?"

Then Dean could see where he'd fucked up. "Not my best idea, huh?" he asked, an unsure smile tugging at the corner of his mouth.

Finally Castiel looked at him. "No," he agreed, returning Dean's smile after a moment's pause. "But it wasn't your worst, either."

Dean grinned as he let out the breath he'd been holding and walked round to Cas, draping his arm around his shoulders as they walked inside. Once they were in the elevator Castiel let his head drop onto Dean's shoulder, and Dean pulled him into a hug.

He'd never asked Cas how he was doing after he'd come to the realisation that he didn't want to die, and he probably should have. "So how are you feeling these days?" he asked quietly.

"Fine."

"Just with the whole... you know... sadness thing."

"Sadness thing?" Castiel echoed, pulling away so he could look at Dean.

"Yeah." Dean smiled, and his cheeks flushed. He'd never been good at talking about how he felt, and he should probably tell Cas that he'd been really scared about him for a while.

"I'm good," Castiel told him honestly.

"Good," Dean smiled.

Neither heard the faint ding that told them the elevator had reached their floor, and they pulled apart when someone cleared their throat.

"Hey," Dean nodded at him as he grabbed Castiel's arm and practically dragged him out of the elevator and down the hallway.

Castiel was still trying to get his heart rate back under control because for a moment – just a moment – he'd thought that Dean might have been about to kiss him. But that was stupid, because Dean wasn't like him. Dean was good. Dean was normal.

But no, he was normal too, or so Father Reynolds had told him. He just needed to find it in himself to believe that.

"So, um, Father Reynolds suggested that I speak to someone – a counsellor – about, well, everything."

Dean paused outside his door. "You mean like a shrink?"
"No, Dean. A counsellor. Someone who can help me process everything I've been through since..."

"Since your dad kicked you out?"

"Since before that," Cas said quietly.

Dean nodded, almost to himself. "But I thought you were better?"

Castiel shrugged, and couldn't look him in the eye.

"Cas?"

"Just because I haven't thought about trying to kill myself lately doesn't mean I don't still feel weighed down by everything that's happened to me, and..." Castiel took a shallow breath and huffed it out in a sigh. "I still dream," he added quietly.

"I take it you don't just mean the ordinary dreams everyone else has where you're falling, or you suddenly realise that you're in the middle of the supermarket and your clothes have vanished," Dean joked, his attempt at levity falling flat.

"No."

"You never said anything, dude," Dean said as he finally opened the door and walked into the apartment.

"What could you have done?" Castiel asked, shrugging his coat off.

"Touché. But it might have helped you to talk about it, you know – rather than keeping it all bottled up."

"But you don't talk. You've said that on more than one occasion. You're not the talking type."

Dean felt guilty. "That's not... I didn't mean..." Dean put his hands on Cas's shoulders and looked him straight in the eye. "I'd listen to you. If you wanted to talk... I'd listen," he said awkwardly.

Castiel smiled. "Thank you. And maybe I will. But I'm still going to see how it goes with this," Castiel dug a business card out of his pocket and looked at it, "Ms Barnes."

Dean stopped dead in his tracks. "Ms Barnes?" he echoed weakly. "As in, Pam Barnes?"

Castiel checked the car again. "Pamela, yes."

Dean closed his eyes as he tried to forget sitting across from her in a room for half an hour twice a week, every week, for three months.

* * *

"So how have things been this week?"

Dean blatantly ignored her, instead tapping away on his phone. Other people might have smart phones with all the latest apps, but Dean was still using his old Nokia 3310.

"Dean?"

"What?" he snapped irritably.
"I said—"

"I heard what you said."

"Well?"

"Look, lady – I'm here because I have to be, not because I want to be. So stop wasting your breath and go play Minesweeper, or something."

Pamela frowned, and snatched his phone from his grasp.

"Hey!"

She tossed it in her drawer and slammed it shut.

"I was going to set a new high score on Snake," he grumbled.

"Do it on your own time. Don't waste mine." Quick as a flash her glare became a smile. "Now how have you been?"

Dean folded his arms and stared at her, willing her resolve to break.

She narrowed her eyes and stared right back.

Dean's eyes started watering, but he wasn't going to blink first. He wasn't.

He blinked.

Damn it! Well, that still didn't mean he had to talk. He looked at her clock. It was going to be a long hour.

* * *

"Do you know her?"

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you knew her. Pamela."

"No," Dean lied.

"Then how did you know her—"

"So what did Father Reynolds want to talk to you about before?"

Castiel clenched his jaw but nevertheless allowed Dean to change the topic of conversation. "What God thinks of me," he replied, following him through to the living room. "And more importantly, as he said, what I think of me."

Dean nodded. "And what do you think of you?"

Castiel sat down beside him, considering the question. "I don't like me very much."

"What?" Dean asked in disbelief. Seeing Father Reynolds was supposed to help Castiel, not make him feel worse about himself.

"I've let others lead my life for far too long."
"That's what I've been trying to tell you, Cas."

"Yes, I know," Castiel said quietly. "But with all due respect, you've never read the Bible."

"And what does the Bible say?"

"There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ," Castiel recited from memory. "Galatians 3:28."

"And what is that supposed to mean?"

"That we're all different... but that none of our differences matter because we're all the same in His eyes."

Dean smirked. "I told you He didn't hate anyone."

"Yes, you did. If you believed in God, Dean, I think you would be a great priest."

"No, not me," Dean dismissed the idea, because he didn't see himself as the type of person to be guiding people in life.

"Well, you'd have to give up sex, first," Castiel said, and his hand flew up to his mouth to stifle his chuckle.

Dean laughed. "Well I think that definitely rules me out for the priesthood!"

Cas smiled. "Thank you, Dean. For everything."

Dean smiled back, and pulled his friend into another hug, but he couldn't help feeling that it sounded like Castiel was planning on leaving.
Chapter 17

Chapter Notes

Un-beta'd.

Castiel looked at himself in the bathroom mirror. His hair was much shorter now he'd had it cut, so theoretically it should be easier to manage, but he just couldn't get it to sit straight. He squeezed a blob of Dean's styling gel out of the tube and rubbed his hands together before rubbing it through his hair. If possible, it only made it look even worse.

"Ugh," he exclaimed, tossing the tube back in cupboard a little too roughly.

"Beer's in, food's on its way, the movie's good to go – come on, Cas!" Dean shouted through.

Shit! He'd forgotten Dean had rented a movie for tonight as a 'surprise' for him. "I... I'm meeting up with Balthazar tonight," he said quietly as he entered the living room.

Dean turned to stare at him. "Oh."

His eyebrows raised when he saw what Castiel was wearing – a pair of slim fitting, dark blue stonewashed jeans (when had he bought them?), and a white button-up shirt with the sleeves rolled up to the elbows. He looked good. In fact, he looked really good. Well, apart from the way his dark hair was sticking up in ridiculous tufts. Dean wondered if perhaps Castiel's friendship with Balthazar was becoming something more than 'just friends'. Should he say something? Make sure he and Balthazar were on the same wavelength? But then it wasn't really any of his business, was it? He just felt oddly protective of his friend, and it wasn't a bad thing to care about him...

"I'm so sorry," Castiel apologised when he realised that Dean wasn't going to say anything else. "I forgot we had this planned. It's Balthazar's birthday, but I can cancel—"

"No! No, don't do that. I'll still be here tomorrow! You go – have fun!" Dean smiled, but it didn't reach his eyes.

"Are you sure?"

"Cas, I'm not here to stop you living your life. Now go before I chase you out."

"Thank you," he said, hugging Dean quickly, "for being so understanding."

Dean shrugged him of. "You've got nothing to thank me for. Go, have fun. Give me a call if you need me to pick you up later."

"Thank you, but I'm sure I won't need to."

"Hey Cas. Come here," Dean said reluctantly. He couldn't let him go out looking like he'd been electrocuted, so he ran his fingers through Castiel's hair and ruffling it up a little until it wasn't sticking up in clumps any more. "Much better."

Castiel smiled. "Thank you, Dean."
Dean flushed and shrugged his shoulders. "It's nothing. Now get out of here, already."

As the latch clicked shut behind Castiel, Dean lay back against the sofa with a sigh. What if it was a date? What if Castiel was going on a date, and that was why he was dressed up nicer than usual? He dragged his hand down his face with a groan. He should be happy for Cas, not moping because he had to share him with someone else. For the first time in his life Dean had someone who seemed to actually like him, and he miraculously hadn't fucked it up yet. He was being selfish.

"Get a grip," he muttered to himself. He could hardly expect him to stay in and enjoy the single life with Dean forever, could he? Everybody left. Well, he'd just need to go out and see if he could get lucky himself. After all, he'd only been out a few times since Cas had moved in, but hadn't had anything other than a quickie in the back of the Impala since then.

The buzzing of the intercom interrupted his thoughts.

But food first, he decided, even if he did have to put Cas's order in the fridge for later.

* * *

Balthazar was already there and waiting when Castiel arrived.

"Happy birthday."

"Thanks. Now sit your ass down and pour yourself a drink. You're missing the show."

Of course Balthazar would want to celebrate his birthday in a strip club – if it hadn't been his friend's birthday, he'd have declined the invitation. Strip clubs were not places he wished to frequent.

Castiel leaned over and spoke in his ear. "I'm sorry I didn't get you anything."

"I told you not worry about it," Balthazar waved his apology off. "This morning I had a ménage à... what's the French word for twelve?" Balthazar shouted above the audience's cheers as a smug smile tugged at his lips.

Castiel shrugged. "I don't know." He'd never studied any other languages at school.

"Well, anyway – six guys, six girls... That was my birthday present to myself."

Castiel didn't know how to respond to that, because the only level of intimacy he'd ever had was with his own hand, and he didn't think that sex was something that should be shared with more than one other person at a time. It was an act of love, giving yourself completely to someone else.

Whooping and whistling jolted him from his thoughts and Castiel knew that the women on stage had removed the last of their clothing.

"Who else is coming tonight?" Castiel asked a moment later, once the room had quietened down.

"The usual crowd – Bart, Meg, Zeke, and some others I don't think you've ever met."

Castiel nodded. Bart didn't like him – he'd no doubt sit and glare at Castiel all night – but Zeke was nice. He reached for one of the pitchers and poured himself a small amount. Tentatively, he raised the glass to his lips and took a sip. It wasn't unpleasant – Balthazar had bought him beverages that burned on the way down in the past, so he'd learned to be careful.

"Oh my God, but look at him!" Balthazar exclaimed suddenly, leaning forward as far as he could.

Castiel reluctantly looked up at the stage, relieved that at least this early on in the performance the
'dancer' – if you could call him that – would be wearing clothes. His jaw dropped as he registered the man on stage, because he had never seen a more perfect example of the male form. He was all muscle – not a single inch of fat on his body – and he could *move*. He became hypnotised by his gyrating hips: a spell only broken when Balthazar started laughing beside him.

He blushed and looked away, but not without daring to steal a second glance. He could swear the man looked straight at him and winked. His cheeks warmed even more as arousal coursed through him, and he downed the rest of his drink on one go.

"You know, now I get why you and Meg didn't hit it off," Balthazar commented.

Castiel swallowed.

"It's ok," he continued. "You know, you could buy a dance with him."

"What?" Balthazar couldn't be serious. Could he?

"In one of the private rooms through the back."

"No," he said firmly.

"Are you sure?"

Castiel pictured the man dancing for him and only him, making his heart beat faster in his chest directing the blood flow... elsewhere. "Very," he said, refilling his glass of... whatever it was. "What is this?"

"Bloody Mary," Balthazar said. "Just don't say that three times while looking in the mirror!"

Castiel frowned and opened his mouth to ask why, but thought better of it.

Balthazar's other friends didn't take long to arrive. Some were already slightly wobbly on their feet because they'd had pre-drink drinks, and he looked away when he caught Meg staring at him.

It didn't seem to take long for Meg to bring over a bottle of tequila, a platter of lime slices, and a supply of salt, but when Castiel glanced at his watch he was surprised to see that they'd been out for almost two hours already. He didn't know exactly how they'd convinced him this was a good idea, but he wasn't going to back out now because doing something he wasn't sure he wanted to do felt better than feeling like an outsider all night.

"What do I do?" he asked anyone who was listening.

"Lick, sip, suck," Balthazar said, and laughed. "Try saying that when you're drunk!"

"Lisp cock!" Meg hollered drunkenly across the table at him.

Balthazar laughed and shook his head. "Not even close!"

His tongue swept up the salt on the back of his hand, he knocked the tequila back in one, and *sweet Jesus, Mary, and Joseph it BURNED!!!*

"Suck the lime!" he was dimly aware of Balthazar shouting at him so he sucked it hard, his eyes screwing up as the sharp acidity of the fruit hit his tongue.

"Not bad for a beginner!" Balthazar praised him with a clap on the back.
Castiel tried to smile as he coughed, eyes streaming, but he'd feel a lot better about it if Meg wasn't cackling at him.

They kept going round the table, and by the time Castiel had downed his third he didn't feel the burn any more. When it came to do four, Meg passed out. When it came to five Balthazar filled the shot glass in front of Castiel, who exhaled and salted his hand.

"One, two, three!" everyone shouted in unison.

Castiel licked the salt, downed one shot, and sucked on the lime edge with a flourish.

Everyone cheered, and the room started to spin.

"I think I'm starting to feel something," he slurred.

"Yeah, sick probably," Balthazar said as he poured his own shots. "Zeke, get him to the toilet before he throws up everywhere."

He didn't remember standing up, or even crossing the room to the toilets, but a minute later he was staring down the vomit-splattered toilet. He groaned. Now he knew how Dean felt all those nights he came home and puked his guts up in the bathroom.

"Who's Dean?"

"Can you read my mind?" he mumbled.

"No. But I can hear your voice."

"Oh." Castiel frowned. "But I didn't say anything." Or had he?

Zeke phone buzzed.

Castiel groaned, and retched over the bowl once again. He hoped Dean wasn't too upset with him about tonight. He didn't seem to be, but then Bobby had said that Dean had a tendency to bottle things up. He vowed to himself that tomorrow they would have their movie night, and Dean could have the final say on what films they watched.

"I think I need to go home," Castiel whined.

Zeke shrugged. "Wait here. I'll be back in a minute."

"Ugh," Castiel complained, missing the lever several times before he managed to flush the toilet. He fumbled in his coat pocket for his cell phone and he prayed that Dean would answer quickly.

* * *

Dean was stretched out in the back of the Impala when his phone rang. He considered ignoring it, because he just wanted to go home and drink himself into a coma. That had never happened to him before – ever! Dean Winchester just didn't have a problem getting it up for the pretty girls, and this one had been smoking hot! He rubbed his face with his hands and groaned. Smoking hot, and pretty pissed when she'd stormed off, flipping him the bird as she left.

Sighing, he glanced at the caller ID – it was Castiel.

"Yeah?" he asked.
"Dean?"

He chuckled. "Yeah it's me, Cas." Who else would it be?

"I— Are you still offering to bring me home?"

"Sure it is – where are you?"

"In the toilet."

"Cas, are you *drunk*?"

"I think so."

"Alright, well which bar are you at?"

"I don't know."

"You've got to give me a hint, man," Dean grinned.

"People are taking their clothes off."

"You mean like strippers, right?"

"Strippers. Yes."

Right, so there were only three places in the city where strippers worked and Dean knew them all. He never claimed to be classy. "I'll see you in a bit." He hung up and tossed the phone onto the front passenger seat and sighed, before wriggling back into his jeans.

* * *

Cas stepped out into the night, wrapping his arms around him in a futile attempt to protect himself from the cold. He shivered, and turned instinctively when the music from inside got momentarily louder as the door swung open and closed again.

"Balthyzur," he slurred, his tongue feeling too big for his mouth. "Zeke!"

"Are you alright?"

"'M fine," he said.

"Have you called a cab?" Balthazar asked.

"Dean's coming."

"Okay, good. Do you want me to wait with you?"

"I'll be fine. He'll be here soon."

"Well you'll need this. It's cold tonight." Zeke tried and failed to help Castiel get his arms into the sleeves of his coat, before settling on just draping it around his shoulders. They stood, shivering, beside him for a couple of moments, before retreating back into the warmth of the club and leaving him to wait for Dean alone. After a few minutes of waiting he decided that he needed to take a leak. If he went back inside Dean might miss him, so he opted to just wait.

And so he waited.
And waited.

It took him several attempts to unbutton his pants, but eventually he got himself free and sighed in relief as he emptied his bursting bladder.

The sound of a stone being kicked across the ground was the only warning he got that he wasn't alone any more. As he turned to see who it was the impact of his fist snapped Castiel's head to the side, and he didn't know if he'd closed his eyes or if it was the force of the impact that sent his vision plunging into darkness.

* * *

Dean pulled up outside the bar and scanned the street for any sign of Castiel, but there was no-one to be seen. He'd tried the other two clubs because they're been nearer, but there had been no sign of Castiel. If he wasn't here, then Dean had no idea where he was.

He stepped out into the cold night air and shuddered, his breath turned to mist as he turned his collar up in a feeble attempt to keep the chill off his neck. He figured if Castiel was here, that he was doing the sensible thing and waiting inside for him. He walked towards the entrance, but the sound of a scuffle made him stop and head down the side street instead.

One man stood over another hunched up on the ground. As he hauled the beaten man to his feet the dim light from the exit sign illuminated them, and Dean recognised the trench coat instantly.

"Cas," he murmured in realisation. "HEY!" he hollered as he ran towards them. "You leave him alone."

The man dropped Castiel, who collapsed to the floor clutching his ribs, and ran.

"Cas, you alright?" Dean asked, crouching down next to his friend. "Cas?" he asked, reaching a hand out.

Castiel recoiled from his touch instantly, and Dean jerked his hand back.

"Sorry, dude," he said, his hand hovering in the air between them. "Are you okay?"

"That..." Castiel coughed as he spat out a mouthful of blood, "is a really stupid question," he said, before passing out.

Dean retrieved Castiel's wallet from the ground and got him back into his jeans as best he could, before lifting him easily into his arms and carrying him back to his car. As Dean drove Castiel straight to the emergency room, not even caring if Cas threw up all over the Impala's interior, all he could think about was the last time he'd had to drive someone he cared about to the hospital.

* * *

"Dean... Dean have you got the salt?"

"Salt? What salt – what are you talking about?"
Sam grabbed Dean by the collar of his coat and pulled him close. "To keep the demons out, of course."

"Of course," Dean agreed, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Of course, Sam – yeah, we've got to keep those demons out." Dean went along with whatever hallucination his brother was having because past experience had proven that it was easier than fighting him on it. "We don't want them to get you."

"No, not me – you! They're coming for you, Dean – they want your soul!"

Dean stopped in the doorframe and looked back at him. "Why do they want my soul, Sam?"

"Get the salt!"

"The salt, yeah, the salt." Dean hurried into the kitchen for the salt. He didn't want to leave his brother alone, but the damn guy was freaking out. "What do you want me to do with it?" he shouted through from the kitchen.

"Pour it in a circle."

Dean complied reluctantly, thinking that the mess was going to be a bitch to clean up in the next day.

"You done, Dean?"

"Nearly, Sammy," he said, shaking out the last of the can and joining the two ends of the circle together.

"Is there any left?"

"No Sam, that's the last of it."

"Okay. Now get inside it."

"What?" Dean hurried to his brother's side, holding him close. "What is it, Sammy? What do you need?"

Sam flinched and recoiled from him.

"What?"

"They've got you."

"They? Who's 'they'?"

"The demons. You... Your eyes! You're not Dean."

"What are you talking about, Sam? Of course I'm me!"

"No," Sam shook his head frantically. "No, you're not. I'll get you back, though, Dean – I promise. Can you hear me? I promise I'll get you out of there, Dean."

"I hear you." But he didn't see the punch coming until he felt it impact with his face. "God damn it, Sam!"

Sam started talking in a foreign language, reciting a chunk of gobbledygook that sounded like those
lawyer phrases he’d been learning before Ruby had come along.

Dean shook him. "Sam? Sam! Cut it out, man." Sam wouldn't shut up – just kept talking rubbish. Where the hell was he getting this stuff from? As a last resort Dean apologised, before slapping him hard across the face.

Sam blinked. "De... Dean?"

"It's me, Sammy. I'm here," Dean assured him, cradling him in his arms. "Shit, man, you're heart's racing and you're burning a fever!"

"I feel great, Dean. So good. I love you."

"I know," Dean sobbed, fighting back tears. "I'm going to take care of you, okay?" he promised. "I'm going to take care of you. I've got to, because that's my job, right? Watching out for my pain in the ass little brother," he choked on those last words, the tears he'd been trying to desperately to hold back falling freely now. "Now I'm going to get you to the hospital. The demons won't get you there."

"They won't?"

"No. Now come on, man – help me get you up."

Dean hauled Sam so his feet, which was an achievement giving his great size, and he half carried, half dragged him down three flights of stairs and into the Impala.

* * *

"I need some help here!" he shouted as he carried Castiel into the hospital.

"What the—"

"Oh, my!"

"Somebody call Doctor Garrison!"

A trolley was wheeled over and he laid Castiel down on it, following the nurses who wheeled him away in a hurry.

"Sir! Excuse me! Sir!"

Dean spun round reluctantly, not wanting to let Castiel out of his sight. "That's my—"

"You'll need to fill this form out for him," the nurse said calmly.

"But I've got to—"

"If you want to help your friend, then fill this out." A reassuring hand was placed on his arm. "You can't do anything more for him until the doctor's seen him."

Dean let himself be led over to a chair where he sat down, only realising when he went to take the offered form and pen that he was clenching Castiel's coat tightly in his hands.
"Doc?" Dean leapt to his feet as soon as the doctor appeared. "How is he?"

"We've had to sedate him," Dr Garrison explained. "He kept lashing out at the nurses. From the looks of things he took it pretty rough. I'd say it's a good thing you showed up when you did."

Dean's stomach clenched in guilt because he should have gotten there quicker, should have pressed Cas for more information so he knew which club he was at, should have—

"Sir, I have to ask - is there any chance he could have been... assaulted... in any other way?"

Images of Castiel in the alley with his trousers around his ankles flashed through Dean's mind and he closed his eyes as he tried to shake that image from his head. He blinked back tears as he told himself that nothing like that had happened, it couldn't have, but the more he tried to stop imagining the worst the more he thought about how he'd been when he'd found him. He felt like he was going to throw up.

"Sir?"

Dean shrugged the other man's hand off him with a growl. "Get off me."

The doctor took a step back. "Does he have any family you can call?"

Dean shook his head, belatedly noticing the weight in one of the pockets in Castiel's coat. He put his hand in and brought out the cell he'd bought. Scrolling through the contacts – there were only five – he found Balthazar, Bobby, Dean, Father, and Pamela Barnes. He hit dial.

As the phone rang in his ear he closed his eyes and hoped 'Father' didn't mean Father Reynolds.

"Who is this?"

"Uh, my name's Dean. Dean Winchester, sir?"

"It's late."

"I know, I'm sorry. I'm looking for the father of, uh, Castiel Milton?"

There was a pause before the man spoke again. "Who did you say you were?"

"Dean."
"Dean," the man repeated. "And you say you know Castiel?"

"We live together. But not like that! I— We're friends," Dean babbled, trying to assuage the man's suspicions. He could almost feel himself being analysed in the following silence that went on too long and he began to fidget.

"Has found his way back to God?"

Dean frowned. "He's still gay, if that's what you're asking. I don't really think he can change that."

"Then I have no son by that name."

"He's in hospital," Dean tried to explain.

"I shall pray for his soul, and yours," Castiel's father continued.

"He's hurt!"

"Do not call here again, Dean."

Dean stared at the phone in his hand, finally beginning to understand why Castiel was pushing himself so hard to be someone he wasn't.

* * *

Dean paced up and down the too-small waiting area, aware that he felt more worried than he should. He'd only known Castiel a few months, but if it was Sam in there... He turned Cas's phone over and over in his pocket as he paced. Pam Barnes would probably try to tell him that he was using Cas as a second chance at helping someone sort their life out without screwing it all up like he had with Sam, but then being told shit like that was why he'd stopped seeing her as soon as his three months were up. He didn't want to see it; didn't want to admit that he couldn't save everyone, no matter how hard he tried, and now here he was, screwing up again.

"How is he?" Dean asked again, the next time the doctor appeared.

"He'll be fine," Dr Garrison assured him. "Sore, but fine."

Dean's mouth went dry. By all accounts fine should be good, but the doctor's had told him his dad would be fine. His dad was supposed to be fine, supposed to get better, but he didn't.

"Mr Winchester? Mr Winchester? Did you hear what I just said?"

Dean blinked and looked at the doctor like he hadn't been there a moment ago.

"I said your friend is going to be fine."

Dean shook his head.

"Mr Winchester, Cas has bruised ribs and a mild concussion so will be kept overnight for observation, but he'll be discharged first thing in the morning."

"He's really going to be okay?" Dean asked warily.

The doctor smiled. "He's going to make a full recovery. He'll need to take it easy for a few days, though."
Dean nodded, hardly hearing anything after *full recovery*. That was better than *fine*. Castiel was going to be okay. Dean wasn't going to lose him. He was going to get better. He was going to come *home*. He walked backwards until his back hit the wall, sliding slowly down until he was sitting on the floor. He rested his arms on his knees, burying his face in his hands as he sobbed in relief. He couldn't bare the thought of going back to an empty flat – it was actually beginning to feel like a *home* with Castiel there.

Then the doctor's hand was resting on his shoulder. "He's still out of it just now, but you can go in and see him whenever you want."

He heard the doctor walk away, and he wiped his face angrily as he thought of all the things he wanted to do to that son of a bitch who'd put Castiel in here in the first place. Digging his hand into his pocket, he called the only person he could.

"Hello?" a female voice answered sleepily.

Dean's shoulders slumped. "Put Sam on."

"Dean? Have you *any* idea what time it is?" Jess all but yelled at him. "I know you're a selfish asshole who only ever calls his brother – the *only* family he has – when he needs something, but I would have thought that even you—"

There was a minor scuffle on the other end and the rustling of bed sheets.

"Dean?"

Sam!" he gasped, like he was able to breath properly for the first time all night.

"Dean, do you know what time it is?"

"Funnily enough, yeah, I do."

"Couldn't it wait?"

"I'm at the hospital, Sam."

There was silence at the other end.

"Sam?"

"What did you do?"

"Me? I didn't do anything!"

"Well the last time you were in hospital it was because you'd got drunk and nearly wrapped your car around a tree."

Sam didn't need to remind him – his brother's words to him that night were forever etched into his memory.

"*Dean, have you learned nothing?*" Sam had shrieked at him as soon as he'd laid eyes on Dean in his hospital bed. "Are you trying to kill yourself? Because if you *are*, you're going the right way about it! Don't you think we've both lost enough?"

"What's wrong, Dean? DEAN!"
The urgency in Sam's tone brought him back to the here and now and he blinked back tears. "It's Cas," he said thickly.

"Cas?"

Dean took a deep, shaky breath before he spoke again. "He got beat up."

"What?"

"He's a mess." Tears fell from his eyes and Dean wiped them away with a hand before he lost it completely. "And Sam, I— He's pumped full of drugs right now, but Sam... I don't know how much all this is going to cost," he said, his voice shaking.

"What about his family?"

"His dad won't come down. He kicked him out months ago 'cause he disapproved of his 'life choices'."

"What does that even— Wait, is Cas gay?" Sam asked, putting two and two together. "Is that what you mean?"

"What does that matter?" Dean shouted, earning himself a stern look from one of the night nurses.

"Look, don't worry about it — when you get the bill just tell me how much you need."

"Sam!" Jess complained in the background.

"He's my brother, Jess."

Dean could hear Jess telling him, "But Cas isn't!"

There was rustling at the other end as Sam got out of bed, and Dean could hear him padding heavily down the hall as Jess complained about 'learning to stand on his own two feet'. "Whatever the two of you need, okay?"

Dean fought back tears as guilt and relief battled to consume him.

"Dean?"

"Thanks, Sammy," he choked.

"Dean... Is there anything else you want to tell me?" Sam asked slowly. "Anything else I should know?"

"What – are you going to give me another lecture again?" Dean snapped defensively. "Because I really don't think that now's the best time."

"No! Dean, I... I worry about you."

"I don't need you to worry about me, Sam. I got me for that."

"You don't worry about yourself nearly as much as you should."

"Bitch," Dean grumbled.

"How are you?"
"What are you asking me that for?" Dean hissed loudly. "I'm not the one lying half-dead in a hospital bed!"

"Dean, I— First mom, then dad... me. And now Cas? How are you?"

"I'm fucking peachy, Sam!" he roared. Then he noticed the nurse stalking towards him. "Sam, I've got to go. I'll call you, okay?"

"Okay. And Dean?"

"Sam?"

"Take care of yourself."

"Always do," he replied cockily, but it sounded forced even to his ears.

* * *

Castiel blinked. Everything was bright and fuzzy, like when he was a child and had tried on his grandfather's spectacles. He tried to raise a hand to his face but his limbs were too heavy. A hand slid into his, giving it a gentle squeeze, and he tensed.

"No... No..." he mumbled groggily. He hurt everywhere. Couldn't they just leave him alone?

Someone leaned over him, but it was too bright to see and he was just a shadow.

"No!" he shouted, using up what little strength he had to lash out at his attacker. "Stop."

"Cas?"

"Stop it!"

"Cas! " Louder this time.

"Please..." Castiel trailed off with a sob as his body gave out and he couldn't fight any more.

"I'm here, buddy."

"De... Dean?" he asked tentatively, squinting at the blurry figure leaning over him.

"Yeah – it's me, Cas. I'm here."

Castiel racked his brain; he remembered being in the Impala... Had Dean driven him home? This didn't feel like the couch – was he in Dean's bed? That wouldn't do. He tried to sit up, but a warm, gentle hand on his chest easily persuaded him differently.

"Do you want me to get the nurse?"

Oh. He was in hospital. He shook his head.

"How are you feeling?"

"Like I've been beaten up," Castiel mumbled, one corner of his mouth twitching slightly, before he winced.

"Anything else you want to tell me?" he asked carefully.
"Like what?" Cas croaked.

"Like... anything."

Castiel turned his head away in a futile attempt to stop Dean from seeing him looking so pathetic. Getting attacked in an alley when he was perfectly capable of defending himself was just embarrassing. He was never drinking again.

"Cas, man, I gotta know."

"Know what?" he asked, his voice dry and scratchy.

"The way I found you... You're jeans were..." He made a downwards motion with his hands.

Castiel fumbled at him until Dean caught both his hands and held them, just staring at him as he waited for him to respond.

"I was waiting for you. I needed to urinate."

"And?"

"And I urinated."

"And that's... all?"

Dean could identify the moment Castiel realised what it was he was asking. "Even I know it's not normal to have such an interest in your friend's bowel movements," he said lightly.

"Damn, Cas," Dean chuckled, the words thick in his throat as he fought back tears. "I thought, maybe... I mean, the doctor asked if..." He gripped Castiel's hand again, and this time Castiel didn't try to pull away.

"No, Dean."

"Thank God," he breathed weakly.

Castiel tried to turn over but his body was too heavy, and his head was pounding something awful. He couldn't even squeeze Dean's hand to let him know that everything was going to be alright.

"I want to sleep, now," he mumbled.

Dean nodded. "Okay."

* * *

When Castiel had mumbled something else, Dean thought he could make out the word stay. "Of course I'll stay," he'd said.

Once Case had let sleep take him, he called Bobby.

"What? Who is this?" Bobby grumbled sleepily.

"Dean," he said quietly.

"Dean? What are you calling me in the middle of the damn night for? And why are you whispering?"
"Cas is in hospital."

"Shit. What happened?"

"He got beat up."

"How bad?"

Dean wiped a hand across his eyes. He was not going to cry, damn it! "It looks worse than it is, but, uh... He won't be in for the rest of the week. At least."

"And neither will you."

"What?"

"You're going to take some time off and take care of that boy."

"Bobby, I can't," Dean said, though it was tearing him up inside. "I need the money. We need the money."

"Where's your head at, boy? You've got almost all your annual leave left to take – I'm not going to leave you with nothing. So you just get that boy back on his feet, and I won't see you 'til next week!"

Dean stood there listening to the dial tone long after Bobby had hung up, too shocked to do anything else.

* * *

"You look tired."

Dean sat up, relieved to hear Castiel sound a bit more like himself. "Oh, yeah. I spent half the night on the phone, calling people, sorting stuff out."

"But you got half a night's sleep?"

"No, not really," Dean admitted. "I spent the other half the night watching you sleep."

"You should have rested, Dean."

"I couldn't. I needed to know you were going to be okay."

"And? Am I?"

"Yeah," he grinned. "Yeah, you're going to be just fine, Cas. I mean, you're probably going to hurt like hell for a couple of weeks, but you'll live," Dean said, trying and failing to be light-hearted about it.

Castiel relaxed slightly. "Don't you have work?" he frowned.

"Not for the rest of the week," he said. "And neither do you. I'm going to take you home, and we're just going to relax in front of the TV all day. You won't have to lift a finger."

* * *

"I should probably text Balthazar and tell him what happened," Castiel said once Dean had him settled on the sofa.
"You don't have to do that now, though? Don't you just want to relax?"

"Texting is hardly a strenuous activity," Cas pointed out as he started typing.

"I can't believe Balthazar took you to a strip club," Dean muttered. "No, I take that back - I can't believe you went to a strip club!"

Castiel didn't answer at first, checking his message for spelling errors before he sent it. Then he looked up at Dean. "It was where Balthazar wanted to go. It was his birthday."

Dean hummed his disinterest. "Oh, but I'd, uh, got *The Green Mile* for us to watch last night," Dean remembered. "I know you liked the book, and the film's pretty good, so..." He shrugged. "We could watch that later if you wanted."

"You're awesome," Castiel smiled, leaning forward to try and hug Dean.

"Hey, come on. Sit," Dean instructed, easing him back.

Castiel rolled his eyes. "Have you any idea how boring the next weeks going to be if you're not going to let me to do anything?"

"Have you any idea how worried I was not knowing if you were going to make it through the night?" Dean shot back.

Castiel's face fell. "I'm sorry." Then he frowned. "I thought I wasn't that bad?"

Dean shrugged, unable to speak around the lump in his throat.

"Dean?"

"I was just imagining the worst, I guess."

"Come here," he said, loosely grasping Dean's wrist and tugging him forwards until he sat down beside him.

"What about the DVD?" Dean protested.

"I thought you said we could watch that later?" Cas pointed out, wincing as he pulled Dean closer, one hand resting on his hip and the other brushing through Dean's hair.

"What the fuck are you doing?"

"I'm here, Dean. I'm not going anywhere. I promise."

After a moment Dean gave in, because actually Cas running his hand through his hair was kind of nice. Carefully, he snuggled up against Cas's side. "I don't cuddle," he insisted, before adding, "but I'll let you hold me if it makes you feel better."

* * *

True to his word, Dean wouldn't let Castiel move unless he needed to use the bathroom. After they finished *The Green Mile* – which Castiel loved just as much as the book, if not more – they spent the afternoon flipping through channels, watching whatever caught their eye, and as the day wore on Castiel leaned further and further into Dean. He rubbed his head against Dean's shoulder, trying to get himself comfortable.
"You feeling okay?"

"Just tired," Castiel admitted.

"You should go to sleep, then." Dean leaned forward and grabbed the remote, knocking his empty beer bottles over in the process, but Castiel placed a hand on his thigh and shook his head. "Cas..."

"If I sleep now I won't sleep at night," he pointed out.

Dean settled back down. "One yawn, and this goes off so you can get some rest," he insisted. He turned his gaze back to the TV, but his attention was still very firmly on Castiel.

On the TV, a woman screamed.

"You looked scared," Castiel told him.

"What?"

"When you looked at me this morning, you looked scared."

"I was worried about you."

"It was more than that."

Dean's knuckles went white around the TV remote. "You could have died."

"The doctor told you I'd be fine."

"Yeah, well, sometimes doctors get it wrong, Dean said roughly.

Castiel looked up at him, blue eyes raking across his face trying to determine what it was Dean wasn't telling him. With a sigh, Dean switched the TV off and tossed the remote back on the table. He sat there silently, chewing on his bottom lip and when he glanced up at the photo by the TV he was aware of Castiel looking rather guilty out of the corner of his eye.

"You've looked at it."

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"It's okay."

"Everyone looks very happy."

"We were. Before mom died."

Castiel didn't say anything, afraid that Dean would retreat back into himself.

"I was four, Sam was just a baby. Six months old," Dean said after a moment. "There was a fire. Dad gave Sam to me, told me to get him out. I always thought that maybe, just maybe, if I'd have been faster to get to him, and take Sam from him, that he'd have been able to save mom, too. He was never the same after that. I practically raised Sam – Dad just raised the bottle to his mouth most nights."

His tears fell unrestrained, and Castiel placed his hand over Dean's clenched fist in a silent display of support.
"We'd gone out together a few years ago, for the first time in a long time – him, me and Sam," Dean began. "Celebrating sobriety. I'd let Sam drive us home. Dad was sat in the front with him. This truck just came out of nowhere and smashed right into us. Dad..." He swallowed thickly. "Dad died. Not instantly – they got him to the hospital and said he was going to be fine. It was me that they thought wasn't going to make it. But I'm still here. He collapsed, all of a sudden, and they couldn't bring him back." Dean let out a shaky breath. "After the crash, Sam... He kind of lost it for a while. He and dad had never really seen eye-to-eye, and I guess he regretted a lot of the things he'd said to him over the years. That, and the fact he was driving..." Dean trailed off. "I should have seen it coming."

"What?" Castiel asked quietly, stroking Dean's arm, and he could have kicked himself for interrupting.

"The drugs," Dean said simply. "Block it out – the guilt, the memory of it; make him feel good. I just didn't see it until it was too late."

"Dean, you can't blame yourself – you were grieving, too."

"Yeah," Dean laughed bitterly. "I didn't know I was driving around with a busted tail light. I had Sam high as a kite beside me on the way to the hospital when this cop pulled us over. I think we're in the clear, then just as the cop's about to let us go he sees the packet of little white pills Sam's dropped on the floor." Dean shook his head. "I told you Sam was a lawyer, right?"

"You mentioned it, yes."

"If he'd been convicted he'd have lost his scholarship and been kicked out of law school. All Sam's ever wanted to be was a lawyer, because the arsonist who killed mom got off on a technicality and then disappeared. I was getting by, doing odd jobs here and there, and he had this whole bright future ahead of him. I didn't have a choice, Cas. It's been my job to look after Sam all our lives, ever since we were kids. 'Look after your brother, Dean,' he said, in a perfect imitation of his father."

"What did you do?" Castiel asked, already knowing what the answer was going to be.

"I said the drugs were mine. That I was taking Sam to the hospital because he'd mistaken them for aspirin and I was worried sick about him. The cop called an ambulance for Sam and arrested me."

"Dean!" Castiel gasped softly. He knew Dean was kind and often selfless but he'd had no idea just how far Dean was prepared to go for those he cared about.

"I got charged and pleaded guilty to possession. They left Sam alone. The only reason I didn't wind up behind bars was because my idiot brother stood up in court and told them about the accident and how Dad's death had affected us both."

"I don't understand – you wanted to go to jail?" Castiel clarified, confused.

"No! But I didn't want to use Dad's death that way – it just wasn't right. It felt like saying it was all his fault."

"I'm sure Sam was only doing what he thought best," Castiel tried. "He'd have been looking out for you."

"It's my job to look out for him, not the other way about. Older brother, remember?" Dean said, jerking his thumb towards himself. "Anyway, I ended up with a suspended sentence on the condition that I went to counselling and completed this drugs course – "I have an addiction" and so on. Load of bullshit."
"So after all you've done for each other, how is it that you have both become so estranged from each other?

"Maybe we did too much for each other," Dean speculated wistfully.

* * *

"Sam, you shouldn't have done that." Dean growled as he walked out of court, hauling the tie that had been choking him for the past few hours loose.

"Why the hell not, Dean?" he shot back, following his brother down the front steps.

"Don't you get mad at me. Don't you do that. I had to look out for you. It's my job."

"I don't need you looking out for me!" Sam cried. "I haven't done since we were kids!"

"It's my job to look after you, Sam – it always has been! Take care of your brother, now, Dean.' 'Look after Sammy for me, Dean.'"

"And who was going to take care of you when were in jail being somebody's bitch?"

"Son of a bitch, Sammy!" Dean spun round to face him angrily. "You really think I'd let that happen?"

"I just don't get why you did it." Sam brushed his hair out of his eyes as he looked desperately at his brother. "Why didn't you want me telling them about dad?"

"It was just plain wrong!" Dean growled.

"Do you think Dad would have wanted you to go to jail for me?"

"I will never stop taking care of you, Sam! So maybe you should have thought about that before you tried to throw your whole Goddamn life away!" Dean turned on his heels and strode off, feeling Sam's hard gaze burning into him as he walked away.

* * *

"You know I can't be in a car if I'm not driving, now?" he said abruptly. "I just feel so out of control, and I can't breathe." Dean leaned forward, his head in his hands.

"It's why after a night out I walk home instead of taking a cab."

Castiel gently shifted closer to him until their thighs were barely touching, and he rubbed a soothing hand between Dean's shoulder blades.

Dean let out a shaky breath. It hadn't been hard, telling Castiel everything. There was no feeling of relief, but neither did he feel the familiar anger bubbling up when usually confronted with his past. He turned to face Castiel. "I've never told anyone that before. Any of it, but especially not about the driving thing." He felt weak under Castiel's sad, sympathetic gaze, and that made him angry. "So help me, if you tell anyone any of that—"

Castiel shook his head vehemently. "Of course not!" he cried, and Dean's posture relaxed slightly. "Dean, it's perfectly normal to want the illusion of safety that comes with being behind the wheel," he went on understandingly. He paused for a moment. "But you do know that if you had been the one driving that night, there's no guarantee it would have turned out any differently – don't you?"

Dean stared at him. It was like Castiel knew – how did he know? He always thought of himself as a
closed off guy, but the way Castiel was staring at him with those impossibly blue eyes of his made it feel like Castiel was reading his damn soul.

Castiel could see Dean putting his guard up again in the way his gaze turned cold, and he moved his hand up to the short hairs on the back of his neck. "You don't have to pretend with me, Dean. You saved me, in more ways than one. I won't judge you – not for anything."

He wrapped his arms around him and a moment later Dean's need for comfort seemed to win the battle with his need to be strong, and Castiel felt him melt into his embrace. Castiel sat there and just held him, stroking his fingers through his short hair and murmuring reassurances in his ear until Dean fell into a peaceful doze.
Chapter 19

Chapter Notes

Un-beta'd.

Dean made sure that Castiel spent the next week taking it easy. He didn't complain about being in pain, but Dean noticed how carefully he held himself when he stood up and how gingerly he would remove his sweater when he got too hot. Dean was always on hand to help Cas with anything he needed, considering how badly having to take Castiel to hospital had scared Dean – but just how scared he'd been scared him even more. It surprised him just how much he'd come to care for Castiel.

He tried to encourage Cas to reschedule his first appointment with Pamela, but settled for driving him there and back when Castiel insisted on going.

* * *

Castiel looked around Pamela's room apprehensively, taking in the diplomas and certificates on the walls, the comfortable looking chair, and the uncomfortable looking sofa.

"Do you want me to sit, or lie down?" he asked.

"Whichever you prefer."

He looked from one piece of furniture to the other, unsure if it was some sort of test, before taking the chair.

Pamela said nothing; just carried over a pitcher of iced water and two glasses, before taking her seat on the other side of the desk.

"You said on the phone that Father Reynolds recommended you see me. Why?"

"Because he thought it appropriate?"

Pamela smiled. "No, I meant why have you come to see me?"

Castiel's face grew warm in embarrassment. "I've been really unhappy."

Pam nodded, half-filling both their glasses. "In general, or..?"

"My father kicked me out," he said quickly.

"I see."

Castiel drained his glass as Pam waited for him to continue in his own time.

"He and I disagreed," Castiel said finally.

When Pamela realised he wasn't going to say anything else, she pushed. "What about?"

Castiel put his glass down too hard and Pam raised her eyebrows.
"I'm sorry," he said. He watched her reaction very carefully as he said, "I'm gay."

Pamela puffed her cheeks out as his words sank in. "Huh."

"Is that a good 'huh' or a bad 'huh'?" Castiel asked after a moment.

"I dated a girl for several months in uni. Great sex, but ultimately not for me."

"Are you saying it's a phase, what I'm going through?"

"No, that's not what I meant. I just want you to know that I'm not going to judge you, no matter what you tell me."

Castiel's shoulders dropped slightly.

"You look disappointed by that."

"It would be easier, knowing that these feelings would go away in time. They can be hard to ignore."

"Who says you should ignore them? They're a part of who you are." When Castiel said nothing, she looked down at her notepad. "So I take it your father doesn't like how you feel?"

"My father thinks God doesn't like it."

She nodded thoughtfully. "How do you feel about him?"

"Who? God?"

"Your father."

"I... What do you mean?"

"Are you angry with him? Do you hate him?"

"No."

Pamela hummed thoughtfully but didn't press the matter. "Do you have any siblings?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"One. An older brother; Michael."

"And your mother?"

"She died."

"How long ago?"

"The night I was born," he stated.

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said sincerely, not pressing for details because she understood what he was saying. "Why don't we start at the beginning? Tell me about your childhood."

***
Halloween was almost upon them, and when Castiel said that he'd never carved a jack o' lantern, Dean promptly went out and bought them one each.

"How do we... Where do I start?" Castiel asked, looking at the large pumpkin in front of him.

"With the lid," Dean said. "You need to be able to get your hand in there and have some room to move around, so make it a decent size"

"Okay," Castiel said hesitantly, watching as Dean demonstrated.

"Don't cut straight down or it'll fall in," Dean instructed as he made a notch. When Cas stared at him, Dean added, "What? It helps show how to put the thing back on."

"Okay," Castiel repeated, more confidently once Dean had finished.

As Castiel took the knife and started on his pumpkin, Dean rolled up his sleeve and dug his hand inside. "You want to get all the crap out first," Dean said.

"You know," he said as he sawed into the top of his pumpkin, "you can toast the seeds. They make a really..." he hesitated to say healthy "...tasty snack."

Dean shrugged. "Well if you want to do that, we'll keep the seeds." He looked at Castiel's pumpkin. "How are you managing there?"

"Quite well, thank you," Castiel said determinedly, scowling at his pumpkin.

Dean chuckled. "If you say so." He remembered Sam making a better job of his first pumpkin when he was six. He waved what looked like a spoon with serrated sides at Cas. "Now it's time to start scraping out the flesh."

Castiel eyed Dean. His focus was now solely on his pumpkin, not on Cas, and Castiel had a fleeting desire to be able to draw so that he could capture the intensity in Dean's face, as he scooped handfuls of guts and seeds into piles. He startled himself with a laughed that had him clutching at his ribs in pain.

"What?" Dean asked, his concentration broken. "Are you okay?"

"You just look so serious," Castiel smiled.

"Pumpkin carving is a very serious business, Cas," Dean joked in monotone.

Once Castiel had scooped out the majority of his seeds he turned his attention to Dean, watching as he expertly scraped the insides of his pumpkin.

When Dean was satisfied with his own work, he held the spoon out to Cas, who jabbed it into his pumpkin awkwardly.

"Do you want a hand?" Dean asked after a moment.

"Hmm?" Castiel replied absently.

"Here."

Castiel froze as Dean stepped behind him.

"Like this," Dean murmured, his breath ghosting across Castiel's ear as he guided their hands
through the suddenly-too-small opening into the damp cavern inside the pumpkin. Dean's grip was firm as he skimmed their hands along the curved contours of the pumpkin. Castiel felt oddly light headed as he let his hand be manoeuvred around the sticky depths.

"Hey, you still with me? I'm not doing it for you," Dean said lightly, noticing the way Castiel's hand fell limp in his.

When Castiel turned to Dean, mouth already forming a yes that got lost between his lungs and his lips when he was caught off guard by just how close Dean was, he was acutely aware of the half-second during which Dean's eyes dropped to his mouth, the tip of his tongue slipping out from between his lips to skim across his lower lip.

He thought he may have breathed Dean's name, but he couldn't be sure.

Whether he did or didn't was irrelevant, however, because Dean stepped away from him like he'd been electrocuted, his hand pulling away from Castiel's so quickly that the pumpkin rocked sideways and he knocked the bowl of pumpkin seeds, sending them scattering across the floor.

"Dean—"

"I've got this. Shit. Sorry."

"Dean, it's fine."

"No, it's not, I— Shit!"

"Dean!" Castiel cried as he just stood there, not sure whether he should help or bury himself back in his pumpkin but feeling like something other than a kitchen mess was wrong. He just didn't know what it was or what he could do.

"Shit, shit, shit," Dean continued muttering under his breath as he picked up seed after seed.

With a sigh of resignation, Castiel dropped to his knees to help.

"I can do this, Cas," Dean mumbled.

"I want to help."

"I can clean up my own damn mess!"

"I know you can. But that doesn't mean I'm not going to help you," Castiel insisted stubbornly.

Dean stopped what he was doing to stare Cas. His stomach lurched. His words sounded so much more profound after they'd escaped his mouth.

Clearing his throat and desperately striving for levity, Cas said, "Hey - you still with me?"

Hearing his own words used against him, Dean dropped his eyes and numbly resumed picking up seeds. The two of them got it done quickly, and when they got to their feet he quietly asked, "So what do you want me to do with these?"

Castiel smiled. "Give them a good wash and then put them somewhere to dry out."

Once Dean had meticulously washed them, getting rid of the sticky, stringy gloop clumped around them, he tossed them out on some paper towels to dry. Next he wet a cloth and started wiping the
floor because the linoleum was tacky beneath his feet.

By that point Cas was getting the hang of his pumpkin, though he had to pause every few minutes until the ache in his chest ebbed, and it wasn't long before they had a large bowl of pumpkin flesh in front of them and two roughly carved jack-o'-lanterns.

"Not bad," Dean nodded, looking over Cas's pumpkin. "Not bad for a first attempt."

* * *

Halloween passed quietly, but then when you lived on the third floor of an apartment building trick-or-treaters tended to be far and few between. Dean may have encouraged the little menaces to skip them by turning off every single light in the apartment and closing the curtains as early as five o'clock. The glow from the television screen and the two small candles flickering inside their pumpkins has been all that illuminated the living room as they huddled side by side watching classic scary movies all night, while Dean munched his way through a whole bag of mixed Halloween candy which Castiel had thought was supposed to be for potential trick-or-treaters.

When they'd finally called it a night Castiel had gone to bed complaining that he was going to have nightmares, but Dean had just laughed at him and told him to check under his bed for monsters.

The pillow that Castiel had thrown at him in response had hit him in the head.

* * *

Halloween may only have been the day before, but all traces of it had already been scrubbed from the stores. Everywhere he'd looked there were special offers on Thanksgiving this and Christmas that. Dean couldn't think of anyone who would need a giant stuffed turkey centerpiece or 135 feet of wrapping paper, even if it was on special at $40 and came packaged with assorted bows and ribbons. He grunted as he jostled the shopping bags in his arms to free a finger so that he could hit the button for the elevator. He hadn't meant to be out so long, but the douchebag in the sports car had rear-ended the car in front.

He paused before opening the front door because he heard voices.

"Hello?" he called tentatively as he opened the door.

"Dean!" Castiel shouted back. "I'd like you to meet Balthazar!"

"I'll be right there!"

Dean abandoned the groceries on the kitchen counter and sauntered through to the living room, already on edge. He dropped a puzzle book in front of Cas. "I got that for you."

"Thank you," Cas smiled. He sat up a little straighter in his seat and said, almost proudly, "Dean, this is Balthazar."

"Dean! So good to meet you!" Balthazar exclaimed from where he was sitting in Dean's seat eating Dean's pecan pie and drinking Dean's beer.

Dean narrowed his eyes. "You too."

"I was just telling Cas that I feel awful that I didn't wait for you with him. I feel like it's all my fault."
"It's not your fault," Castiel assured him.

"I don't know," Dean said, sitting down. "I think friends should look out for each other."

"Dean!" Castiel hissed in shock.

"What? I wouldn't let my drunk friend wander around alone at night."

"And that is exactly why I feel bad," Balthazar said, as Castiel bit back a retort that Dean didn't have any friends. "Though I have to say, you took your time getting there."

Dean straightened in his seat. It wasn't like he hadn't had that same thought himself. "What?" he said, his tone low and deadly.

"Well, I mean—"

"Stop it, both of you!" Castiel snapped. He looked at his two friends, each trying to outstare the other, and he sighed. "You're both being ridiculous. Some things just happen, like accidents, and you can't stop them."

"Accidents don't just happen accidentally, Cas!"

Balthazar chuckled into his beer bottle.

It took another moment for Dean to realise what he'd just said, and he glared at the other man until he started shifting uncomfortably in his seat.

"I think I should be going," Balthazar said eventually.

"No, Balthazar, you don't have to go just yet."

"It's alright, Cas," Balthazar said, standing up.

Dean's stomach clenched because Cas was his nickname for him.

"It was very nice of you to come by," Castiel said, shooting an unhappy look in Dean's direction. "I only wish you would have stayed longer."

"Oh, I have places to go, people to see, and all that."

"Good," Dean said quickly. "I'll show you to the door."

Balthazar let Dean usher him towards the door without complaint.

"Come again soon!" Castiel pleaded, following them into the hallway.

"Maybe we can catch up once you're feeling better, eh?"

Dean scoffed, and Castiel pushed him out of the way. "You should put the shopping away before it starts to defrost," he said icily. He turned to Balthazar and lowered his voice. "That would be a very good idea, and I am so sorry about Dean."

Balthazar cast a glance over his Castiel's shoulder, to where Dean was glaring at him from the kitchen. "I'll see you soon," he promised, pulling Cas into a gentle hug.

"You don't have to apologise for me," Dean said as soon as the door clicked shut.
Castiel turned on Dean. "Yes, I do. I know this is your home, but did you have to be so rude? You've done so much for me, but is it too much to ask you to be civil to the only friend I have?"

Dean froze in place, no longer noticing the cold. "I thought I was your friend," he said carefully. "I thought you were, too."

Dean screwed his eyes shut as he let out a shaky breath. First John, then Sam, and now Cas...

"In case you'd forgotten, I don't exactly have a lot of friends, Dean," Castiel continued coolly. "Please don't make me choose between them."

He made his way back to the living room, and Dean made no attempt to follow him. He only moved after the fridge started beeping at him, informing him that the door was still open, and he took his time unpacking the rest of the shopping.

* * *

Castiel sat down wearily. His sides were aching, and given the amount of pain he'd been in for the first couple of days he was surprised he didn't have broken ribs. Dean had been great, making sure he had everything he could possible need - even if he did treat him like a child some of the time.

Of course, now Dean was acting like a child, and Castiel was stuck in the middle. He supposed that was how Michael must have felt, being stuck between his brother and his father.

He sighed and reached for the book of puzzles that Dean had brought him and flipped through it. Stopping on a random page somewhere near the middle of the book he started reading through the crossword clues, but found he couldn't focus on the words. He tossed the book aside angrily and ran a hand through his hair. Why did Dean have to make Balthazar feel uncomfortable? Why couldn't Dean just be happy for him? It was at times like this he'd turn to God, but he didn't have a... Wait a minute. He'd accumulated a small pile of books at the side of the sofa, and he knocked them over until he found the Bible Dean had bought him all those weeks ago at the bottom of the pile. He ran a hand down the cover, thinking about his father refusing to let him take his own copy with him; telling him that he didn't deserve it.

He opened the cover, and several pages turned with it, settling on a page titled Guidance in life. At the very top of the page, it said Anger – p451 – Ephesians 4:25-32.

He turned to page four hundred and fifty-one and read.

Therefore each of you must put off falsehood and speak truthfully to his neighbour, for we are all members of one body. "In your anger do not sin": Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry, and do not give the devil a foothold. He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need.

Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what it helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen. And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption. Get rid of all bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, along with every form of malice. Be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other, just as in Christ God forgave you.

He rested his palm against the page and smiled to himself. He'd forgotten the strength he got from turning to the Lord for guidance.
Yes, he was angry.
And he was hurt.
But Dean deserved his forgiveness.

* * *

When Dean couldn't hide in the kitchen any longer he came into the living room slowly, wary of Castiel's reaction.

"Hey," he said softly.

"Hey," Castiel said back.

Dean leaned against the back of the chair, his fingers digging into the stretched, faded leather as he racked his mind for something to say.

"How about we go for a walk?" Castiel asked, breaking the awkward silence.

Okay, so Castiel was holding out an olive branch. That was good. But Dean shook his head. "No. The doctor said you had to rest."

"The doctor said I wasn't to overdo it, not that I wasn't allowed to do anything," Castiel pointed out. He needed to get out, even just for half an hour. Being stuck inside all week was like being locked in his room all over again. "I'm going out, Dean," he said decisively. "You can't stop me."

Dean opened and closed his mouth. He knew exactly how Cas felt. He'd spent a week in hospital and the novelty of having nurses to flirt with had worn off very quickly after his second bed bath – they'd used cold water and threatened to keep using cold water unless he kept his dirty chat-up lines to himself.

"Okay," Dean conceded, not wanting to start another argument when they hadn't resolved the first. "But a short walk."

It was cold outside so Dean let Castiel borrow an old fleece jacket, considering that his trench coat would do little to keep him warm, and half an hour later they were making their way to the park. As they neared the gate Castiel stopped and pressed a hand against his side, his face screwed up in pain.

"Are you alright?"

"I'm fine."

"Let me see," Dean said, his hands moving to the hem of his jacket.

Castiel swatted his hands away.

"Come on, Cas."

"Dean!"

There was a large purple bruise across his side, and it was darker than it had been a couple of days ago.

"Dean, it's cold!" Castiel hissed.
Dean lowered Castiel's clothing again, and Cas shivered as he stuck his hands deep in his pockets.

"Let's sit down for a bit," Dean suggested, guiding Castiel to the nearest bench.

"I'm fine," Castiel insisted, but sat down anyway. Sometimes he breathed too deeply and his side protested, so it would be good to catch his breath.

They watched a beautiful German Shepherd playing fetch, his attention focused solely on the blue ball that was thrown as he chased it, before returning to his owner and dropping at his feet.

Two young boys were riding their skateboards along the path, and Dean was hit with the painful reminder of the Christmas he'd shared with Lisa and Ben – Ben had thrown a fit and hidden upstairs for the whole of Christmas morning when Lisa hadn't bought him the skateboard he'd begged and pleaded for because she thought they were "too dangerous."

"I thought I'd take a turn at cooking dinner tonight," Dean said. "I'm pretty sure I can't go wrong with soup – I watched my dad make it often enough." On the rare occasion that he wasn't drunk, Dean added to himself.

Castiel gave a small shrug. "Okay."

They sat and watched the kids playing tag on the climbing frame for a few minutes, and Dean was half aware of a couple of concerned glanced being sent in their direction – not that he could blame them, really – but no-one told them to fuck off and no-one hurried their kids home, so he supposed they didn't look too creepy. He was just glad that Cas had left his trench coat at home.

"So how are you really?" he asked after a moment.

"My side hurts when I breathe. Just sometimes."

Dean nodded. "You know the doctor said if you were still pain you could make an appointment and talk about getting something stronger," Dean reminded him.

"He also said stronger medication was highly addictive and that if the pain wasn't unbearable he would prefer that I stuck with over-the-counter pain relief."

"Okay."

"I'm sorry." Castiel said after a moment. "I'm just... With Sam and everything, I wasn't trying to—"

"It's okay. I knew you weren't."

"Okay."

Dean laughed as the German Shepherd deserted the ball in favour of chasing a white, neatly clipped poodle across the grass. Judging by the pink satiny bow he saw clipped to her ear as she ran past, the dog had a lot better plans that playing fetch on his mind!

Its owner retrieved the abandoned ball and gave chase. "Colonel! Heel! Colonel!"

The dog ignored its owner's shouts, barking as the poodle led it on a merry dance across the park.

"Look, I'm sorry about what I said to Balthazar, okay?"

"It's not me you should be apologising to, Dean."
Dean closed his eyes. "I know. I just... It wasn't him who saw you lying in the hospital, Cas."

Castiel swallowed, and bowed his head as he searched for the right words. "It... seems to have upset you a lot." He bit his bottom lip. "I mean—"

"Yeah," Dean cut him off, not wanting to go into the details of his father's death. He cleared his throat. "I mean, you're a good friend, you know? If anything happened to you... Well. I'd miss you."

Castiel smiled sadly at him.

"And I know it's stupid, but I don't like that he calls you Cas."

Castiel frowned. "But that's my name."

"No, your name is Castiel. I call you Cas."

"Bobby calls me Cas," Castiel pointed out.

"That's because he's heard me call you that. It's like... That's my nickname for you."

Castiel licked his lips, gone rough and dry in the cold. "Did it ever occur to you that Balthazar calls me Cas because that's how I introduced myself to him?"

"You— What?"

"I like that you call me Cas. I like being Cas. Cas is so completely different from Castiel – from who I used to be."

"So, what – Cas is like the new and improved version of Castiel?"

"Cas is the happier version of Castiel," Castiel said pointedly.

Suddenly it clicked in Dean's mind. Castiel was the unhappy boy who couldn't be himself that Dean had found on the bridge, whereas Cas was the man who was finally beginning to accept himself.

"Right. I get it."

"Do you?"

"Yeah. Yeah I do. I was being an idiot."

"My idiot," Castiel smiled without thinking. His words only seemed to make it to his ears after he caught Dean looking at him funny. "I mean," he started, desperately trying to take his words back, "you're my friend and I'm yours... I'm your friend... and you're important to me. As a friend. You're my best friend."

Dean was still looking at him funny as he stumbled his way through a poor explanation for his poorly chosen words. "Cas, don't laugh if I'm barking up the wrong tree but, you don't... like... have a thing for me or anything, do you?"

Castiel swallowed. This was everything he'd been afraid of. But he couldn't lie; not to Dean. He owed him honesty.

"I'm not gonna be mad at you, or anything," Dean promised him.

"Yes," Cas admitted quietly, not looking at him.
Dean let out a breath beside him.

"But I am under no illusion that my feelings for you - whatever they are - are returned." Okay, so that wasn't the whole truth, but it wasn't a lie, either. He didn't believe that Dean felt the same, but he did wish for it. "We're just friends. I know that."

"Fuck."

"I'm sorry," Cas apologised, meeting Dean's eye and silently pleading with him to understand that he hadn't meant for any of this.

"No, I mean, that's rough. I'm sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Castiel told him. "I'm sorry if it makes you uncomfortable."

"What? I dunno, I guess it's flattering? I'm just sorry I don't—"

"I know," Cas cut him off, not wanting to hear Dean tell him that he didn't feel the same. Knowing that Dean wasn't offended by his feelings didn't bring any of the relief that he'd hoped for. "And that's okay."

Dean looked torn, but thankfully glanced at his watch and asked, "Do you want to head back now?"

"I think that would be wise. I'm getting very cold."

"Come on then," Dean said, standing up. After a moment of what looked like hesitation, he held out a hand to help Cas. "Let's get back before it gets colder."

* * *

The fresh air tired Cas out, and when Dean left the soup to simmer he found Cas snoring with a half-completed crossword in his lap. He smiled to himself as he put the book on the table and draped a blanket over him.

"Hmm? Dean?"

"Shh. I didn't mean to wake you," Dean whispered.

"Is it time to eat?"

"No. Go back to sleep."

But Cas retrieved his book from the table as Dean put the TV on quietly; however five minutes later he was snoring again, and Dean chuckled to himself.

* * *

"Dean, that was wonderful," Castiel said as he leaned forward to put his empty soup bowl on the table. "Thank you."

Dean looked down at his bowl to hide his smile. "It's nothing."

"You probably can't wait to get back to work tomorrow. I bet looking after me doesn't make the top one hundred ways to spend your day."

"Oh, I don't know. Looking after you is way better than cleaning the toilet."
"Are you trying to tell me that cleaning the toilet makes it into your top one hundred ways to spend your day?!" Castiel laughed lightly.

Dean roared with laughter, even though it wasn't *that* funny. "Okay, but seriously – I like having someone to look after."

"But going back to work will be good."

"Yeah. I've kind of missed Bobby nagging at me this week."

"I'll tell him you said that," Castiel smiled. "I'm sure he could find a lot more to nag you for."

"Don't you dare!" Dean laughed. "But yeah. About you coming back tomorrow..."

Castiel sent a rather panicked look in Dean's direction. "Bobby hasn't sacked me, has he?"

"Well I mean you're not exactly an *official* employee, you've said it yourself—"

"Dean!" Castiel all but shouted at him, praying that he still had a job to go back to, no matter how temporary it was supposed to be.

"He called when you were sleeping and said you should take tomorrow off as well. Just to make sure you're better."

"*I am* better!"

"I know, I know."

Castiel slumped down in his seat dejectedly, then stiffened and winced as his side protested.

"Bobby might be right."

"Shut up."

Dean raised his eyebrows in surprise.

"I'm sorry," Castiel apologised immediately. "I'm just so bored, and I feel completely *useless* just sitting here all day."

"You're not useless, Cas. And we're just being careful because we care." Castiel looked at him and he coughed. "I mean, you know, like friends do..." he trailed off.

"Thank you, Dean." Castiel wondered if this was how it was going to be from now on - Dean apologising for any little word or action that might give Castiel the wrong idea. "You're a good friend," said, by way of reassuring Dean.

"So what do you want do the rest of the night?" Dean asked.

"Is there anything you can think of that *doesn't* involve watching another film?" Castiel asked. As much as he enjoyed television, he craved something else to do. Though that might partially be boredom talking.

"But you haven't seen any of the best movies!" Dean protested. "I have a *duty* to show you them. And besides, you can't just watch one Marvel movie - they all interlink and it's awesome. But how about this - enough of me picking films that I think you should see. Tonight you can choose."
Castiel shot him a look of mock surprise. "You're letting *me* choose? Really?"

"Dude, shut up."

Castiel laughed. "You know, Balthazar mentioned some sci-fi movie that's supposed to be on tonight."

"Balthazar?"

"Dean," Castiel warned.

"No, I just don't know that I'd want to watch something he'd recommend. He looks like he watches foreign films with subtitles, and if I wanted to read I'd pick up a book." But he pounced on the remote to check what was playing, and a couple of minutes later he let out an impressed sound.

"I take it the film gets your approval?" Castiel asked with a smile.

"Definitely. *Alien*'s a classic." Dean's face fell. "It doesn't start until ten thirty, though."

Castiel didn't really understand the TV cable stuff the same way Dean did, so he mostly let him deal with it. He could surf through the channels and that was about it. He carried their bowls through to the kitchen so he could start washing up, and when Dean said, "Wait a sec... I think I bought this a few months ago," Castiel knew he wasn't being addressed.

Dean was still digging through his old video tapes when Castiel came back, rubbing his fingers which had wrinkled in the washing up water.

"Ta-da!" Dean declared, waving the box at Cas. "You put that in and I'll get the food."

"We *just* ate!"

"We need movie food."

Castiel took the video box from Dean, a bemused expression on his face, and knelt in front of the video player. He copied Dean's actions of simply pushing the video into the slot, and it disappeared into the machine. The film started to play automatically, or at least it looked like it was playing on the video machine, but the TV guide was still on the TV screen. He looked at the remote, but he had no idea what buttons to push.

A few minutes later Dean came back with a bowl of hot buttery popcorn and a bag of candy.

"What is that?" Castiel asked, eyeing the black things suspiciously.

"Liquorice."

"It looks disgusting."

Dean scowled at him. "You and my brother would get on really well. You both have no taste."

Castiel smiled. "I hope I get to meet him one day."

Dean stilled and fell silent.

"But I'm still not eating that," Castiel added, mentally kicking himself for letting the conversation dwell on Sam.
"It's a classic movie food," Dean picked back up. "It's like little chewy pieces of heaven."

"I think God would disagree with you."

"All the more for me then," Dean declared childishly, moving the bag of liquorice to his side.

"Then I suppose the popcorn is mine, then?"

"Hell, no. We're sharing."

Dean grabbed a fistful and stuffed it into his mouth, smiling at Castiel with bulging cheeks.

Castiel shook his head and tossed the remote at Dean. "Here – make it work."

Dean nudged Cas and pointed at a button. "Ah wah," he said through a mouthful of popcorn, and hit the button. Cas snuck a small handful of popcorn and delicately placed the individual kernels into his mouth.

Dean threw himself back onto the couch in a lounging position, arms draped across the back of the sofa and a huge grin on his face.

Castiel tried not to focus on the fact that if he leaned right back, his head would be resting against Dean's arm.

* * *

The first part of the movie went by quickly. Dean was talkative, explaining why he liked the different characters and wondering when the special effects in this movie had gotten so bad, but after a while, Cas began to really get into it.

He could see some themes that really seemed... well... sexual, and he began to wonder if the film was intentionally preying on anxieties over homosexuality and homosexual penetration as a means of discomforting male viewers.

He said as much out loud, and it was like a switch had been flipped. Dean fell almost completely silent, his gaze on Cas as much as the film, and Castiel began to let his commentary fill the space. At first Castiel was afraid he was rambling, but when he checked Dean's reaction from the corner of his eye Dean had a bemused smile on his face. A weird feeling bubbled up in Castiel's chest.

Castiel didn't stop his commentary.

* * *

"Dude, you are seriously weird," Dean said as he switched the TV off, a grin still lighting up his features.

"I was merely pointing out the sexual undertones and symbolism used throughout."

"Cas—"

"You can't see it?"

"—it's a movie about aliens killing people!"

"Yes," Cas conceded. Dean groaned melodramatically when he followed up with, "But not before one of the men was raped by the creature and gave birth to its offspring."
"Okay seriously dude, shut up."

Cas imagined Dean was wishing he'd never shown him the video, but he couldn't find it in himself to be remotely regretful.

"No," Castiel replied, somewhat petulantly, "I think it's interesting."

"Yeah, well, you and your weird-ass interpretations can go shove it. I've seen this movie millions of times and I've never thought about gay oral rape or whatever."

Castiel pondered this for a moment. "Perhaps I'm more aware of the subtext because I have experience with people who perceive homosexuality as something to fear," he mused aloud.

A heavy silence hung between them, highlighted by the weary ticking of the clock on the mantel. Dean looked like he was scrambling for something to say.

"Drink?" Castiel asked, aware that he had perhaps made things between them awkward.

Dean stared at him, a bit of relief in his eyes, but the change of direction in conversation apparently catching him off guard. "Yes. Please."

"Okay." "I do not want to know what you have to say about the sequels..." Dean muttered to himself as Castiel walked gingerly to the kitchen.

"Did you say something about sequels?" he asked lightly.

"No!"

Castiel chuckled to himself as he got the drinks.
Chapter 20

Thick smoke forces its way into his mouth, winding down his throat, and he coughs and retches at the lack of fresh air until he feels like he's going to burst. Somewhere, a baby cries.

"Take your brother outside!"

His skin is crawling, but the more he scratches the hotter he feels. The flames lick at his heels as he realises there's nowhere to run.

"Dad!"

The flames are in him now, under his skin, and his feet more of their own accord as he carried the bundle that has appeared in his arms outside. He doesn't know what it is, but he knows he has to protect it – has to keep it safe.

It's dark – too dark – and he can't see where he's going. He stumbles blindly through the maze of corridors until eventually he sees a faint glow. He falls to his knees as he crawls towards the light, the bundle still in his arms. He knows what it is, now; it's a baby – his baby. Except once he reaches safety the baby crumbles in his arms.

"No!" he shouts as he tries to pull the baby free.

But all that's left is ash and bones.

"No!"

* * *

"No!"

Dean awoke with a start, blankets tangled around his lower half and his when he reached for the bedside light he fell out of bed with a dull thud.

He was shivering despite feeling like he was burning, his body covered in sweat. He tried to focus, his breathing fast and shallow as he tried to get himself orientated. He was at home. He was home.

He was alone, and there was no fire.

Beyond his door a floorboard creaked.

Cas.

Not so alone after all, then. He closed his eyes, hoping that Cas would go away if he stayed quiet, and he began to wonder if he'd imagined it when there was no further sound. He disentangled his limbs from the bed covers and got shakily to his feet, leaning on the wall with one hand to support himself as he moved to the door. He pulled the door roughly open to find Castiel standing there,
hand raised as if he was still trying to summon up the courage to rap on the door.

When it became apparent that Castiel wasn't going to say anything, he reached out and wrapped his hand around Castiel's fist, lowering it from where it was frozen in place.

"Oh," Castiel breathed. "I was going to knock."

"Go back to bed, Cas."

"I heard you."

"It was a bad dream. That's all."

"You were shouting for help."

He was... *Oh. That was new.* He'd woken himself up a lot over the years shouting out, but he'd never been aware of shouting for help before.

"Are you alright?"

Dean forced a smile onto his face. "I'm fine, Cas. Good night."

He shut the door once Cas turned to go, letting his head fall against it with a tired sigh. Every year at around about this time the nightmares came back. He'd gone to bed every night this week expecting to wake up, sweating and screaming, but they hadn't come. In hindsight he should have perhaps told Castiel this would happen, but then that would have led to questions that he didn't want to answer. He'd been stupid to think that maybe this year it would be different, because the dreams were back and worse than ever.

* * *

When Dean's alarm clock jolted him out of another nightmare the next morning he was still tired. He trudged, bleary-eyed, into the kitchen and found a freshly brewed pot of coffee waiting on him. He smiled and poured himself a cup. Castiel didn't really drink coffee all that often, which meant that he'd done it for Dean.

"Thanks," he said, raising his mug when Castiel padded through.

"I figured you could use it," he replied. "Given the amount of shouting you did last night I'd be surprised if you got much sleep."

Dean's mouth went dry as a chill ran up his spine.

"You didn't know?"

"No. The only time I woke up was when you came through."

"Oh. Sorry."

"No... No, it's fine. I'm gonna go shower," he said, shoving his untouched coffee into Castiel's hands and leaving the room.

"Dean?"

Dean started stripping before he'd even closed the door, leaving his boxers in the middle of the floor as he stepped into the shower. He turned the dial right down, shuddering as the warm spray turned
cold. Traditionally he spent the day in bed until late afternoon, and would spend the rest of the day drinking himself into a stupor.

But Cas was here, now.

Now Dean didn't stay out as late and didn't sleep in as late.

He shivered as he scrubbed at his body; the cheap, scentless soap failing to lather on his skin. He didn't even like this soap. He just bought it because it was the type of inexpensive soap he'd been used to growing up. Over the years he'd changed his toothpaste and deodorant from a value range store label to a branded variety, but he'd never done the same for his soap. Perhaps it was about time he did, because it even smelled cheap - and it never seemed to take away the smell of oil and grease.

When he ventured back into the kitchen fully clothed Castiel looked up at him.

"Your coffee's cold."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"Are you alright?"

Yes. No. Maybe. Three answers rushed into his mouth at the same time - one lie, one truth, and one half-truth - but he swallowed them all down again. He wasn't alright. Not by a long shot. But at least he was alive.

"Dean?"

"Hmm?"

"I asked if you were alright."

"I'll be fine," he said, not really answering the question.

He tossed his cold coffee down the sink and poured himself a fresh cup.

"Is that mine?" he asked, pointing at the bacon sitting in the frying pan.

"If you want it."

"Awesome," he said, tearing open a roll and lavishing it with butter.

He was aware of Castiel watching him carefully as he piled the bacon on his roll, leaving the fat Castiel had already trimmed off in the pan. He was acting weird, he knew, but he didn't want to talk about it. He bit into his it and started chewing as he carried his breakfast over to the table.

Cas slid the sports page over to him as he lowered his gaze back to the rest of the paper.

Dean tried to ignore the way Castiel's eyes occasionally flicking up as if to check up on him as he read the baseball scores. When he was done he folded the paper in half, the date jumping out at him even though it was the smallest font on the page.

November 2nd.

He scowled and threw the paper across the table to Cas a little too roughly.

"Sorry. There you go."
He glanced at his watch, the number two above the six telling him the date catching his eye.

"I've got to get to work."

"I guess I'll just amuse myself today," Castiel muttered.

"You do that," Dean agreed, his disinterested tone a result of him only half listening to Cas. Castiel frowned. "Tell Bobby that I'll be back tomorrow, whether he wants me or not. I'm getting cabin fever."

The front door slammed shut and Castiel sighed. Whether it was because Dean's nightmares had disturbed his sleep or he had something on his mind, Dean wasn't behaving like his usual self.

* * *

Dean jogged down the three flights of stairs to the front door, feeling his heart beat faster in his chest and the blood pounding in his ears. He nearly bumped into one of his neighbours at the bottom.

"Sorry," he called over his shoulder, not stopping to see if the guy was alright.

He picked a few stray leaves off the windshield before getting into his car, and as the engine roared to life the radio came on.

"—unseasonably warm today, with temperatures reaching as high as 55°. We might see some light rainfall in the early evening, but that shouldn't spoil what will be a beautiful November second!"

Dean hit play on the cassette player a little too roughly, patting the steering wheel softly in an unspoken apology. The opening to Shoot to Thrill blared out of the speakers, the music wrapping himself in its familiarity, but failed to soothe him as it usually would.

He changed tapes when he stopped at a red light, but Zeppelin was equally unsuccessful at raising him out of his bad mood. When Bon Jovi failed he gave up, opting to complete his journey in miserable silence.

A minor collision between a motorcycle and a Volvo at a junction caused delays, worsening the rush hour traffic. As Dean checked his watch to judge just how late he was going to be the he couldn't help but see the date. His knuckles whitened as he clenched the wheel. What he wouldn't do for a drink. All he wanted to do was get drunk - really, really drunk.

He ignored Bobby's shocked stare when he turned up at work, and kudos to the old man for letting Dean work in peace for forty minutes before coming over to say his piece.

Bobby had known Dean's dad since before Dean was born, though they'd lost touch after Mary's death, and Dean tried not to think that John might have been a part of why Bobby had been willing to take a chance on him when no-one else would. He knew that it was why Bobby never said anything about him not turning up to work on the 2nd, even if it caused problems in the garage, so he didn't blame Bobby for being surprised to see him.

"Dean?" Bobby's voice was hesitant, like Dean might suddenly bolt.

Dean gritted his teeth.

"Are you alright, boy?"

"I'm fine, Bobby," he said without turning round to look at his boss.
"Okay..." Bobby paused, before carefully asking, "How's Cas doing?"

Dean thought about Cas spending the last seven days complaining that he wasn't an invalid so should at least be allowed to make himself a mug of coffee without Dean chasing him back to the sofa to and huffed a small laugh.

"Cas is healing up just fine. He'll be back tomorrow."

"If he needs more time off—"

"That's the last thing he needs."

"Okay."

Dean could hear Bobby fidgeting behind him.

"Well, if you want to take off early, you can. I'm just saying," he said, in a please-don't-start-a-fight-with-me tone. Then he walked away.

Some of the tension in Dean's shoulders drained away, and he leaned over the engine with a tired sigh. Maybe coming into work had been a bad idea. He still had tonight to get through, after all. He huffed an empty laugh as it finally clicked why Bobby had told Cas to take another day to recover — he hadn't expected Dean to come in.

***

Dean buried himself in his work all day, distancing himself even further than usual from his workmates.

Or maybe they were distancing themselves from him.

At the end of the day Bobby shouted after him as he was about to leave. "Dean!"

He shut the Impala door again and turned around.

"Am I gonna see you tonight?"

"Of course."

"Good. I just didn't know if you and Cas had... plans... or something."

Dean frowned, and when he responded it was a little too roughly. "No."

"Okay."

***

It seemed like Castiel was waiting for him, appearing in the hallway as soon as he'd opened the door.

"So how was work?"

"Busy. Bobby says he'll see you tomorrow."

"Good," Cas smiled. "I thought... after dinner... the Alien sequel's showing? If I promise not to make any comments about sex, of course," he added with an awkward, teasing smile. "And then maybe we could go out. Perhaps it's time I learned how to play pool."
"No."

"N—" Castiel took a step back and nodded. "Okay."

"I have... a thing."

"That's okay," Castiel said, turning moving into the kitchen. "You don't have to justify yourself to me."

Castiel was obviously trying not to sound as upset as he felt, and Dean felt a little guilty for being too short with him.

"I should start on dinner."

Dean stopped in the doorway. "Do you want a hand?" he offered.

"No," Castiel said sharply, before adding, "thank you."

"Well I'm just gonna take a shower."

"Okay."

Dean turned to leave, but then poked his head through the doorway. "Are you okay?" he asked hesitantly.

"I'm fine, Dean."

Cas didn't sound fine, but maybe that was down to being cooped up indoors for a week. Dean hoped he'd perk up again once he got back to work.

He let the thought fade as he locked the door, quickly stripping off and running the shower hot. The water was too hot but he didn't bother to turn the temperature down, instead grimacing until the burn faded. He ran the bar of soap across his skin, thinking that he was definitely going to pick up something different next time he passed the store.

He halfheartedly stroked his cock, hanging limp between his legs. He couldn't get hard, though, and he cursed. It had been too long since he'd been with anyone. He wanted the relaxed feeling that came with relief, but he wasn't really in the mood to jerk himself off. He gave up and lifted his face up to the spray, dragging tired hands down his face as he wished he could just wipe the date from the calendar. He stood under the spray far longer than was necessary, unsure if he was just close to crying or if he was actually crying as the water ran down his face.

When the water started to run cold he stepped out of the shower and stood in front of the steamed up mirror. Dragging a hand across to clear it he examined his reflection. He looked exhausted. He clenched his fists until his nails dug into the palms of his hands. Barely giving himself enough time to secure the towel around his waist, for Cas was busy in the kitchen, he headed to his bedroom to get dressed.

When he stepped back into the kitchen Castiel was tossing a small salad in some sort of dressing.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

"Yeah. You need me to do anything?"

"No, I've got everything under control. There's wine in the fridge."
"Wine?" Dean echoed. "When did we start drinking wine?"

"Since I needed a wine for the sauce," Castiel explained, drizzling a creamy white sauce over two pieces of fish. "And it says it goes well with fish."

"I'll stick with beer," Dean said, taking both bottles to the table.

"Suit yourself."

Dean watched as Castiel dished up boiled potatoes and dumped the saucepan in the sink. He cut himself two thick slices of bread and spread butter across each one. "Want some?" he asked.

"No," Castiel replied as he carried his plate and the bowl of salad to the table.

Dean dropped the bread onto his plate and carried it over. He didn't touch the salad, except to pick out a couple of tomatoes, and his plate was empty in minutes.

"That was nice," he said, dragging the last piece of bread across his plate to mop up the sauce and stuffing it in his mouth before it could drip.

"You don't want any salad?" Castiel asked, placing a second helping on his plate.

"Nah. I don't eat rabbit food," he grinned, wiping his hands on his jeans.

* * *

"Two whiskeys," Bobby ordered when Ellen came over to their table.

"Make them doubles," Dean told her.

"Hey, just 'cause you ain't payin' for them!" Bobby snapped, but nodded to Ellen.

"Nuh-uh, not tonight," she said, refusing to take Bobby's money. "First round's on me."

Dean leaned back in his seat, casting a glance around the bar at the various groups of people laughing and joking. He turned back to Bobby and picked at a score in the table.

"So, no Cas tonight?"

"No."

Bobby looked a little surprised, then disappointed. "He didn't want to come?"

"I didn't invite him."

At that Bobby looked confused. "Why not?"

"Because it wasn't his dad that died! Because I didn't want to make him uncomfortable! Because I didn't want him here! Pick one!" Dean growled.

Bobby glared at him. "That damn boy is the best thing that's ever happened to you!"

Dean faltered. "What?"

"You've got no life, boy! You come into work with lipstick on your collar and smelling of cheap perfume, and it's never the same shade twice!"
Dean looked lost for words, before saying, "You paid attention to the lipstick?"

"It's a metaphor, idjit!"

Dean's eyes widened and his mouth formed a silent 'oh' of realisation, before realising that he should probably be offended and scowling.

"I'm tryin' to say that if you let that boy in, you could be happy."

"What— No, I'm not—"

"You haven't got any friends, Dean. Don't shut out the best one you could pray for."

"Now you boys aren't going to start a bar fight on me, are you?" Ellen asked, setting three drinks down in front of them. "Because I'll have you out on your ass sooner than you can cuss me out."

"No, we're good," Bobby told her.

Ellen smiled. "You just keep it that way, Bobby Singer."

"I try. He don't make it easy, though."

"Hey!" Dean objected.

Ellen picked up one of the glasses and raised it high. "Here's to your mamma, kid."

Dean and Bobby raised their glasses, and she clinked her glass to each of theirs in turn before knocking it back. Dean grimaced at the drink burned on its way down, but Bobby didn't bat an eyelid. She gathered their empty glasses together. "Same again?"

"You know us."

"I sure do," she said, pouring them both another and taking her empty glass away, leaving the bottle on the table between them.
If there was one thing Castiel did not like about winter it was the dark mornings. Living with his father, he'd rise no later than seven every morning. He rolled over and drew the covers up to his chin. Living with Dean meant that he could take an extra hour of sleep and get up once the sun had started to rise. He frowned, eyes screwed shut. The apartment was quiet. He fumbled for his phone, opening one eye to check the time.

Seven oh three.

Dean should be up by now. He lay there and listened, wondering if perhaps Dean was merely eating, or brushing his teeth. But after five minutes there was still no sound, so reluctantly he threw back the covers, shivering at the sudden drop in temperature. First he checked the kitchen, then the bathroom. Finally he stood outside Dean's bedroom door.

"Dean?" he called, knocking softly. When there was no answer he knocked louder. "Dean?"

He opened the door and peered into the dark room. The bed was empty.

Castiel tried to ignore the feeling of dread that twisted in his stomach. Dean had gone out last night. Just because he'd never not come home while Castiel had been here didn't mean that he couldn't meet some girl and spend the night with her.

Tears pricked at his eyes and he clenched his hands into fists until his nails dug into the skin.

Refusing to entertain his worst thoughts he showered, brushed his teeth, and sat down to breakfast. He ate two slices of butter and toast on automatic, not tasting the food as he chewed, and his coffee went cold.

When the phone rang at ten to nine he stared at it, having to force himself to move and pick it up.

"Hello?"

"Cas?"

"Bobby," he breathed, not knowing whether he should be worried or relieved.

"I take it Dean has left? He's not usually this late, and we're fully booked today so I need all hands on deck."

"I don't think Dean came home last night," he said around the lump in his throat.

"Ah, balls. Call his cell for me. I've got a customer about to blow a gasket out front. Let me know if you reach him."

"Okay."
The line went dead, and Castiel hit the button in the earpiece rest and dialled Dean's number. When it rang out he redialled. "Hello?" he gasped out when someone picked up.

"This is Sheriff Jody Mills, speaking. Who is this?"

Castiel's eyes went wide when he registered the woman's voice on the other end, and then he felt stupid. He'd been trying not to worry when all that had happened was that Dean had picked up some woman and—

Her words slowly caught up with his brain and his stomach sank. Sheriff Jody. Castiel's eyes went wide in horror. "Did you say Sheriff?"

"I sure did."

Panic flooded his system. "Is Dean—"

"Alive? For now," she said lightly. "But if he starts throwing up in my cells I can't promise he'll stay that way."

Castiel opening and closed his mouth as he tried to separate the important questions in his mind from the questions that could wait, all the time wondering what trouble Dean could have got himself into that was so bad that he'd earned an overnight stay in jail.

"Now you still haven't answered my question, son. Who are you?"

"Cas— Castiel Milton," Cas said, finding his voice. "I'm a friend of Dean's."

"Well now, Castiel Milton friend of Dean's. Are you gonna be able to swing by and pick him up?"

*Pick him up. Dean couldn't be in too much trouble if he was getting to come home.* "Yes. Yes, I can do that."

"Okie-dokie. Well I'll start filling in the paperwork and I'll see you when you get here," she told him cheerily.

"Alright. Yes. I'll be there soon."

"Alrighty, then."

"Good bye. And thank you."

"No worries."

Castiel numbly placed the handset back in the cradle. The sheriff had sounded cheerful, so perhaps there wasn't anything seriously wrong. There was only one way to find out, however, so he picked up the phone again and called a cab.

* * *

Less than forty later Cas was walking into the local police station and asking for Sheriff Mills.

"You're talking to her!" the smiling brunette at the desk said. "Sheriff Jody Mills. I'm gonna put money on you being Cas?"

"Yes."
"Hi, there. Why don'tcha come on through the back."

Apprehension danced through his body as he followed her through to one of the interview rooms.

"Am I a suspect?" he blurted out.

"Should you be?" she queried, her voice laced with amusement.

"No?"

She smiled. "Then no, you're not."

"Oh." He took a deep breath and sat down.

"So you work for Bobby Singer?"

"How did you—"

"You called him on the way here. He called me. Speaks very highly of you both."

"He does?"

"Says your friend has his issues, but that you're a good kid."

Castiel's mouth hung slightly open as he tried to figure out what he should say. "I think we both have our issues," he settled for.

"Hmm."

"Where is Dean?"

"In a cell. I'll take you to see him once you've answered a few questions."

"Then would you please ask them?"

Jody scrutinised him. "How often would you say Dean goes out?"

"A few nights a week."

"And what state would you say he comes home in?"

Castiel's first instinct was to say drunk, but when he actually thought about it Dean didn't come home as drunk as he used to. "A little wobbly on his feet," he said.

"Is Dean having any personal problems?"

He frowned. "Not that I'm aware of. Nothing that's changed recently, at least." When she looked at him, waiting, he elaborated. "He's estranged from his brother."

She leaned back in her seat. "So far you haven't told me anything that is persuading me not to file charges."

"I don't understand."

"Bobby asked me to let him off with a warning. I said I'd consider it. Driving under the influence isn't exactly jaywalking. Of course, he couldn't give me a reason as to why I shouldn't file charges. Or should I say wouldn't." She scratched her head in frustration. "Why am I risking my job for some
"Kid I don't know?" she asked herself.

"Have you spoken to Dean?"

"Tried," she shrugged tiredly. "Doesn't want to talk."

"Can I see him, now?"

Sheriff Mills stared at him for a long moment. "God damn it," she muttered, standing up and walking out of the room.

After a moment's hesitation Castiel followed her.

Dean looked surprised to see him when they reached his cell, eyes widening in surprise before he frowned. "I don't need to be saved," he spat mockingly.

Castiel glared at him. "Neither did I."

Dean squinted up at him, blinking against the fluorescent lights. "What?"

"Get up."

Dean heaved himself to his feet as Sheriff Mills unlocked his cell door, and he was led out to the front desk. There was paperwork to fill out, which Castiel tried his best to fill in on Dean's behalf.

"What about my car?" Dean asked when Castiel called for another cab to take them home.

"It's being detained."

"You can't do that!"

Jody shrugged, uncaring. "The paperwork's going to mysteriously go missing as well. Try dropping in next week. And you'll be getting a fine for that busted tail light as well."

"There's nothing wrong with her tail lights!"

"There will when I'm done with her."

"You fucking—"

"It's a 90-day suspension for a DUI. I imagine that would be rather embarrassing, and somewhat inconvenient, as a mechanic. There's also a fine of up to $5000, and the possibility of jail time. You could have killed somebody last night, and you're damned lucky it was me who picked you up because if it happens a second time I am not going to let this go, no matter how many favours Bobby calls in!" She looked at him staring sullenly at her badge. "Are you listening to me, Dean Winchester, or do I have to use my mom voice?"

Castiel caught the muscle twitching as Dean clenched his jaw, and the tear that spilled over.

"Maybe this would be better spoken about when he comes back for his car," he suggested, placing a hand on Dean's arm and turning him towards the door.

She waved a dismissive hand at them both. "Go. Go! Get out of my sight before I change my mind."

Once outside Dean let rip a barrage of abuse aimed at the sheriff, but Castiel cut him off mid-rant. "You can live without your car for one week, Dean, you could have died!" Castiel snapped as the
reached the parking lot.

Dean squinted as the sun hit his eyes. "So?"

"So? So?" Castiel repeated in shock. "I don't understand how you can say that, after all you've done for me. Do you think that Sa..." Castiel trailed off before he could finish.

"Do I think that what? What, Cas?" Dean yelled, venting his anger and guilt and pain on the only person he had right now that would stand by him – though for how much longer? "Say his name. Go on! Say his name!"

"Sam!" Castiel all but screamed. "Do you really think that Sam would be happy if you died?"

"Are you trying to kill yourself? Because if you are, you're going the right way about it! Don't you think we've both lost enough?" Dean's furious expression melted away as a million little things that Sam had said to him flooded his brain. "We buried our mom, and then we buried our dad – I'm not going to bury you, too."

He started shaking, though whether it was from the cold or the drink or the emotional comedown he didn't know, and his cheek stung where the bitter wind hit the tears that fell down his cheeks.

"Damn it boys, I just want to finish my shift in peace! You can either take this home, or I can arrest you both for disorderly conduct," Jody warned, coming up behind them. She turned to Dean, expression softening when she saw his face. "Look, you've had a long night so just go home and take it easy, okay?" she instructed softly.

Dean was vaguely aware of a woman's voice saying something that he couldn't make out; the words muffled as if he were underwater. Then gentle but firm hands were gripping his arms and guiding him towards the waiting cab, and he let the hands manoeuvre him into the back seat without complaint.

Another voice spoke – this time a man's, deep and rough – but again the words were muted.

"Are you going to be okay?" Jody asked Cas.

Castiel looked at Dean, practically catatonic in the back seat. "I don't know."

Jody sighed. "Look, I don't know you and you don't know me, but I know Bobby Singer is a good guy so if he says the two of you are alright then you're alright." She gave him a card. "If you need anything, you give me a call, okay? I don't want to be clearing up your friend's mess if he gets behind the wheel of a car again in the state he was in last night."

"Thank you," Castiel said, pocketing the card. He didn't think he'd be calling the sheriff, however, for he knew how Dean felt about strangers poking their noses in his business. "For everything," he added, when Jody said nothing else.

"You boys take care, okay? And tell Bobby that I haven't forgotten about that twenty bucks he owes me!" she grinned, but her smile couldn't quite erase the concern from her eyes.

* * *

Castiel toed his shoes and socks off at the door, catching Dean doing the same out of the corner of his eye, only the movements were clumsy and less co-ordinated.

"You stink." Castiel wasn't trying to be mean; just honest.
Dean merely grunted in response.

"Come on." He dragged Dean to the bathroom and started running the bath, thinking that it was a strange how he was now doing for Dean what Dean had once done for him. "Dean?" he asked, looking over his shoulder to see Dean staring vacantly into the mirror instead of getting undressed. Castiel stood and moved to him. "Dean?" he asked quietly, taking a gentle hold of his wrist.

Dean blinked.

Castiel swallowed thickly. "How about I do it? After all, we're both men here!" he joked lightly, throwing Dean's words back at him.

There was no response, so he carefully lifted his hands to Dean's collar and unbuttoned the top button; the smell of stale sweat, nicotine and alcohol making his nose wrinkle. Dean let him, so he worked his way down. The cuffs were next, and then Cas removed the shirt, not knowing why he was bothering to roughly fold it in half and half again. He cupped Dean's face and brushed a thumb across his cheek.

"Dean?" he pleaded in a whisper, seeing his friend in such a state scaring him.

He licked his lips, and started to work Dean's belt undone. This was weird. This was wrong, it was — As he lifted Dean's feet out of his jeans Dean stepped out of them. He glanced up, seeing Dean looking down at him as if wondering how he got there. Castiel slowly stood up, Dean's eyes never leaving his until they were level.

His eyes were drawn to the scattering of freckles across Dean's cheeks and nose, and a desire to kiss him surged up in him.

Dean blinked once, twice, three times, and frowned. "Cas?"

Castiel's eyes went wide and he turned away, moving to turn the taps off before the bath started to overflow. But Dean didn't yell at him; didn't say anything. When he turned back Dean hadn't moved.

"I thought a bath might make you feel better," he offered.

"Yeah," Dean responded distantly. "Yeah."

Castiel averted his gaze and rubbed the back of his neck as Dean dropped his boxers, stepping aside to let him pass, but he'd be lying if he said his eyes didn't flick down to Dean's ass as he stepped into the tub, just for a moment.

He left the room as Dean settled into the water, closing the door behind him and sliding down it until he hit the floor. He didn't know what to do. He hugged himself, stroking his left arm as he listened. There was no sound from behind him. He knew Dean wasn't religious but he was, so he whispered a prayer to God, hoping that He was listening. Dean wasn't Dean right now, and Cas didn't know what was wrong.

Heaving himself to his feet he opted to make something as an early lunch, because he doubted Dean had had much to eat - if anything - since dinner last night; however that was easier said than done. He opened and closed cupboards, seeing but not seeing the contents. It should be something simple yet filling, that would stay in Dean's stomach.

He eyed the tomatoes and crusty bread sitting out from dinner the night before, considering bruschetta. He knew there was still half a pepper and half an onion left over in the fridge, and figured dried basil would just have to work. He could even sprinkle a little cheese on the top, and if Dean
looked wary he could call them mini pizzas.

Castiel liked cooking. He'd always found it relaxing. As he focused on the food in front of him, chopping and mixing, dicing and sprinkling, he allowed himself to forget about everything else.

He'd made too much, he realised, as he spooned the mixture onto toasted bread and found he needed to cut more.

As he was slicing Dean paddled through, barefoot and wearing a grey Henley that hugged his muscles. Despite that, he looked small as he watched Castiel at work. He didn't sit down, or ask if he could help; he just stood there, watching.

Castiel pulled the bread out from under the grill and poured a glass of fruit juice, giving it to Dean and sitting him down.

"What the fuck are you doing here, Cas?"

"I don't understand."

"With me."

How was he supposed to answer that? He had nowhere else to go, but that wasn't the right answer to give. "Why shouldn't I be here, Dean?" he asked, turning the question around.

A bitter chuckle burst past Dean's lips. "How long have you got?"

Cas chewed at his lip. "I could tell you that I have nowhere else to go, but even if I did there is nowhere else I would rather be than here with you, because you are my friend."

Dean shook his head. "You gotta get better friends."

"No, I've got to finish seeing to lunch," Castiel joked.

His attempt at humour didn't even raise a smile.

"I don't know why you can't see how wonderful you are," Castiel said as he turned back to the food, so quietly he wasn't even sure if Dean would hear him.

It only took a few minutes to warm the bruschetta enough to melt the cheese, and Castiel lined them up on a single serving dish.

"Help yourself," he told Dean, placing it down between them.

Obediently Dean grabbed a slice and took a large bite. "Mm, this is really nice," he said.

"Good, because there's plenty," Cas smiled.

They ate in silence after that, save for the crunch of the bread.

"You should call Bobby," Castiel said once the plate was empty.

"I'll see him when I get in."

"You can't seriously be thinking about going to work!"

"Why not?"
"Because... because..." Words escaped him. He knew what he wanted to say, but trying to say it in a way that wouldn't risk Dean taking offence was harder.

"I've gone into work hungover before," Dean said. "It's not fun, but I can manage. I'll just take some aspirin or something."

Castiel, perhaps wisely, kept his mouth shut.

* * *

"What the hell were you thinking?" Bobby yelled as Dean walked into the garage.

"I wasn't," Dean growled, already on the defensive. His head was still throbbing and he just wanted to quietly get on with his day.

"Damn straight you weren't! I know you've had a rough go of it—"

"Damn it, would people stop using my dead parents as an excuse for me fucking up!"

"Would you shut your mouth and listen to me for once! If you were anyone else I'd sack you for half the crap you pull!"

Castiel glanced around while Bobby and Dean glared at each other, aware of the other mechanics trying to look busy as they eavesdropped.

"Then why don't you?"

"Because you're a damn good mechanic! And because I'd hate to think where you'd end up if I let you go!"

"Well maybe I'll quit!"

"Dean!" Castiel gasped.

"I'm serious!" Dean yelled. "I don't need your pity!"

"Don't be so stupid, boy!"

"Okay, fine, you want to know what I was thinking? I was thinking that I wanted to forget! I was thinking I wanted to pass out so that I didn't have to dream! I was thinking that just once I wanted November to pass me by without the nightmares coming back!" Dean yelled until he was red in the face.

Castiel could pinpoint the exact moment Dean realised he'd said too much, and things started to make sense.

Bobby motioned outside. "You see all those cars?" Bobby snapped, most of the anger gone from his tone. "They need washed. Today, that's your job."

"I thought I was a good mechanic?" Dean grumbled.

"Well today you're gonna be a good car washer! And you're gonna come in on Saturday and help clear the backlog you've created."

"Fine."
Bobby looked around, as if suddenly realising something was missing. "Where's your car?"

"Police lockup," Dean complained.

"Damn it, I knew I should have sent you home yesterday. Next year you're taking the second off like you usually do," Bobby said tiredly. "Now get a move on – those cars won't wash themselves."

When Dean stormed off to get soap and a sponge, Bobby followed Cas into the office. "How is he really?" he asked, shutting the door behind him.

Castiel sat down and sighed. "I don't know."

"Has he told you... anything about his parents?" Bobby asked carefully.

Castiel focused on the paperwork in front of him. "He told me that they died," he answered. "But..."

"But what?"

Castiel looked at him. "I think there's something – or a few things – he hasn't told me."

"Don't take it personally, kid," Bobby told him with a reassuring clap on the shoulder. "Dean keeps a lot of stuff bottled up. Then stuff like this happens."

Castiel merely nodded, the turn in conversation making him uncomfortable. "I should get started on this," he said.

Bobby took the hint. "Yeah, and I've got cars to fix. Damn idjit," he muttered on the way out.

* * *

It was dark when they started walking home, and Dean barely said a word until the passed a takeaway joint.

"Do you want pizza for dinner?"

Castiel didn't, but those few words were the most Dean had said in hours.

"Yes. What do you want?" he asked, trying to force conversation.

Dean shrugged.

"Meat feast?" Castiel suggested, scanning the menu in the window.

Beside him, Dean grunted.

Cas usually had Hawaiian, but he fancied something different. "I think I'll try the spicy chicken. But I'll ask them to put tomatoes on it as well."

He sucked in a breath as Dean moved to stand behind him. He could feel the warmth radiating off him, and Dean was both too close and not close enough.

"Spicy beef," he said.

Castiel knew better than to ask what size of pizza. 'Go large or go home,' Dean had told him the first time he'd asked. He stepped inside, holding the door for Dean, and walked up to the counter to place their order.
"And a garlic bread," Dean piped up.

"That'll be twenty-seven fifty."

As Castiel reached for his wallet Dean brushed him aside, silently handing over his card.

"There's a charge on card transactions less than thirty dollars."

Dean scanned the board behind the cashier. "Then ring up a two litre Coke as well."

"Thirty dollars exactly."

When Dean shoved his card in the reader Cas picked up a new takeaway menu and sat down.

"We've got one of them at home."

"This is a newer one," Castiel told him, showing him the front.

Dean fell silent again, staring blankly at the menu board behind the counter. The wait for their pizzas seemed longer than usual as they waited in silence, other customers coming and going in a constant chatter while the phone rang regularly.

"It's busy tonight," he commented, not expecting an answer.

Dean hummed in agreement.

"Spicy beef, spicy chicken with tomato, and garlic bread!" the cashier shouted at them.

Dean headed outside while Castiel hurried to retrieve their food.

"Enjoy."

"Thank you." He hurried outside to catch up with Dean, who was already walking off.

The rest of the walk home passed in a silence that was neither comfortable nor awkward, and when they got in Castiel didn't bother with plates. He poured himself some soda, while Dean went straight to the fridge for a beer.

Castiel bit his lip as he pondered whether or not to say something, but chose to keep quiet. For now.

Dean skipped through the channels but nothing caught his eye, so he passed the remote to Cas who settled for a nature documentary about meerkats. It wasn't long before Dean ventured back to the kitchen for a second beer, however, not even halfway through his pizza. By the time he was finished he was on his third. When Castiel took the empty pizza boxes away and Dean asked him to bring back what would be his fourth, Castiel spoke up.

"Don't you think three beers is enough?"

"Don't you think you should mind your own damn business?"

"By that logic you should have left me to jump off the bridge."

Dean's gaze hardened. "Maybe I should have. Now do I have to get my own fucking beer?"

Castiel turned on his heel and moved to the kitchen where he fought back tears, quiet fury thrumming under his skin. He told himself that Dean didn't mean it; that Dean was just lashing out
because he was hurting. But it didn't stop the anger surging through him.

He looked in the fridge, seeing the several bottles of beer lying on the shelves, and for a moment considered pouring them all down the sink. But he knew that Dean would then go out, if he was truly set on getting drunk, and he'd rather Dean got drunk where he could watch over him. Reluctantly he took the beer through to Dean, who took it without so much as a thank you.

Not bothering to ask Dean if he needed to take a leak, he locked himself in the bathroom and ran himself a bath. "If you need to piss you've got enough beer bottles lying around," he muttered angrily as he stripped off.

Unfortunately the hot water did little to ease the tension in his muscles, instead weakening his resolve until he let out a choked sob and his eyes burned, tears running down his cheeks against his wishes. "Fuck you!" he shouted at the ceiling, splashing his face and washing away his tears. "Fuck you and your kindness! Fuck you and your green eyes! Just... fuck you!"

Footsteps thundered down the hall and then Dean was battering at the door. "The fuck are you shouting about in there?"

"Nothing."

"Then shut up."

Footsteps receded until the living room door slammed closed, and Castiel lowered himself down until his face was below the water. The ceiling tiles blurred into one, then. He wondered what would happen if he just didn't get up again, though he knew he would.

He held his breath for as long as he could then sat up.

The thought of dying no longer seemed like the easy way out. It scared him, now. Life wasn't easy, but then wasn't that the point?

He reached for the shampoo and massaged it into his hair before ducking under the water again to rinse it off. Then he washed himself all over, and by that time the bathwater had started to cool so he pulled the plug and dried himself off, belatedly realising that he hadn't brought clean clothes with him.

Fortunately there was still some clothes hanging on the dryer in the kitchen from the day before, including a flannel nightshirt. He slipped it on along with a fresh pair of boxers and made himself a coffee.

When he returned to the living room, mug of coffee in hand, he found that Dean had turned to whiskey. He put his mug down and gathered up the empty beer bottles to put in the recycling.

"You're blocking the TV."

Castiel ignored his protests, deliberately clinking the bottles loudly together in a somewhat childish act of rebellion as he carried them through to the kitchen.

He sat and watched whatever explosion-filled movie Dean was watching, but it failed to hold his interest. Making his coffee had been more interesting.

"I'd really like to go to bed," Castiel said as it neared eleven o'clock.
Dean fumbled for remote, grabbing it on his second try and switching the TV off. "Fine. Go to bed. Can't even watch TV in my own damn apartment," he muttered to himself as he stormed off down the hall to his room, taking the bottle of whiskey with him.

Castiel lay awake for a long time after that, finally starting to doze off at around one; however he was awoken half an hour later by Dean's shouts. He screwed his eyes shut and pulled the covers up to his ears in an attempt to block out his friend's cries.

* * *

It was the same the next night, and the next. Castiel resorted to scrubbing the oven clean on Thursday night until he thought his fingers were going to bleed, but at least it looked cleaner. It also enabled him to keep count of how many beers Dean had.

Far too many.

So on Friday he hid the beer; the whiskey being long gone.

"Where the hell's the beer?" Dean asked, poking around in the fridge. "I might be a bit fuzzy on last night, but I definitely remember having another pack in here."

"Maybe it's not such a bad thing there's none left," Castiel said quietly as he dried the dishes.

The fridge door closed and Dean stared at him. "Where is it?"

Castiel put the plate he was drying down. "Dean, please. Not again."


Castiel bit his lip. "You don't need to get drunk. I know you think it helps but—"

"It does help!" Dean yelled.

Castiel jumped, body instinctively tensing for a blow that never came. Afraid of pushing too far, he silently walked over to the vegetable drawer and pulled out four bottles.

"That's more like it," Dean said. He put three in the fridge and took the other one through to the living room.

Castiel stood there for several minutes, trying to force himself to relax. Deep breaths – in through his nose; out through his mouth. He trembled slightly as Dean's voice yelled at him, over and over in his mind.

He missed his friend.

He waited until he'd stopped shaking before finishing drying the dishes, and called Balthazar. He didn't mention Dean; simply listened as Balthazar told him about things he'd done. It was calming. Unfortunately Balthazar couldn't stay on the phone all night, so when he had to go, he sat on the far side of the living room, away from Dean, and filled in some crosswords in the book Dean had bought him.

He really missed Dean, and hoped this new version wasn't here to stay.

He was relieved when Dean remembered he was working on Saturday and went to bed. Castiel sat up and watched some rubbish movie about a giant snake in an attempt to get his brain to wind down. It half worked, and he put the light out at half past midnight.
The sound of shouting woke him at quarter past two. He waited for Dean's cries to die down as usual, but when they didn't he tiptoed down the hall and stood outside his door.

If he was being honest he was a little afraid of going in, but when Dean let out a particularly pained cry he opened the door as carefully and as quietly as he could.

Dean was thrashing under the covers, shouting for his mother.

Cas covered his mouth with his hand, his heart breaking for Dean despite his behaviour the past week. His feet started moving before he was even aware of deciding to move closed, and shook Dean's shoulder.

Dean snorted himself awake. "'S just another dream," he mumbled, eyes screwed shut to keep the tears at bay.

Castiel turned to go, but then Dean whispered, "Stay with me?" so quietly that if he'd wanted, he could pretend he hadn't heard him. And maybe that was the point. But he turned back, and Dean shuffled over to make room for him. He hesitated for a heartbeat, unsure whether to sit on top of or under the covers, before deciding that Dean's room was too cold.

He found himself stroking a hand through Dean's hair as if it was the most natural thing in the world, and Dean didn't complain. He actually seemed to like it, if the way his breathing quickly fell into a steady rhythm was any indication.

"What's wrong?" he whispered, feeling like he was taking advantage of Dean's drunken state. Which he probably was.

"Nothing's wrong," Dean slurried into his pillow.

"Please don't lie to me," Cas pleaded. "Talk to me. I'm worried about you."

"You should be pissed at me."

"Well, I'm not." He was a little pissed, but his relief outweighed that.

Dean sniffed, and looked like he was either about to cry or punch something. "Cas, I fucked up," he said, his voice broken.

"I know."

Dean's hand found his and gripped it tight.

Castiel stayed there until Dean fell asleep, brushing his other hand through Dean's hair and thinking that it was just as soft as it looked. When a deep snore rumbled in Dean's throat, he eased himself out of the bed and returned to his own.
Chapter 22

The look of surprise on Castiel's face when he came out of the church on Sunday and saw Dean waiting for him, leaning against the Impala, made him chuckle.

"I got her back!" he declared with a grin. "I had to beg and plead with Sheriff Mills to let me have her back today, and I'll have to fix the damn tail light on my lunch break tomorrow, but at least she's going to be back home."

"Just don't get drunk and drive again," Castiel begged.

Dean coughed and felt his cheeks blush. "Yeah, about that."

When Castiel folded his arms and stared at him Dean realised he wasn't going to make it easy for him. And deservedly so.

"Can we go somewhere?" he asked quietly.

"Where did you have in mind?"

"There's a place just outside of town I like to go to sometimes. We could take lunch up there and... talk," he finished reluctantly.

Castiel nodded once, and Dean felt some of the tension in his shoulders ease. That was the easy part. Actually talking - opening up and telling Cas the one thing he never spoke about - that was going to be the hard part. But he owed it to him.

They stopped off at a café on the way and bought sandwiches, crisps, and drinks, then Dean drove them out of town. He glanced over at Cas as they drove over the bridge, aware of his friend looking out at the place he'd fallen from.

"You okay?"

"Fine."

"How was church?"

"Are you asking because you care or because you want to be polite?"

"Uh," Dean hesitated. "A bit of both?"

It struck him as the sort of comment Castiel would usually huff a small laugh at, but apparently not today.

"They're preparing for Christmas."

"Isn't that a little far away to be thinking about?"
"Not when you have to organise the children's Christmas party. There's food to organise, presents to wrap, we need to hire a Santa suit, and they're still trying to organise more shoeboxes for children abroad so that—"

"Okay, okay, I get it. You've got a lot to do."

"And we could use all the help we can get."

He knew what Castiel was hinting at - that he should volunteer - but he was hesitant to commit before Cas knew the truth about him.

"So, uh, shoeboxes?" he asked instead, trying to look interested.

"You fill a shoebox with things children in poverty might need. A brush, hair slides, colouring books and crayons, sweets... Things that will brighten their lives, even just a little. But also things that will be useful; toothbrush, toothpaste, deodorant, underwear..."

"I get it. And then they get sent out where they're needed, right? Like where's there's been war or a disaster?"

"Or simply where poverty is rife, exactly."

"That's a pretty neat idea. But I mean, shoeboxes? Don't most people throw them out?"

"I think it's just a generic term. I'm sure any box of a similar size would do."

Dean almost missed the turn-off. He slowed down as he drove along the narrow dirt track until they came to a grassy area, wide enough for maybe three cars side-by-side, and parked up a good few feet from the edge.

"Don't get too close," he warned when Cas got out and walked forward.

He stopped a couple of feet from the edge and leaned forward to look down. There was a sharp drop for a few hundred feet or so before the hillside sloped out again. "I don't like the height," he said, moving back again. "I don't like it."

"Well don't look over, then," Dean grinned. When Cas didn't smile back he held out his sandwich. "Here."

Cas tore off small pieces of his tuna salad on brown bread and placed them in his mouth, whereas Dean took enormous bites of his pastrami. Even though Dean's was a triple, he'd still started his crisps before Cas had even finished his sandwich.

"It's nice up here," Castiel commented.

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "It helps me clear my head."

"Was this where you were coming from the night you found... the night we met?" Castiel corrected himself.

"Uh, no," Dean admitted sheepishly. "I was giving a girl a ride home."

"You had sex with her."

Dean laughed, and started choking when a shard of crisp got stuck in his throat. He took his juice from Cas and gulped down half of it, successfully dislodging it.
"Wow," he wheezed, tears streaming down his face. "Put it bluntly, why don't you."

"But you did, didn't you?"

"I... Yes," Dean admitted.

"There's no need to be embarrassed about it."

"I'm not embarrassed about it."

"You sound it."

He did, didn't he? Jeez, when did he start blushing about sex? He ran a hand through his hair as he remembered why they were here, regretting choosing it because this was his place and he didn't want it associated with bad memories.

"Wasn't there a reason we came here?" Castiel asked, almost as if he could read Dean's mind.

Dean closed his eyes. As much as he didn't want to talk about this, he couldn't let himself back out now. If he did he risked pushing Cas away and losing him altogether. His right hand clenched and unclenched at his side. "D'you remember what I told you?"

"About?"

He swallowed. "My mom."

"Yes."

Dean focused all his attention on his empty crisp packet as he folded it and tied it in a knot. "It was my fault she died," he admitted quietly, unable to look Castiel in the eye.

The soft intake of breath beside him was almost enough to make him walk away.

"I don't understand. How old were you?"

"Four."

"I don't understand," Cas repeated, with a small shake of his head.

"It's not rocket science, Cas. She's dead because of me."

Castiel opened and closed his mouth as he shook his head vehemently, staring at him in shock. "I don't understand, Dean. What are you saying?"

"I couldn't sleep. Got up to ask for a drink of water." He could still see her in his mind after all these years, as clear as if she was standing right in front of him now. "She was in Sam's room," he continued, his voice cracking. "There was this guy, and he... he... There was blood all over her nightdress, and I couldn't move. She was whispering my name, and I couldn't move."

"Dean, you must have been so scared—"

"'S no excuse, Cas. The guy turned to me, and I'll never forget his eyes until the day I die. They were yellow. I mean, I know no-one has yellow eyes, but... they looked yellow. Point is, he grinned and told me to go back to bed, and I did. My mom was still alive, and she was saying my name, and I just went back to bed." He turned his back on Cas and looked out over the town. "Dad was downstairs, asleep in front of the TV. By the time he woke up and realised the house was on fire, it
was too late. We barely got out of there, but mom, she..."

He choked on tears and covered his hand with his mouth, then two arms were snaking around his waist. Cas was hugging him, face pressed against his back.

"You said it yourself - you were a child, and you were scared."

"Dad died blaming himself. He used to say that if he'd gone to bed like she'd asked instead of staying up to watch the end of a movie he'd have heard something. Hell, even Sam feels responsible because she died in his room. He was six months old, for crying out loud!"

He pulled away and turned to face Cas, needing to make him understand.

"It's *my* fault. I should have shouted for dad, but instead I went back to bed. She's dead because *I* didn't help her!"

"It is *not* your fault, Castiel argued adamantly. "It's a tragedy, yes, but you cannot be blamed."

"I could have saved her," he breathed wishfully, eyes glazing over.

"Maybe she would have lived if you'd shouted out. Maybe she'd have died anyway. You don't know." Castiel paused before speaking again. "I bet Sam doesn't blame you."

"That's because Sam doesn't *know!*"

"Your brother loves you." Cas placed two fingers over Dean's mouth when it looked like he was going to argue. "He *loves* you," he repeated. "I know you don't have the best relationship—"

"Huh, that's an understatement," Dean muttered.

"—but if he didn’t love you he wouldn't keep helping you. He wouldn't blame you, Dean. He'd understand."

Dean shook his head. There was no way Sam could understand Dean letting their mother die; letting their father almost drink himself to death. Castiel looked torn, and Dean couldn't blame him.

"My mother died giving birth to me," Castiel revealed. "Does that mean I killed her?"

"It's hardly the same thing," Dean said, leaning against the Impala's hood. Then he realised that was a pretty shitty response. "I'm sorry, that was... I'm sorry."

Castiel let it slide. "We believed that it was God's will, but that doesn't mean I didn't feel guilty about it for a long time."

"Are you trying to tell me that my mom *dying* was God's will?" Dean scoffed with tears in his eyes.

"No," Castiel replied calmly. "I'm trying to tell you that you shouldn't feel guilty for something you can't control."

Dean stared at his feet, but slowly reached out to take Castiel's hand. He half expected him to jerk his hand away but, to his surprise, Cas spread his fingers, interlocking their hands. He gave his hand a squeeze.

They looked out at the buildings dominating the landscape; metal and concrete almost as far as the eye could see.
"It was this week, wasn't it?" Castiel asked in realisation.

Dean frowned in confusion until he realised he meant the anniversary of her death. "Yeah. Monday."

"I'm so sorry. If I'd have known I'd—"

"You'd have what, Cas? Held my hand and told me everything was gonna be okay?"

"Don't do that."

"What?"

"Let me in and then push me away."

The grip on his hand tightened and Dean looked down, surprised to see their hands still together. He's forgotten they were. It was... comfortable.

"I don't need you to be sorry," he murmured.

"Well it doesn't change the fact that I am," Cas scowled.

"I know."

"What do you need?" Castiel asked him softly.

He looked at Cas and replied, "You." He said it without thinking, and it wasn't until he said it that he realised it was true. "I need you."

* * *

"I'm not mad at you for drinking," Castiel said over his shoulder, attention on the potatoes he was peeling and slicing.

On the other side of the kitchen Dean froze, a half moulded burger in one hand. "What?"

"I'm not mad at you for drinking. I think I can almost understand that. I'm a little mad at the way you've treated me the past few days—"

"I can understand that."

"Please don't interrupt me, Dean."

Dean's eyes widened in surprised but he kept his mouth shut.

Cas hesitated. "I'm disappointed. I expect better from you."

Well, wasn't that always the problem? He let people down.

"I deserve better," Cas continued.

When Dean was sure Castiel was finished, he agreed. "Yeah, you do. And I'm sorry. I'm just not used to having to think about how what I do affects other people."

Castiel softened. "I was worried about you. Yes, I'm mad, but most of all I'm relieved - relieved that you're alive." He didn't miss the irony that their roles had reversed since they first met. Dean had started to put the broken pieces of Castiel together, and now he was trying to piece Dean back together.
Dean stared at him, his tongue sticking out between his teeth. His first instinct was to tell Cas that he was the *only* one grateful that he was alive, but he knew Castiel wouldn't hear it. "I'm sorry," he said instead. "For saying that I should have left you on that bridge."

Castiel took a deep breath and said nothing, so Dean turned back to shaping burgers.

"Thank you. I knew you didn't mean it, but that doesn't mean it didn't hurt. That it doesn't *still* hurt."

Dean swallowed thickly. He hadn't realised just how deep words he didn't mean could cut. "Cas, if I kept waking up and reliving that day like Groundhog Day, I'd stop every damn time."

"I don't understand that reference," Castiel said. "But I appreciate that you wouldn't make a different choice, given the chance."

"Bill freakin' Murray, dude," he said, chuckling at the knowledge that Cas wouldn't get *that* reference either. "You've got to see *Groundhog Day*. *And Ghostbusters*. And—"

"Why don't we concentrate on dinner first, hmm?" Castiel smiled.
Chapter 23

Chapter Notes

Un-beta'd.

Sorry this is just a short chapter - I know I haven't updated since Asylum 14. (It was amazing!) I'm struggling with pacing out the next couple of chapters, but I'll try not to leave it too long before I get them up.

Castiel continued to see Pamela regularly, however she seemed to focus more on his childhood before he realised he was gay than his current problems. She kept telling him that it was 'part of the process', but while he wasn't entirely convinced he was prepared to give it time. He was just glad that Father Reynolds' church had an arrangement with Pamela and a fund to help its parishioners in need of financial aid, because he wouldn't have been able to afford Pamela's rates himself - and he would never have been able to admit as much to Dean.

There had been a noticeable difference in Dean's attitude and behaviour in the run up to Thanksgiving, though whether that was because the anniversary of his mother's death had passed, he'd opened up to Cas, or simply because he liked Thanksgiving Cas didn't know, but Dean's good mood was contagious.

Unfortunately, Pamela's sessions seemed to bring him down again for she seemed determined to get him to open up about his father.

"He is a good, devout Christian man."

Pamela gave him a surprised look. "That doesn't tie in with what you've told me previously."

Castiel stiffened. "What?"

"You've told me that he hit you, that he manipulated you, and—"

"He believed he was doing the right thing."

"By hurting you?"

Castiel looked at his lap.

"Doesn't that make you angry?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Anger is an emotion that serves only to hurt other people."

"Have you ever been angry?"

"A little," Cas conceded.
"Why? What, or who, made you feel angry?"
"Dean."
"What did he do?" Pamela pushed.
"He was rude to my friend."
"And that hurt you? Made you angry?"
"Yes."
"And how did you resolve that anger?"
Castiel frowned, uncomprehending.
"Why do you no longer feel angry with Dean?"
"Because I forgave him."
"Did you?" Pamela asked. "Did he apologise?"
"Yes. To me. Eventually."
"Do you still feel hurt by the way he acted?"
"I guess," Castiel answered tentatively. "But it wasn't his fault."
"What did you do?"
"I didn't do anything!"
"Exactly."
"Pamela, I don't understand," Castiel sighed. She always seemed to talk in riddles.
"Look at it this way, blame can only be directed in one of two directions: outward, at those who have hurt you; or inward, at yourself. Someone's got to be responsible. If it wasn't Dean's fault, then do you think you did something to make him react in a way that hurt you?"
Castiel tried to think what he could have done to provoke Dean. "I have been spending a lot of time with Balthazar."
"Your friend?"
"Yes. Perhaps I made Dean feel neglected."
"Have you also been spending time with Dean?"
"Yes."
"Then it doesn't sound like you've been neglecting him."
Castiel thought some more. "Then I don't know what I could have done," he said eventually.
"I don't think you did anything," Pamela reassured him. "Instead of being rude to Balthazar, Dean should have respected that you have been making other friends. If he had a problem, then he should
have spoken to you about it."

That sounded like what Dean had said after that night at the bar. *Now if you think I've got a problem, just ask me about it.* "Dean doesn't talk about things."

"And how does that work out for him?"

Castiel looked at his lap again, thinking about Sam Winchester. "Not very well."

"I'm going to give you a homework exercise," Pamela smiled. "I want you to talk to Dean - sit him down and really *talk* to him. Let him know how he made you feel."

"I don't want to upset him," Castiel said.

"If you don't talk to him, he might hurt you again in the future."

*Dean wouldn't like that,* Castiel's brain offered helpfully.

"Castiel," Pamela began slowly, "have you ever heard the expression, 'to err is human; to forgive, divine'?"

Castiel glanced up at her, and nodded once.

"In my experience as a counsellor, far too often people say 'forgive and forget' when what they really mean is 'pretend it didn't happen'. But if you pretend it didn't happen, it excuses the actions of those who have hurt you. Therefore, you open yourself up to being hurt again. and again. and again."

"What does this have to do with my father?"

"You say you've forgiven him but, by forgiving him without holding him accountable, you end up blaming yourself. And as long as you blame yourself, you will feel guilty. I want you to realise that forgiveness isn't always the best solution. So, what would you say if I asked you to 'unforgive' your father?"

"*Unforgive?*" Castiel echoed, not quite sure he understood her correctly. "You want me to blame him?"

"Not blame him - hold him responsible. He *hurt* you. Something we'll talk more about later," she added.

"He believes—"

"What do *you* believe?"

"I don't know."

"Yes, you do. You've told me before."

"That my feelings aren't the sin I was told they were," he conceded.

Pamela nodded. "Until the next session, I want you to hold people accountable for whatever way they make you feel. This is the first step in getting rid of your misplaced guilt, and the first step in moving on."

* * *
As Castiel left her office after his appointment, he scanned the street for the Impala. He'd arranged for Dean to meet him afterwards so they could shop for Thanksgiving dinner, and it was something he was irrationally excited about. The familiar black car pulled out of a parking spot a few yards up the street as he looked, and he slid easily into the passenger seat.

"Did you remember the list?" he asked as he buckled up.

"List?" Dean asked, looking confused.

Castiel stared at him. "The shopping list? The one I called to say I'd forgotten and could you please bring it with you?"

"Oh," Dean said. "That list."

"You forgot."

"Sorry."

Castiel rolled his eyes. "Now we have to go back and get it which means we're going to get stuck in a queue at the busiest time of the day and—"

He stopped when Dean waved a piece of paper at him, grinning like an idiot.

"Assbutt," he complained grumpily, snatching the list from him.

"You're so easy to wind up sometimes."

"And you're not funny," Castiel shot back.

It might have been childish, but he refused to acknowledge Dean as they drove to the store; instead studying the list like he'd never seen it before when in fact he'd written it the night before. They would have to budget this trip carefully. Thanksgiving dinner would be expensive and they were buying items for the church's shoebox campaign, so they would have to make sacrifices elsewhere. An asterisk marked against several items meant that they were going to buy a cheaper brand than usual, though Dean had refused to compromise on toilet paper.

"The own-brand stuff scratches my ass!" Dean had complained when he'd suggested it.

"I'm sorry," Dean apologised as he parked up in his usual spot far away from the store entrance.

"No you're not. You just don't like it when I don't talk to you."

"I'll get a cart," Dean told him.

The sheer volume of turkey-themed decorations that greeted them as they walked through the door overwhelmed Cas - from napkin rings and name place holders to a giant inflatable turkey.

"Are we supposed to buy all of this stuff?" he asked, unable to take it all in.

"Hell no," Dean said, striding straight past a display of stuffed turkey centrepieces.

"Dean?" Castiel hurried after him.

"I don't mind the food, but all this rubbish is too much."

"Too much what?"
"Just... too much."

They made their way round the fruit and veg section first, Cas selecting the nicest looking onions and parsnips while Dean grabbed a prepacked bag of potatoes.

"We done?" Dean asked, ready to move on.

"No," Castiel said, scoring things off the list. "We still need mushrooms and sprouts."

"You're gonna give me gas," Dean complained, pushing the cart to the other side of the aisle.

Castiel's eyes narrowed and he squinted at Dean out of the corner of his eye. "You don't need me to give you gas."

They'd had tacos the night before and something in the spice mix must have upset Dean's stomach. Dean didn't even blush; just laughed.

"It's not funny!" Castiel protested, fighting back a grin because it was slightly amusing now that the event had passed. "That's where I sleep!"

Dean just laughed harder.

"It was horrible," Cas complained.

They continued their way around the store, filling the cart with everything they needed (and some things they didn't). Castiel refused to comment on the crate of beer Dean hefted off the shelf, and when he noticed Dean deliberately trying not to look like he was eyeing a copy of Busty Asian Beauties reached past and tossed it into the cart with a dramatic eye roll. He may have tried to lecture Dean in the past but he'd be a hypocrite if he did so now. He might not jerk off to almost-naked pictures of strangers, but he did jerk off to fantasies of his best friend. He wasn't sure which was worse.

They religiously traversed up and down every aisle; Dean pushing while Castiel consulted their list, scoring off item after item until he announced that they were nearly finished.

An electronic whistling rang out, easily heard above the hustle and bustle of the supermarket, and Dean started patting himself down. When he pulled his phone out he looked at the screen and declared that he had to take it.

"Are you coming back?" Castiel asked with a frown.

"Yeah. I just don't know how long I'll be."

"Dean—"

But Dean was already hurrying away, phone pressed tight against his ear.

Castiel continued his journey down the last few aisles, locating the last items on the list and adding them to the cart, periodically checking around him to see if Dean had returned. It was silly, but Dean's absence was making him anxious. Once finished, he passed time remarking the gaudiness of several brightly coloured turkey hats, when a voice in his ear made him jump.

"Absolutely not."

"Is it traditional to wear a turkey on your head?" he asked Dean, puzzled as to their significance.
"It's commercialism."

The first thing Cas noticed when he turned round was the hardness in Dean's expression; eyes were narrowed, lips pressed in a thin line; skin pale.

"Is everything alright?"

Dean shook his head; not here. "Are we done?"

"Yes."

"Good. Let's get out of here."

* * *

Dean had stood stiffly in the queue at the checkout, throwing things into shopping bags without a word while Castiel made small talk with the cashier. He hadn't even protested when Castiel had thrust the money he'd tried to give Dean for the rent at her, but being able to contribute this month should have left him feeling more satisfied than it did.

Once in the car, he'd played something at almost deafening levels and refused to let Castiel turn it down. When they got in they unpacked the groceries in silence, and as Castiel took the toilet roll to the bathroom Dean stomped into the living room and put the TV on.

Castiel paused in the doorway. Dean had been in a foul mood for a week and he'd hated every minute of it, so he wasn't about to let Dean sink back into some kind of depression. Swallowing any last hint of doubt he crossed the room and turned the TV off before sitting himself down on the table in front of Dean.

"Talk to me," he instructed with more confidence than he felt.

It was apparent in the way Dean straightened in his seat, almost like a child knowing he was about to be reprimanded, that he knew he was being difficult. Twice he opened his mouth as if he was about to say something and closed it again. He licked his lips.

"Sam checked into rehab this morning."

Castiel stared at him, eyes wide as Dean's words sunk in.

"He, uh..." Dean swallowed and took a breath, eyes brimming with tears. "He relapsed last week."

"Oh, Dean," Castiel breathed. "Dean, I'm so sorry."

Dean ran both his hands through his hair. "It's stupid, but he always figured that he must have been a bad baby. That if mom hadn't been in his room that night that she might still be alive."

"Dean, this is not your fault," Castiel insisted, reading the warning signs.

"Cas, we've been over this. Maybe things would have been different if I'd just—"

"And maybe they wouldn't," Cas cut him off before Dean could make himself feel even more guilty for something that wasn't his fault.

"I was always the one who looked out for him growing up."

"And now that he's grown up his mistakes are his to bear."
"What if I hadn't pushed him away, Cas? What if I'd been there for him?"

"What if you hadn't had sex the night you found me on the bridge? What if you hadn't gotten drunk and you'd driven home the night you found me in the park?"

Dean stared at him, but his eyes were unfocused - almost like he was looking through him.

"Life is full of what-ifs, Dean. We all make our choices and we have to live with the consequences, but we cannot make choices for other people. That's why they call it free will. We are all free to make our own choices."

"I'm his big brother."

"That is irrelevant. Even if you were his father his mistakes would not be your responsibility."

"I promised him I'd always be there for him," Dean said quietly. "That's what I told him when we were kids. And then I we grew up and I walked away."

Castiel's tone softened. "You could always walk back."

Dean rubbed a hand back and forth across his mouth.

"I know you don't believe in God, but I will pray for Sam."

Dean stood up and wrapped his arms around Cas in a bear hug. "Thank you," he murmured.
"I'm home!" Dean called, the door handle slamming against the wall as he threw it open. "Shit!" he muttered.

"You're late," Castiel observed.

"Yeah," Dean agreed, examining the new dent in the wall with a frown.

"I made us sandwiches, but I got hungry and ate without you. I put yours in the fridge."

Dean turned his attention away from the dent, clutching his chest dramatically with a sigh. "Cas, man, you're breaking my heart here!" he declared, heading towards the bathroom. "Just let me shower and eat, then I'm all yours."

Castiel's own heart fluttered at the thought, so he quickly began to clear up the kitchen to distract his mind from thoughts of his naked flatmate.

* * *

Dean's eyes widened as his gaze swept over the table full of ingredients. It hadn't seemed that much when he'd bought it, but then he hadn't really been paying that much attention after Jess's phone call. "You do realise we're not feeding an army tonight, right?"

"I hope not. I don't think this will feed them and you."

"Hey!" Dean pouted as he pretended to take offence.

"The bird is already in the oven," Castiel said, then proceeded to instruct Dean on how to prepare the vegetables.

"And what are you going while I'm doing all this?" Dean asked as he stood by the sink, washing his hands.

"I'll be making pie."

Dean's eyes lit up. "Pie?"

"Pie."

Dean grinned. "I knew I liked you."

Castiel could feel his cheeks growing warm, and he had to remind himself that Dean meant nothing by it.

Their Hallowe'en pumpkins were long gone - thrown out after they'd started to go soft - but Cas had kept the carved out flesh to make soup and, when it had become apparent that there was more than necessary for that, pie.

So, while Dean scraped and peeled and sliced and diced, Castiel began preparing the filling. He'd found a recipe in one of Dean's mother's old books, with neatly written annotations in the margins, amending quantities and cooking times. The page had stains from where it had been splashed in the past. He consulted every printed and handwritten instruction carefully, thankful that Mrs Winchester had had such legible handwriting.
"Fuck!"

Startled by Dean's sudden outburst, Castiel looked up from the book to find Dean bleeding over the potatoes. Quickly stepping around the counter, he dragged his friend over to the sink and forced his hand under the cold tap. "Keep it there," he instructed. He rushed into the bathroom, making a mental note to keep some first aid supplies in the kitchen from now on. When he came back Dean was sucking on his finger like a child.

"I told you to keep it under the tap."

"It's fine. It stopped bleeding."

"That's not the point. You're handling fresh food. Give me your hand."

With a loud sigh of protest, Dean allowed Cas to wrap the plaster around his finger.

"Please be more careful," Castiel said softly, holding Dean's hand for a second too long before letting go. Dean said nothing as he returned to his vegetables.

Dean's back was to him, so for a long moment Castiel watched him as he got back to work. His usual layers of flannel and plaid had been reduced to a single grey fitted t-shirt that hugged his body in all the right places.

The longer he stared, the hotter it felt in the already warm kitchen. Cas exhaled softly, working open another button of his shirt before getting back to the pie. The recipe didn't require a pastry topping, but said you could decorate it with a lattice pattern if you wished. The picture in the book had maple leaves across it, however Castiel had his own design in mind.

* * *

"What the hell is that?" Dean asked as Cas pulled the roast out of the oven to rest some time later.

"Turducken."

Dean paused, staring at Cas blankly. "I say again, what the hell is that?"

Castiel sighed and pulled the cardboard box out of the trash. "Turducken. Chicken stuffed in duck stuffed in turkey. See?"

Dean took the box and read the front. "Whatever happened to good old-fashioned turkey and stuffing? This looks and sounds like shit. It's even got 'turd' in the name - turducken."

"Don't like it, don't eat it," Cas told him sharply, snatching the box back. "There are plenty of vegetables."

"I just don't get why we couldn't have a regular turkey and—"

"Because we couldn't afford it!" Cas snapped angrily.

Dean was stunned into silence by Cas's outburst, and as Castiel turned his back on him he wasn't sure if it was a trick of the light or if he'd seen tears in his friend's eyes.

When Castiel began roughly chopping some walnuts Dean didn't know what to do, so he just stood and watched him. Cas was stiff with irritation as he attacked nut after nut, and every time the knife sliced through to the chopping board the noise cut into Dean's head.
He licked his lips. "Cas," he said softly, moving up behind him and putting his hands over Castiel's. "Stop." For a moment, it felt like Cas was leaning into him. Dean let him go. "I'm sorry."

"I just want Thanksgiving to be perfect," Castiel sighed.

"It doesn't have to be perfect," Dean told him. "So long as there's you and me, we don't need anything else. Any of this," he emphasised, sweeping an arm around the kitchen.

"But I have a lot to be thankful for this year."

"Yeah?" Dean breathed.

Castiel dropped the knife and turned to face him. "Yes. I have my life, I have a job, I have good friends," he said, taking Dean's hand, "and, for the first time in a long time, I think that perhaps God does love me."

"'Course he does, Cas," Dean smiled, squeezing Castiel's hand. He took a deep breath. "And d'you know what I'm thankful for?"

Castiel gave a minute shake of his head.

"You."

"Me?" Castiel echoed in surprise.

Dean chuckled. "Yeah. You don't know what I was like, before I met you."

There was an unexpected intimacy in the way Dean spoke, and there was a long pause as neither spoke; they seemed to get lost in each other's eyes. After a moment, Cas licked his dry lips before speaking. "Bobby said... that I was good for you. Whatever that means."

"He said what?" A slight flush crept onto Dean's cheeks and mild irritation prickled under his skin.

"That I was..." Castiel dropped his gaze and self-consciously wiped his hands on his apron. "I shouldn't have said anything."

"No, it's... It's fine, Cas," Dean told him, unconvincingly. When Castiel didn't look up at him, he ducked his head, searching for his eyes until they locked together. "Really," he said, more sincerely this time. He rested a warm hand on Castiel's shoulder. "Now what can I do to help 'round here?"

Finally Castiel looked up at him. "I'm almost ready for the pancetta."

"The what?"

"Pancetta cubes. They're in the fridge."

Dean went to search the fridge, eventually grabbing the packet of meat. "Is pancetta just a fancy name for bacon?" he asked, eyeing the contents of the packet.

"I have no idea. Maybe?"

Dean laughed, and Cas smiled because that was for him.

In a matter of minutes, Cas had the pancetta and walnuts cooking in a saucepan.

"You know, I don't think I've ever seen anyone use so many pans," Dean joked.
"You may add the sprouts when the pancetta is crispy," Cas instructed, passing him the wooden spoon.

"Oh may I?"

But Cas didn't respond to his teasing; he was too busy pulling trays of roasted vegetables out of the oven and adjusting temperature dials on the cooker.

Dean poked at a pancetta cube with a spoon, wondering if it was crispy enough yet. "Eh," he shrugged, tossing the sprouts into the pan. "You're like a little kitchen wizard," he told Cas once he started putting food on the table. "Like a domestic Gandalf or something."

"A domestic who?" Cas asked, brows furrowed in confusion which made Dean smile.

"Never mind," he said dismissively, mentally adding _The Lord of the Rings_ onto Castiel's list of must-see movies - a list that was getting longer by the day no matter how many they watched - as he moved the contents of the pan around. Dean found his gaze travelling over to watch Cas's silent dance around the kitchen as he hurried to get everything ready. "You sure I can't do anything else?"

"Just don't let the sprouts burn."

Dean mock saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

Less than ten minutes later, they were both sitting down to a feast that had Cas reluctantly admitting he may have gotten 'a little carried away'.

Dean just grinned at him as he scooped spoonfuls of vegetables onto his plate beside three thick slices of turducken - which he still wasn't convinced about - and poured a generous amount of gravy over everything. He stabbed at several things and had them halfway to his mouth when Castiel spoke.

"Bless us, oh Lord, as we thank You..."

Dean's fork hovered in the air for a moment before he decided that, even if he didn't believe, it would be polite to wait for Cas.

"...for food when others are hungry; for drink when others are thirsty; for friends when others are lonely. We humbly ask You to bless those whom we love, now absent from us, and watch over them; protect them in all anxiety, danger, and temptation. Amen."

"Amen," Dean echoed automatically.

Cas stared at Dean with his head cocked to the side for a short moment. "Nothing, I guess," he said, but a small smile crept onto his lips as he reached for his knife and fork.

When Castiel started eating, Dean raised the fork to his mouth again and concentrated on chewing.

"Oh my God this is incredible!"

Across from him, Castiel narrowed his eyes. "So it doesn't _taste_ like shit, then..." he commented.
dryly.

An embarrassed chuckle burst past Dean's lips. "Yeah. Um, about that..."

"Just eat it before it goes cold," Cas smiled, Dean's unspoken apology already accepted.

* * *

Thanksgiving dinner was better than anything Dean had ever eaten, he decided as he tucked in. Castiel had made plenty, so he helped himself to seconds. And, okay, maybe thirds as well.

"So how are things going with Pamela?" he asked.

"Fine," Cas replied.

"Just 'fine'?'" Dean asked, studying Cas from across the table.

Castiel put his cutlery down and clasped his hands together. "She wants me to un-forgive my father," he said after a moment.

Dean's brow furrowed as he chewed and, once he'd swallowed, asked, "What does that mean?"

"From what I understand, she thinks I am blaming myself for my father's actions."

Dean bit his bottom lip thoughtfully. "Do you think you are?"

"I don't know," Castiel sighed heavily. "I really don't know."

"That's okay."

"I think—" He paused. "Perhaps I should not be so quick to defend him."

"Usually people defend someone they think is innocent," Dean commented, putting a whole brussel sprout in his mouth.

"Yes."

Dean moved the food to the side of his mouth to speak. "Are you saying that you think he's not so innocent any more?"

"I don't know, Dean. It's so confusing. I know what he believes, because I used to believe the same. But the way Father Reynold's speaks of God creates doubt in my mind."

"You know, I don't think I could ever have forgiven your father if I was you."

Castiel picked up his fork again and poked at a mushroom, sliding it around in his gravy.

"Forget what Pamela thinks," Dean told him, putting his cutlery down to give Cas his undivided attention. "What do you think?"

He shrugged. "I don't know."

"You forgave me for the way I spoke to Balthazar," he pointed out.

"Did I?" he asked. "Or was I just afraid of further confrontation?"

"Cas, I was wrong to treat Balthazar the way I did, okay? And I'm sorry. I will apologise the next
"time I see him."

"I believe you."

"Do you think your father would apologise?"

Castiel shook his head straight away. "Absolutely not." He put his fork down and rested his arms on the table. "He thought he was doing the right thing," Cas said quietly, almost to himself.

"Doesn't mean it was the right thing." Dean scooped pancetta cubes onto his fork and shoved them greedily in his mouth. "What kind of stuff do you say to her? I mean I'm not asking for details, 'cause I figure it's private stuff - just generally speaking? I've never really gotten the whole counselling thing."

Castiel shrugged. "I'm not sure I get it either. So far we've only spoken about my childhood and my father's liking of corporal punishment."

Dean's expression darkened, and his grip on his fork tightened. "How often did your father hit you when you were a kid?"

"Whenever I was bad," he replied matter-of-factly. "Didn't your father ever hit you when you were a kid?"

"Whenever I was bad," he replied matter-of-factly. "Didn't your father ever hit you?"

"No. Never."

"Not even when you'd done something wrong?"

"Never. Not even when he was drunk, because even then he knew that you don't ever hit your kid."

"When I told him I didn't feel... that way... about women..." Castiel licked his lips. "It was supposed to be punishment. I think it just got out of control when I wouldn't agree to get married off."

"He abused you, Cas. Don't defend him like that," Dean argued, bewildered that Cas was still defending the man who had made his life miserable for so long.

Castiel looked uncomfortable. "Can we talk about something else, please?"

Dean didn't want to talk about something else; he wanted to keep talking until he made Cas see what a piece of shit his dad was because Cas deserved better than the way he'd been treated. Cas was nothing but kind, though considering the way he'd been treated for so long, it would have been understandable if Cas had been bitter and angry and hateful. Castiel's big heart was one of the things Dean admired about him. "What do you want to talk about?" Dean asked with his mouth full.

Castiel rolled his eyes in disgust. "Well not your lack of manners, certainly."

Dean grinned like the big kid he was, his cheeks bulging. Wanting to wipe that cheesy grin off Dean's face, Castiel launched a sprout at him.

Dean almost choked on his food, eyes wide with surprise at Cas's actions. "Did you just throw food at me?"

"No."

"You did! I watched you do it!"

In retaliation, Dean picked up a piece of roast potato and threw it at Cas. It bounced off his chest and landed on his plate, splashing gravy up his white shirt.
Dean snorted. "Looks like you might need a bib," he teased. "The little baby got food all down his front."

Castiel dug his hand into the bowl of mashed potatoes and leaned across the table, splatting it in Dean's face. His eyes widened as he realised what he'd done, and then he laughed.

"Oh, you are *so* on!" Dean declared, wiping potato off his face and flinging it back at Cas.

Laughing and shrieking like two-year-olds, they started pinging food at each other. The bowl of leftover mash was quickly emptied as they lobbed handfuls of it at each other until they were both covered in food.

"Okay, okay, time out!" Dean declared breathlessly a minute later. He surveyed the mess they'd made - his elbow had caught the gravy jug sending it across the table, Cas had ducked a couple of times so there was potato on the walls, and a couple of stray sprouts had flown past his head at one point. "What a mess."

Castiel seemed to withdraw into himself. "I'm sorry."

"Dude, it's cool."

But Castiel didn't look convinced.

Dean's chair scraped across the floor as he stood and leaned over the table. "Hey, look at me. It's cool, okay?"

"I started this. I should clean it up."

"We'll clean it up - together - because I gave as good as I got," Dean insisted, before a lump of potato in Cas' hair caught his gaze. "You've got food in your hair," he told him, reaching over to run his fingers through that strand of thick hair, picking the piece of potato out as their gazes locked. They were silent for a few seconds before Dean licked his lips nervously and pulled back a little, dropping the potato onto Cas's plate. "I hope you were finished with that."

A small smile tugged at Castiel's lips and he cleared his throat. "Yes. I was."

"Good."

As he turned around to retrieve Castiel's sprouts from the floor, Cas giggled.

"What?" he asked, looking back over his shoulder, thinking that perhaps he had something on his back.

"I've never been in a food fight before."

"No?"

"Or a pillow fight. Or *any* kind of fight, really."

"Probably for the best, really."

Castiel frowned. "What do you mean by that?"

"Well you're kind of skinny. Whoever you were fighting would probably break you." Dean's teasing grin fell as he remembered sitting beside Cas's sedated form in the hospital.
Castiel's eyes narrowed. "I am not weak!"

"I never said you were weak!"

"You said I wasn't strong!"

"I— Stop twisting my words!"

"I'm strong," Castiel insisted, lips pursed a slight pout.

"Okay."

"I am!"

"I believe you!"

"No," Castiel said quietly. "You don't."

Dean took a breath. "Can we not do this?" he pleaded. The last thing he wanted was to ruin Cas's first real Thanksgiving.

"I'm strong," Castiel repeated softly, eyes on the ground.

"I know," Dean agreed. He stepped towards Cas and gripped his wrists loosely, rubbing his thumbs where Cas had once threatened to leave scars. "I know."

* * *

Surprisingly it took them less than an hour between the two of them to gather up the remnants of food, wipe down the floor and walls where food had hit, and wash the mountain of dishes. Castiel handwashed the tablecloth as best he could while Dean tidied up the counter. And they did it all in silence.

"What about that pie?" Dean asked after they were done.

"You can't still be hungry!" Cas exclaimed.

"But pie," Dean pleaded.

Castiel shook his head in bemusement. "It's still in the oven. Be careful."

Dean carefully pulled the dish out and let out an impressed whistle at the sight, for the golden-brown pastry topping had been cut out in a Jack O'Lantern-inspired face. "You, my friend, are amazing."

Castiel gave him a small, pleased smile. "I try."

"You succeed," Dean amended. "I almost don't want to cut into it."

Castiel placed two plates on the counter and Dean cut them each a generous slice of pie, topping them with a generous dollop of Cool Whip. Before Cas could get them forks, Dean swiped a finger through the filling and stuck it in his mouth.

A small noise akin to a whine rose in Castiel's throat. He stared at Dean's plump, pink lips suggestively sucking his finger clean, then it slid out with a wet pop. He held his breath, feeling a warm flush spreading across his face as Dean ran his tongue across his lower lip, catching a few stray flakes of pastry.
Dean swallowed. His expression bore none of the stress that prematurely aged his face; rather the years fell off him as his face lit up in a look of childish wonder.

"Cas," he choked.

"Dean? What is it?" Castiel asked, immediately concerned.

When Dean looked at him his eyes were wet. "How...?"

Lines creased Cas's forehead as he tried to decipher what Dean wasn't saying.

"My mom, she..."

Castiel sucked in a breath as understanding dawned on him. "It was a recipe from one of her books."

He wasn't sure which one of them was more surprised when Dean launched himself at Cas, nearly squeezing the life out of him. Cas grimaced and did his best to bear it, but eventually he needed to breathe.

"Um, Dean?" he croaked. Immediately the pressure around his ribcage eased as Dean stepped back.

"Sorry, I... Uh..."

Neither of them acknowledged the single tear that trickled down Dean's cheek.

"I understand."

They took their plates to the living room, sitting beside each other on the sofa. Castiel was halfway through his slice, suddenly hungry despite feeling full not that long ago, when he noticed that Dean hadn't touched his. He was simply staring at it.

He placed a hand on Dean's arm. "It's okay," he said, when Dean looked at him.

"It was my favourite," Dean told him. "When she died... I never thought I'd taste it again. I forgot what it was like, but as soon as I had this, I knew. Is that weird?"

"No," Castiel assured him. "Not at all."

Dean picked up his fork and broke off a small piece, placing it in his mouth in a way more careful than Cas had ever seen him eat before. He closed his eyes as he chewed, letting the flavour transport him back to his childhood.

"Promise me you'll make this again," Dean asked hoarsely when his plate was clean.

"Of course."

"You know, I don't really feel like watching anything tonight."

Cas nodded. Dean had probably picked out another movie in his head that he thought Cas should see.

"I think I'm probably gonna just like down for a bit," he said, moving to stand.

"You could lie down here," Castiel said, his words stopping Dean in his tracks.

"I kind of want some quiet."
"I can be quiet," Castiel promised. "Unless you'd rather be alone?"

Dean hesitated. "No," he answered eventually. "I don't want to be alone."

Castiel patted the sofa, still warm from where Dean had been sitting.

Slowly, almost reluctantly, Dean lay down beside him, curled up with his head on Castiel's lap. He fidgeted, trying to get his comfortable on Cas's thigh, before placing a cushion between them.

"Comfortable?" Cas asked.

"I thought you said you could be quiet?"

"Sorry."

"'S okay. I was just teasing."

"I'll be quiet now."

They sat there in silence, their breathing falling into an easy rhythm as the minutes ticked past. After a while Castiel found himself brushing his fingers through Dean's hair, and Dean didn't protest. Eventually Dean's breathing became heavier, until gentle snores rumbled in his throat.

Castiel looked down at his sleeping friend, more peaceful than he'd ever seen him. Dean looked beautiful like this, and he found himself staring in a way he couldn't when Dean was awake. He'd noticed Dean's freckles - it was impossible not to - but now he could see the smaller, less obvious ones, and could appreciate just how many were scattered across his face. The desire to kiss each and every one surged up in him, and his heart filled with longing.

"I think I love you," he whispered.
Chapter 25

Dean had woken up at around nine the night before, having dreamt about his mother and pies. For the first time in forever, there hadn't been a single flame turning it into a nightmare. They'd watched TV for a couple of hours in relative silence (though he wasn't sure that either of them had paid it much attention), and Dean had gone to bed a little after eleven.

Now, he was standing in the living room doorway, hot mug of coffee in hand, watching Cas sleep. When he'd taken him in, he had been someone to take care of; someone to fill the hole that Sam had left. Things had changed, though, and it felt like Cas was the one taking care of Dean, and he didn't know how to feel about that.

But there was also something... more. Something that Dean couldn't put his finger on. It just felt right, being around Cas. He couldn't explain it.

Castiel shifted, the cover half-falling onto the floor exposing a hairless chest. "Hmm," Castiel sighed sleepily, turning over and opening his eyes. He looked at Dean and blinked twice. "Dean?"

"Morning, sleepyhead."

Castiel sniffed the air. "Do I smell coffee?"

Dean huffed a laugh. "Yeah. Give me a minute."

Two minutes later Castiel was sitting wrapped in his blankets, the steaming mug of coffee that Dean had brought him cradled in his hands.

"Are you going to drink it or just inhale it?"

"Both," Castiel said, taking a small sip. "Mmph. Hot."

"You'll find that when it's freshly made," Dean smirked.

Castiel's stomach growled. "I can't believe I'm hungry after everything I ate last night. I shouldn't need to eat anything for the rest of the week."

"Cereal or toast?" Dean asked.

"Ugh, toast," Castiel groaned immediately.

"Good, because I put two slices in the toaster for you when I poured your coffee."

Castiel laughed and stretched his legs out until they knocked against the coffee table. "You know me too well."

* * *

"You don't know me at all," Lisa told him, picking up items of clothing from various piles and fitting them into her suitcase.

"Yeah, I do."

She chuckled. "You know how to get me off in bed, Dean, but that's not the same thing as knowing me."
"Don't leave," Dean breathed, watching her helplessly. It felt like everything he had was slipping through his fingers like grains of sand.

"I have to."

"Why? I know it's not perfect, but I thought what we had was good."

"It was good," she agreed. "Until I realised it wasn't."

"Don't take Ben away from me," he pleaded brokenly.

Finally she stopped packing. "I'd never do that," she promised, moving to stand in front of him. Her soft hands reached up to cup his jaw, but her lips would never touch his again. "You're... You're the closest thing to a dad that he has. I want you to always be a part of his life."

"I love him," Dean whispered.

"I know you do," she replied, her eyes filling up with tears, "which is why this is so hard. But I need to do this. For us. For me and Ben," she amended.

* * *

"No, I don't," Dean shrugged. Because one lucky guess didn't mean he knew him, right? "Anyway, it's gonna pop in a minute so you might want to..." he beckoned towards the kitchen. "I've got to get ready for work."

Dean took his cooling mug of coffee down the hallway to his room. Shutting the door behind him, he sat down on his bed and glanced at one of the two photos that sat beside the lamp on the small bedside table.

It was Ben's birthday party, and Dean had blown up so many balloons he'd gotten light-headed and had to sit down. The house had been filled with them, and maybe he'd gone a little overboard but he'd wanted Ben to have the kind of birthday he'd always fantasised about as a kid. The grin on Ben's face made him smile sadly. That had been a good day. After a while, his eyes flicked right to his mother. As he looked at his smiling younger self in her arms, he saw a striking similarity between himself and Ben.

Shaking himself out of his stupid daydreams, he slammed his mug on the table and began getting ready for work.

* * *

After Dean left, Cas went to shower. As he caught sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, however, he stopped. He turned and looked at himself but, since it was only a small mirror, he couldn't see much. He went to Dean's room instead and stood in front of the three-door wardrobe, the middle door housing a full-length mirror.

Dean was right. He was skinny. In most places, he amended, turning sideways. He'd been slowly regaining the weight he'd lost before he'd found a home with Dean and was now carrying a little extra weight around his middle, but he lacked any of the muscle that Dean's body boasted.

As he compared himself to Dean, he got momentarily distracted by thoughts of Dean's body. God, how he wanted nothing more than to be able to run his hands up his firm chest; to be wrapped in his strong arms; to be kissed by those full, plump lips...
Reluctantly, he pulled himself out of that fantasy. Just because he'd lost what muscle he once had, didn't mean he couldn't get it back again, he decided, forcing his brain back on topic.

Resolutely, he walked back to the living room, putting out the bathroom light en-route. He wasn't going to shower. Not yet. He raided his cupboard, pulling out a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants that Dean had loaned him a couple of weeks previously and a long-sleeved t-shirt. It had been a long time since he'd gone running, but it was high time he started again.

* * *

Thanksgiving was barely over when people started talking about Christmas. Decorations didn't appear before the first of December - people still had some restraint, but it all vanished as soon as the calendar changed. Within a day, Christmas music started playing with abandon in many shops, often filtering out onto the streets, and Dean counted seven windows across the street that had illuminated Christmas decorations in apartment windows, from a simple string of Christmas lights to flashing stars and waving snowmen.

"I bet by next week, the whole street will be done up," Dean grumbled.

"Who cares?" Castiel protested, for Dean had been passing judgement all week. "Just shut the curtains already!"

"I promise you this, though, there will be nothing like that hanging in my window."

"Bobby did say you're a Scrooge when it comes to Christmas," Castiel announced, unsurprised at his declaration.

"I am not!"

Castiel smiled fondly from where he sat on the couch, wearing a hideous oversized sweater he'd bought recently. It was sickeningly festive and Dean hated it. Unfortunately when Castiel had asked him for his opinion, excitedly spreading his arms so that Dean could take in every last ugly detail, he hadn't the heart to say anything other than, "It's great!" in case he wiped the smile off Castiel's face.

"What - you've seen that film?"

"I've read the book."

Dean humphed in surprise.

"You're turning into one of those nosey neighbours who always wants to know what everyone's up to," Cas teased, rolling his eyes. "Anyway, I thought you wanted to introduce me to Gandalf? I would like to know if I was being insulted when you compared me to him."

"Hell no! Gandalf kicks some serious ass! Now come on," Dean commanded, as if Cas was the one who'd been delaying them. "We can't have you 'not understanding references' forever."

Castiel looked bemused. "I shall endeavour to complete my training, Yoga."

Dean blinked as he replayed Castiel's words in his mind. "It's Yoda, dude. Yoda ," he repeated.

"I apologise," Castiel said sincerely. "Do we need popcorn?"

"I don't know about you, but I'm still stuffed from dinner. I could use a drink though?"

As Dean started the film Castiel brought through two large glasses of soda. For a split second Dean
looked disappointed, before taking the glass from him without a word.

* * *

The next day it was raining when they woke up, and it didn't stop all day. In Bobby's office Castiel muttered to himself, wishing - not for the first time - that Bobby had a computer on which to keep his client database. He'd seen the invoice he was looking for just a second ago, but he couldn't for the life of him remember which pile he'd put it in. All the words were starting to blur together and he was giving himself a headache.

"How you doin'?" Bobby asked, sitting down across from him.

Frazzled, Castiel didn't even spare a second to glance up at him. "Bobby, I don't mean to sound rude, but... Have you ever considered a computer?"

"I'm gonna stop you right there," Bobby interrupted. "You're not the first person to hassle me about that."

Disappointment welled up inside him for a moment. "You don't want one?"

"Don't want one? Son, I got one. The damn thing was a pain in the ass so I packed it up."

"You... You have a computer?" Castiel wanted to tear his hair out. "Where?!"

Bobby jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "In the cupboard."

It was less a cupboard and more a long, narrow room to the side of the office with shelves running down one wall, meaning you almost needed to walk sideways to get to the far end.

"In the brown box, but I don't know what you're getting all excited about— Now, son, just you put that back!"

Castiel ignored him, dragging the box of computer parts into the office.

"What are you doin'?!!" Bobby cried.

"Hoping it still works," he grunted, pulling back the flaps of the box revealed a computer tower, a screen, and what looked like all the cables he would need - now if only he knew how to connect it all up.

"Printer?" Castiel asked hopefully.

"Dream on. That hunk o' junk was the biggest waste of money as it is."

Castiel considered which mechanics were in. There was Dean, obviously, but he doubted that his friend would know how to connect a computer up. Benny might know, but he still wasn't sure if he liked Benny, or if Benny liked him. Andy was the youngest, and might be the best choice. "Is Andy busy just now?"

"Well, no, he's— Now hang on. What are you planning?"

But Castiel was already gone, disappearing into the workshop.

"Excuse me, Castiel said, finding Andy assisting Dean with a car he couldn't identify. "I wonder if I might borrow Andy?"
Dean's head jerked up and his eyes flicked between the two of them before he asked, "Andy?"

"That's what he said," Andy told him, wiping his hands down his front and moving away from the car he was working on with Dean.

"Would you happen to know how to connect a computer?" he asked as they walked out into the forecourt.

"A computer? You mean Bobby's finally giving modern technology a second chance?" he laughed.

"Not exactly willingly," Castiel said wryly.

Bobby scowled at them as they walked into the office.

"I can have this thing switched on in ten minutes, easy," Andy boasted. "Providing all the cables are still here."

"I would expect so," Castiel said, picking up the tangled knot of cables from the box.

"Why don't you start on untangling them and I'll start on this," he said, moving to take the computer screen out of the box. Then he stopped. "Um, what do you want me to do with all these papers?" he asked hesitantly, motioning towards the stacks on the desk.

"Leave them where they are!" Bobby grumbled.

"Bobby, you are paying me to organise your files and that is what I intend to do," Cas told him adamantly, clearing the desk for Andy. He paused for a moment, then turned to his boss with a handful of papers clutched to his chest. "Unless you miss the paperwork and intend to 'let me go' so that you can take over?"

"Hell no," Bobby protested.

Castiel knew damn well that Bobby was more than happy to be getting his hands dirty in engine parts again now that he had someone else to take care of the boring office stuff. "In which case, welcome to the twenty-first century."

Andy snorted.

"Why'd I ever listen to Dean..." Bobby complained, his voice getting quieter as he walked away, leaving them to it.

They heard him bellow, "Winchester!" and looked at each other.

"Okay, who are you and what did you do with the real Cas?"

"The 'real Cas'?" Castiel frowned.

"Yeah, you know - the timid guy who usually sits in the office and quietly accepts every shitty job Bobby offloads onto him?"

Castiel puffed his chest out in indignation. "They are not 'shitty jobs', as you so—"

"So you didn't object to being sent on seven coffee runs in a day when the coffee pot blew up?"

"And who should he have sent?" Castiel asked. "You? And then who would've finished... doing whatever it was you were doing... on that car you were doing it on?"
"Okay, okay," Andy grinned. "Though I think Dean's about to cop it for pushing Bobby to give you a job. He's been trying to get me and Benny to dispose of the computer for months, but what were we going to do with it? Nobody'll want something as old as this, except maybe a museum!" he joked. "It's no wonder Bobby got it as cheap as he did."

But Castiel's attention was focused out the window, in the direction of the workshop. "I can't let Bobby give Dean trouble for something that I—"

"Nah, don't worry about it. Bobby's just going to let off some steam, is all."

"Oh. Well, I'll have to make it up to him tonight."

Andy looked up from what he was doing. "How are you going to do that, then?" he asked with a cheeky grin.

"Baking a pie always works."

"Huh."

Castiel sat with the mess of cables in his lap and slowly started to untangle them, one by one, while Andy moved the piles of papers onto the floor and set the computer out on the desk.

"Bobby hated this thing. Though it probably didn't help that he never took the time to learn how to work it."

"I'm sure he'll learn to love it." Castiel replied, concentrating working out which connection was at the end of the cable he was working loose.

"Can I be there when you ask him to start paying for broadband?" Andy asked, shooting him a wicked grin.

Castiel hadn't thought about that. The mention of internet had the wheels in his head turning, and as his fingers deftly slipped cables through loops, disentangling them one knot at a time, he entertained the idea of the garage having its own website. Unfortunately that wasn't something he knew how to do, and would probably be expensive.

"I'm gonna need that thick purple one first," Andy told him.

"Oh. Okay."

"So, how long have you known Dean anyway?"

"A few months."

"Is that all? They way you two are, I thought maybe you went way back."

"It seems a lot longer than that at times."

"And you two are... good friends?"

"Yes," he replied honestly. Aware that his colleague was looking at him a little too intently, he asked, "Andy, why are you looking at me like that?"

"I'm not," Andy chuckled, still giving Cas that same look.

Castiel squinted at him.
"Hey, I just want the purple cable," Andy shrugged. Tugging it loose, Castiel passed it to him. "But you two live together, right?"

"You seem to have a slight fixation with us."

"I'm just making conversation," Andy said, throwing his hands up defensively, a grin still on his face. "Yes. We live together. We work together. Often, we go out together."

"Huh," Andy said again. Castiel narrowed his eyes at Andy, who was too busy connecting the purple cable to the back of the tower to notice him staring. He seemed a little too inquisitive. Had he picked up on his feelings towards Dean? Or was he truly just 'making conversation'? "What about you?" Cas asked, moving the subject safely away from himself. "Do you live with anyone?"

"My girlfriend. Tracey."

"Is she nice?"

"Dude, I'm dating her!" Andy laughed. "Of course I think she's nice."

"I mean, what's she like?"

"Smart. Funny. Beautiful. Too good for a guy like me."

"I'm sure that's not true."

Andy dug his wallet out. "See for yourself."

Cas looked at the picture. She was attractive, he could see that. "She's very pretty."

"Pretty? She's beautiful."

Castiel shrugged. "I guess she's just not my type?"

"What is your type?"


"Come on, you've got to have a type! Everyone has a type."

He shrugged. What was he supposed to say?

"Benny likes foreign women. The last one he got serious about was Greek, but she got deported. Overstayed her visa or something. I go for women who are out of my league, which is why I've been single most of my life. I don't know about Dean. He doesn't really talk to us, much, but you can tell when he's gotten laid the night before. I'd say his type was simply 'female', but his bed seems to have been pretty empty, lately, if you know what I mean?"

Castiel tried not to let Andy's words upset him. He knew Dean dated women - if his actions could
even be described as *dating*. The fact that Dean didn't appear to have been with any women recently was irrelevant.

"So what about you?"

"I've never... *been*... with anyone," he revealed. "I've never been interested in dating before."

"Before? So, there's someone you're sweet on now?"

"No, that's not what I meant," Castiel backtracked hurriedly. "But perhaps, in the future... Who knows?"

"You'll find a nice girl, Cas. Girls dig the whole 'mysterious' thing you've got going on."

"Who's gonna find a nice girl?" Dean's voice asked as he strolled into the room, eyebrows raised as he wiped his grease-covered hands with an old rag.

"Me, apparently," Cas told him, thankful that Dean had interrupted.

"You?" Dean asked, momentarily confused before he caught himself. "I mean, yeah, of course you will."

Cas held another cable out to Andy, catching his eye as the other man stared at him.

"Or, you know, maybe you'll find a nice *guy* instead," Andy suggested carefully.

"Maybe you'll find a nice guy," Dean shot back.

Despite Dean's attempts to defend him, Cas couldn't help but respond to the implication; eyes widening as his hands clenched around the cables. He could hear his heart beating a frantic rhythm in his ears and wondered if the others could hear it, too.

Andy nodded. "Huh."

"Andy, I would very much appreciate it if you wouldn't mention it to the others," he began desperately.

"Hey, it's none of my business. Or theirs," Andy said, holding his hands up. "They'll find out if you tell them, and not before. Certainly not from me."

Castiel's shoulders sagged, and he released his grip on the cables. "Thank you," he breathed.

"See? There's nothing wrong with you," Dean told him, ruffling his hand through Cas's hair.

"No, but there's something wrong with *you*," Cas snapped half-heartedly, throwing the remaining clump of cables at him.

"What did I do?" Dean cried.

"You kind of gave it away," Andy grinned. "Though I did have my suspicions."

"All I came in here for was a coffee," Dean protested, dumping the cables back on Cas's lap.

"Then make your coffee and get out!"

Andy laughed. "You two almost sound as if... No, never mind. Oh, brilliant!" he exclaimed as
Castiel disentangled one more cable and the remaining ones fell loose.

Cas triumphantly laid out the separated cables on the desk.

"I can't wait until we get a new coffee pot," Dean muttered to himself, scooping instant coffee into a mug and pouring boiling water on it. "This stuff tastes like someone's pissed in it. You know, I can't believe Bobby let you dig that thing out again."

"Well Castiel didn't really give him much of a choice."

"Really?" Dean shot an impressed look at Castiel that had him smiling proudly at himself.

"Do you want me to show you how to do this?" Andy asked him.

"Please," Cas smiled.

"Well, I'll leave you little lovebirds to bond over Bobby's computer," Dean teased.

"Worried I'm gonna steal your boyfriend?" Andy joked back.

Dean looked adorable when he blushed, Cas realised. "Leave him alone," Cas smiled. "Now where does this one go?"

* * *

Cas was surprised to see a rainbow sticker had appeared in the office window when he showed up for work the next day.

"Andy thought that it'd be a good idea," Bobby announced, noticing where his attention was focused. "Something about letting queers know they're welcome here. I don't get why they think they wouldn't be - their money's just as green as anyone else's."

"Some people would turn them away from their business," Cas told him, thinking about the shop he used to work in.

"Well that's just stupid."

"What if a customer has a problem with it?"

Bobby shrugged. "If they want to go somewhere else, then that's their problem. I'm not turning folk away, and if a sticker lets them know that then I'll put up some damn stickers."

Castiel smiled.

* * *

"My work have displayed a rainbow sticker in their window," Castiel told Pamela the following weekend. "I'm told it a symbol of support for the queer community."

"It is," she agreed. "That sounds promising. Are you thinking about coming out to them?"

"No," Castiel replied firmly, shaking his head.

"Why not?"

"It's not that I think they'd reject me, if that's what you're thinking. My colleagues are not my father."
"No, they're not."

"It's none of their business. And I suppose, if I'm being honest, I'm still not fully comfortable with myself," he admitted.

She gave him a supportive smile. "It's good that you can acknowledge that. You've come a long way in a relatively short space of time - though I suspect a large part of that is because of Dean."

Castiel swallowed hard around the lump in his throat at the mention of Dean's name.

"I think his friendship is good for you," she continued. "Of course, coming to accept yourself is only a part of why you're here."

Castiel nodded. They had discussed this. He wasn't very good at being assertive. "I suppose you could say I stood up to my boss this week," he told her. "In a way."

"Great! Tell me about it."

* * *

"Tell me about it," Jo pleaded with him.

Castiel sighed and pushed his empty glass towards her. She topped up his ice and poured another can of Cola over the cubes before pushing it back to him.

"On me," she said, when Castiel tried to pay her. "But come on, tell me all about this Big Idea of yours."

"A website," he stated. "Bobby should have a website."

"For the garage?"

"What else would he need a website for?"

Jo pouted as she considered it. "It makes good business sense."

"I just don't know how to make one. I can balance spreadsheets and complete mail merges, but..."

"You know, I have this friend. Charlie. She's amazing with computers. Though I wouldn't say everything she does with them is strictly legal."

"Charlie?" he asked, wondering why the name sounded familiar. Then it clicked. "Your friend Charlie who is... who's a... umm..."

"Lesbian?" Jo finished for him, with an amused smile.

"Not into men," Castiel amended, returning her smile.

"Have I told you about her before?"

"No, Dean mentioned her."

For a second she looked puzzled, almost as if trying to work something out, but then she laughed. "If you put a picture of Dean up on the site, I can guarantee a lot more women would bring their cars into the garage."
Castiel's stomach twisted at her words and he stared down at his drink. "Yes, I'm sure they would."

His words hung heavily between them for a moment.

"You know he's not the only guy in the world, right?" Jo told him quietly.

Castiel's pulse seemed to pound louder in his ears. "What?"

"Dean. You don't have to follow him around like a lost dog. Get out there, make some friends."

"I have friends."

"Yeah?"

"Yes."

"Where are they?"

"I don't know. I'm not following them like a lost dog," he said, throwing her words back at her.

"No - you're following Dean."

Castiel took a sip of his drink before speaking carefully. "If you're implying what I think you're implying, then—"

"Don't even try to tell me I'm wrong, Cas," she told him firmly. Lowering her voice, she leaned across the bar. "I don't know what you are but I know you're into Dean. It's not the whole world that can see it, but I can tell when someone likes someone."

Castiel was silent for so long that Jo started to wipe down the bar for something to do.

"You're right," he whispered, just as she was about to move away.

"I know," she said softly.

"I can't help it."

"Cas, I don't blame you. I've been there, but I've become too much like a little sister to him to ever get that lucky. Dean's a catch. Unfortunately you're only fishing for fun with him, and then you've got to throw him back for someone else."

The problem was, Castiel didn't want to throw him back.

"So when did you last go out with these mystery friends of yours?" Jo asked lightly.

"They're not 'mystery friends'," Cas grumbled back.

"I haven't seen them."

"I haven't seen any of your friends. Should I therefore assume that you have none?" he asked, perhaps a little more sharply and a little less teasingly than he'd meant to.

"Okay, okay," Jo sighed, holding her hands up in defence, "but my point is you seem to spend an awful lot of time with Dean and it's not healthy. Maybe if you went out more with these friends of yours, you'd stand a chance of finding someone you like better than Dean?"

Castiel doubted it, but didn't tell Jo as much. She thought she was helping.
"I mean, how many movies have you guys sat and watched this week?"

One most nights. They'd watched two last night - Dean had wanted him to see The Two Towers and The Return of the King back to back. "What are you, my therapist?" Castiel joked. So what if they watched a lot of movies? It's not like he never went out.

"No, dummy! I'm your friend."

Cas's head shot up at that, brows pinched. "You are?"

"Of course I am!"

"Oh."

"And as your friend, I don't want to see you to become Dean; shutting yourself away from the world."

Cas laughed at the idea of the outgoing Dean he knew shutting himself away from the world. He looked around the room for him, finding a woman pressing him up against the pool table and tucking a slip of paper into his pocket. "I don't think that applies to Dean, given how frequently he goes out and the number of nights he finds company," he disagreed bitterly.

"How many of these chicks does he take home? None - he always goes back to their place because it's easier to leave in the morning than ask someone else to. How many of them does he talk to about himself that isn't just 'yeah I work out'," she asked, flexing her imaginary muscles.

A reluctant smile tugged at his mouth. "I think I see your point."

"So, if you want, I could set you up with— Someone?" she asked carefully.

"Thank you, but no."

"Well what if I spoke to Charlie for you about making a website? If you keep it simple, maybe I can sweet-talk her into doing it for free."

"That... would actually be really good. Thank you, Jo. Though I haven't mentioned the idea to Bobby, yet."

"Here's a tip - wait until he's had a few drinks. You're in for a shot, then."

"I hardly think I'm going to catch him drinking in the office."

"I didn't mean at work!" Jo laughed. "The Christmas party." When she saw Castiel's confusion, she smacked the palm of her hand off her forehead. "Of course - you live with Dean. Okay, so it's not much of a party, but every year the guys from the garage come here for Christmas drinks and, more often than not, get completely smashed," she explained. "Dean, of course, doesn't join in the fun because he's an anti-social dick when it comes to the jolly holidays. Of course his dick's usually very sociable—"

"Jo!" Castiel exclaimed, rather loudly.

"Sorry. T-M-I."

Castiel glanced over at Dean again, aware of Jo watching him stare.

Jo rested a hand on his. "There's more to living than just being alive," she told him, putting his empty
glass on her tray and leaving him with his thoughts.

Castiel was reluctant to concede that Jo was right to worry. He couldn't spend the rest of his life pining after Dean - not that she knew how strongly he felt. But it was hard to move on when faced with the person you wanted every day; though he wasn't even sure he \textit{wanted} to move on.

* * *

When they got home that night Castiel was a little relieved to see Dean drop the woman's phone number in the trash, though he still felt jealous that Dean had let her give it to him in the first place.

"She said she wanted to show me her sixth toe," Dean whispered conspiratorially.

"You're drunk," Castiel proclaimed, pushing his friend away.

"Am not."

"You have beer breath."

"But I'm not drunk," Dean insisted.

"Then why did you turn her down?"

Dean seemed to hesitate. "I dunno."

Castiel didn't believe him. "Was it her sixth toe?" he teased, trying to disguise his curiosity with playfulness.

"There are other parts of her body that I'd be more interested in than her toes," Dean informed him.

"I'm sure."

As he turned to the living room Dean wrapped his arms around his shoulders, his weight almost pulling him down as Dean hugged him.

"Do you want to show me your toes?"

"Go to bed!" Castiel instructed him.

"I could count them for you - make sure you've got all ten."

"I promise you, Dean, I have ten toes - five on each foot," Castiel chuckled, moving Dean in the direction of his bedroom.

"Are you sure? When did you last count them?"

"This morning," he lied.

"I last counted my toes... never!" Dean exclaimed in shock.

"I think it's safe to assume that you also have ten toes."

"Really?"

"Really. Now go to bed."

"But I don't want to go to bed."
"Yes, you do."
"I do?"
"Yes."
"I'm gonna go to bed."

Castiel watched him stagger down the hallway, pondering the idea that maybe he was wrong and Jo was right. He'd always been adamant with Dean that casual hook-ups weren't his thing, but perhaps if he tried, even to just meet someone else, he'd stand a chance of moving on.
Chapter 26

The next day, filled with a fresh determination to give Jo's advice a go, Castiel decided that that night would be the start of getting over Dean. He called Balthazar and asked if he wanted to go out.

"You, asking me if I want to go out?" Balthazar exclaimed, his laughter sounding tinny over the bad connection.

"Yes," Castiel told him, already having second thoughts. "Somewhere I can meet someone."

"Someone... male?" Balthazar smirked.

Castiel sucked in a breath. "Yes," he admitted, after a moment. It wasn't like Balthazar hadn't already figured him out. First Balthazar, then Andy, now Jo. His friends really did seem to know him, and thankfully didn't care. Given the way his family had reacted, he'd never thought he'd find himself surrounded by so many accepting people. It made him wonder what his life would be like now if his family had accepted him. Although then he wouldn't have met Dean...

"So just you and me?"

"If you don't mind. I don't think I'm ready for everyone to know that I'm..."

"It's not like they'll care," Balthazar told him. "But hey, all in your own time."

Cas smiled in relief. Dean may not like Balthazar, and even Castiel could admit that he could be a little overbearing at times, but deep down he was a good friend. "Thank you for being so understanding."

"I know just the place," Balthazar told him. "Dance club on Queen Street. It's not too loud, and it's not one of those quiet bars that's just like every other bar in the rest of the town."

Like the one Dean had taken him to.

"You wouldn't want to be seen there, trust me. It's where all the older guys go who are too old to stay out clubbing until the early hours and too gay to settle down like the straights."

"The straights?"

"Straight people. Like your boyfriend."

"I don't have a— Oh," Castiel realised. "You mean Dean."

"Let me tell you something - I never want to get too old for partying."

"Balthazar, I'm sure you'll still be strutting your stuff when you're ninety, even if you have to take your walking frame onto the dancefloor with you."

Balthazar laughed. "I'll pick you up at eight, okay?"

* * *

"Not having second thoughts, are you?" Balthazar asked him, leaning against the bar and checking out the talent as they waited for their drinks.
"No," he lied. Not completely, anyway.

"So what about him?"

Castiel followed his friend's gaze to a man three times his size with biceps as large as melons. "You're not serious?!" he exclaimed. The man could easily snap him in half like a twig.

Balthazar simply laughed.

"You're not serious," Castiel realised, shaking his head. "I thought you were supposed to be helping?"

"I am. Helping you to relax. You're coiled tighter than a spring, darling," Balthazar observed, placing a hand on Cas's shoulder.

"I'm nervous," Cas muttered, eyes darting around the packed club.

"You've got nothing to be nervous about! You're young, you're hot, and half the guys here are gonna be lining up to bang you by the end of the night."

"Just half?" Castiel huffed, a flattered smile tugging the corners of his mouth upwards.

"Okay, maybe a little more than half."

"But I'm not looking for someone to 'bang' me," Cas told him, the slang term feeling alien on his tongue.

"Maybe you should be," Balthazar teased, paying the bartender before taking a long sip of his colourful cocktail.

"No thank you. There is more to being in a relationship than sex."

"I thought you were looking for a hook-up?" Balthazar reminded him pointedly.

Castiel opened and closed his mouth, realising that maybe he wasn't so sure what he was looking for tonight. "I'm looking for something that might lead to a relationship," he compromised.

Balthazar looked like he wanted to say something, but he kept quiet.

* * *

Later that night Castiel had his arms around some teenager Balthazar had steered his way, and they weren't so much dancing as swaying along to the music. He wondered what the boy's story was; whether the people closest to him knew or if it was like a secret second life.

He had to remind himself that it was okay to relax when the boy's hands slid lower, though his momentary falter led him out of time with the music.

Lips brushed against his neck; a kiss feather-light, unsure of its welcomeness. Sometimes the Dean in his dreams was confident and manhandled him with ease, but at others he was hesitant and equally as unsure as Cas was. Before he was even aware that he was doing it, he imagined Dean in the boy's place; imagined the scratch of stubble that darkened Dean's jaw tickling his neck as another, more confident kiss met his skin.

"Hmm... Dean..."
"Adam," the guy he was dancing with reminded him casually. "My name is Adam."

"Oh," Castiel said, jolted out of his fantasy. "Sorry."

Though they continued to dance, they didn't stand so close as before. As they kept moving, Cas looked around the room at Balthazar and a couple of his other friends they'd bumped into. They were all partnered up with someone, grinding together on the dancefloor. It was all so impersonal; there was no real feeling behind it. And he'd bet money he didn't have that none of them had to imagine their partners were someone else.

"I'm sorry, I... I need to go," he said, pushing Adam away.

He grabbed his coat on the way out, ignoring Adam's shouts for his number. He didn't want to see him again. All he wanted to do was go back to a home that wasn't his. To the man he loved but would never have. Cas had really thought that he could do this; just go out, meet someone, and forget all about his feelings for Dean. Last night it had seemed like such a simple idea. Now all it felt like was a mistake.

After stumbling outside, almost colliding with a drag queen taking a smoke, he rang the taxi company that Dean had programmed into his phone.

He didn't realise Balthazar had followed him outside until his friend asked, "Are you okay?"

"Yes," Castiel insisted, fumbling with his phone. "I'm fine."

Balthazar looked disbelieving.

"I will be," Cas amended.

"Was it that guy? Did he say something? Because I can—"

"No. No, I just... I need to go home."

"I'll wait with you."

"You don't have to do that."

"No, I'm going to wait with you until your cab comes," Balthazar insisted.

"Thank you," Castiel smiled gratefully, though he thought it unlikely that he was in any danger of being attacked a second time.

Balthazar draped a friendly arm around his shoulders and pulled him close.

What little extra warmth his friend had to offer was welcome on such a cold December night. Cas turned into his body and hugged him, holding onto him as if he were afraid Balthazar was going to disappear. "You're a good friend," he whispered.

Balthazar held him for a long moment, the steady thwump thwump thwump of the bass from inside feeling like it was beating in time with Castiel's heart.

"If I was a good friend," Balthazar said slowly, "I'd tell you to move out."

"What?" Castiel frowned, leaning back to look at his friend.

"Living with Dean... It's not going to help your feelings for him."
Castiel pulled away and stepped back. "How long have you known?" he asked defensively.

"I didn't, really. I don't know. I guess some things are just starting to make sense, now."

Castiel said nothing, unsure if there was anything he could say.

"If money was an issue, you could move in with me for a while?"

"I'm not leaving Dean," Cas told him stubbornly, frowning as he folded his arms across his chest. Even though, deep down, a small part of him admitted that Balthazar might be right, he couldn't bring himself to think about leaving Dean.

"It might be for the best."

"No," Castiel said adamantly. "I love him." It was the first time he'd told someone, and he couldn't take it back. Not that he wanted to. "I love him," he said again, being able to say it offering him some sense of freedom. The third time, he choked on the words. "I love him."

"I know. Love sucks, doesn't it?"

Castiel laughed even though he didn't find it funny, because it hurt.

"No matter what, Cas, I'm here if you ever want to talk. I don't know how much use I can be if you need advice, but at least I can listen?"

"Thank you, but please don't be insulted if I say that I hope I never have to take you up on your offer."

"Of course not. To be honest, I'm kind of hoping you don't."

This time when Castiel laughed, it was heartfelt. It seemed like Dean and Balthazar had something in common after all.

* * *

Castiel was deep in thought when the taxi pulled up outside Dean's apartment block.

"We're here."

"Oh. Thank you," Castiel said, moving to get out of the car.

"Not so fast, buddy. You forget something?"

Cas looked at the back seat, before realising the driver meant his payment. "Of course, sorry. How much am I due you?"

"Let's call it an even nine."

Cas handed him a ten and the driver gave him a dollar back.

"Thank you," he said again as he shut the door. He looked up at Dean's apartment, seeing light peeking through the curtains.

It took three hits of the button before the elevator arrow lit up, and he hoped it didn't mean that it was on the fritz again. Hesitantly he stepped inside as the doors opened, looking around as if hoping for a sign that it was safe. The button for the third floor lit up the first time he pressed it, which he took as
"It's kind of early, isn't it?" Dean asked, when he got in.

"I came home because I was tired," Castiel lied, before an unexpected yawn burst past his lips. He supposed it wasn't a complete lie, after all.

"I'll let you get to bed," Dean declared, standing up and switching the TV off.

"No, you don't have to—"

"It's okay," Dean grinned. "I've seen the film before. Bond kills the bad guy and gets the girl."

Castiel smiled tiredly as Dean made his way down the hall, collapsing onto the sofa without bothering to make up his bed.

* * *

All too soon, the sound of Dean bumbling around in the kitchen woke him. Yawning and bleary-eyed, he made his way to the kitchen in search of coffee.

"So how was last night?" Dean asked as he trudged through, passing him his own cup of coffee before making himself a second cup.

"I danced with a boy," Cas told him, taking a sip of the much-needed caffeine boost.

"A boy?"

"Well, younger than me," Cas amended over the lip of his mug.

"So, uh, what? Do you like him? Are you going to see him again?"

"No," he yawned, shaking his head in case his answer had been drowned out by his exhaustion.

"No you didn't like him, or no you're not going to see him again?"

"No, I'm not going to see him again. I barely got to know his name." Castiel finished his cooling coffee in three mouthfuls. "There's no need to worry Dean, you're still the number one man in my life," he said, forcing himself to sound like he was joking.

Dean brought the coffee pot over to the table and refilled his mug.

"Oh! Thank you," he said, curling his hands around his mug and pulling it close again.

"No need to sound so surprised," Dean grinned, pouring his own. "So. This boy."

"Last night was a mistake," Castiel said firmly.

"He wasn't a dick, was he? I mean, he didn't hurt you?"

"No, it was just a mistake," Castiel reiterated, warmth blooming in his chest at Dean's concern.

They finished their coffees in silence, Cas unwilling to elaborate further and Dean unwilling - or perhaps too uninterested - to ask.

"So have you got any plans this morning?" Dean asked as they washed up.
Castiel shrugged. "Not really."

"I didn't know if you wanted to do something."

"Like what? We have no money."

"Well, yeah, that's true, but there's this new exhibit on at the museum and—"

"You want to go to the museum?"

"Well, no, but I thought you might."

Castiel thought about it.

"And it is donation entry, so I'm pretty sure we could scrape together something like five bucks a piece."

"It's not like there's anything else to do," Castiel conceded.

"Jeez, sound a little more excited, why don't you," Dean muttered. "It was just a thought. If you don't want to go then—"

"I didn't say that," Castiel said quickly.

"Fine," Dean said as he dried the soap suds off his hands, "let's get going, then."

Cas paused for a second. "Right now?" he asked, wondering if perhaps he'd misunderstood.

"Why not?"

"Because I haven't showered, yet."

* * *

"Insects?" Castiel grinned an hour later, his face lighting up when he saw the banner outside the museum.

"I thought you might like it," Dean told him, a little smugly.

Dean dropped their money into the box as Cas picked up a leaflet to guide them through the exhibit.

"This is going to bore you," he observed.

Dean shrugged. "You like bugs, they have bugs - albeit dead bugs."

He followed Castiel around for a little over two hours, listening to him 'um' and 'ah' every time he learned something new. The size of some butterflies surprised him, and he thought the moth that was the size of his hand was pretty badass. He didn't mind spiders, but he wasn't going to admit to Cas that some of the larger ones freaked him out. What he really didn't get, though, was why anyone would want to kill and collect all these creepy crawlies in the first place.

"Some of the insects here were caught over a hundred years ago!" Cas exclaimed.

They were currently standing in front of a large cabinet displaying hundreds of species of beetles, from Mexican elephant beetles to your regular garden ladybird.

"Dean, did you know that aphids are born pregnant? So have no need for sex..."
"Where's the fun in that?"

"And they can give birth 10 days after being born themselves" Castiel continued reading aloud, ignoring him.

"Fascinating," Dean replied, sounding anything but fascinated. "I feel sorry for the little guys. Girls. Having to go without sex all their lives."

"I'm pretty sure they don't live that long, Dean. A few weeks or months at most."

Dean glanced at his watch. "Don't make me give you a kick up the ass if you want to see the bees and we're going to make it to work on time," Dean chuckled, giving Cas a gentle nudge in the ribs to encourage him to move on.

"But I didn't get to see the—"

"We can always double back if we have time," Dean promised.

* * *

Bobby still wasn't happy about being pushed into the age of technology, and on some level it felt like Cas had taken a step backwards. Now he had to go over everything he'd done a second time to enter the data into one or more of several databases he's created, but on the other hand he was getting through things quicker. Now he didn't need to keep every scrap of paper Bobby had hoarded; just those from the previous financial year. Everything else could be disposed of once it had been entered into the computer.

His fingers felt stiff from typing for the past hour and a half so he interlocked them, stretching his hands out in front of him causing his knuckles to crack. Every day he put Dean's house key out of his pocket and sat it beside him on the desk. Today, however, it hung from a keyring. Castiel picked it up and fingered the overpriced enamel bee that Dean had bought him. It had been completely unnecessary, but he appreciated the thought.

"What have you got there?" Bobby asked him.

"Nothing," Castiel said, putting it down again. "Can I show you something?"

Bobby narrowed his eyes. "On that thing?" he queried, pointing at the computer.

"Yes," Castiel said, sliding his chair to the side to let Bobby in.

"Do I have to?" he grumbled, nevertheless moving to stand beside Castiel. "What?"

"This is your customer database. Name, address, telephone number—"

"Why do I need to know this?"

"I'm hoping to change your mind about this computer."

"Good luck with that," Bobby scoffed. "But go on."

Was it Castiel's imagination or did Bobby sound a little amused? "And these two columns are for the make and model of their car. If we keep a note of when each customer has their annual vehicle safety inspection performed, then we can send out reminder letters the following year. That way they might be inclined to bring their car back here, which means more repeat business."
"And more money," Bobby nodded in understanding. "Just one thing."

"Yes?"

"You can't tell the difference between a Ford and Ferrari, so how are you gonna fill all this in?"

Castiel felt like he should be offended, except he was also pretty sure that Bobby was right. "With this," he said, pulling a rough draft of a form out from a drawer. "I can type it up and print it off, then we have every customer fill one in. It's got the basic details you've always asked for, plus everything else."

"Print it off on what?" Bobby pointed out.

"Well, I could do it at the library, or..."

"No," Bobby said adamantly, knowing what Cas was getting at.

Castiel wasn't going to give up. "Then how else do you propose we send out letters to customers, which you just agreed would be a good idea? You pay me to do a job, so let me do it right."

Bobby opened and closed his mouth. "Fine! Shop around, see what the cheapest one you can get is."

Castiel fought to hide the smile until Bobby had left the room. That had been the easy part. Internet and a company website? May God be with him...
Christmas trees started popping up everywhere - windows, the city centre, the shopping mall - and Dean decided that, for the first time since Lisa had left him, he was going to put up a tree in the apartment. Wanting to make it a surprise, however, he chose to wait until Cas wasn't around. So on his next half day he swapped shifts with Andy, finishing at lunch. Regardless he dropped Cas off at work as usual, but detoured to pick up a cheap tree on the way home. It wasn't the nicest tree, for it had a crooked branch that stuck up at an odd angle - hence the slightly discounted price - but it would fulfil its purpose.

The decorations were the awkward part - they were in the back of the stair cupboard so he had to drag everything out, hitting his head on the underside of the stairs several times, before he could finally drag the box out. Too annoyed by this point to be bothered putting everything back in properly, he just shoved the stuff in haphazardly and closed the door. He'd have to drag it all out again in a few weeks time anyway.

As he wrapped tinsel around the branches and adorned them with baubles he found himself whistling Christmas songs, and the fact made him chuckle. It was almost terrifying how many Christmases had come and gone whilst he'd sat in his apartment and let the world pass him by. But that was changing. Castiel had come into his life with a second chance, and all Dean had to do was take it.

Except there was Sam. Moving on felt like leaving him behind, and he couldn't do that, no matter how strained things had become between them. He was scoring off days on the calendar; while some were counting down to Christmas, Dean was counting down until the day he could call Sam. Jess had told him he'd signed up for a thirty day stay in rehab, and he wanted to call Sam when he was out. No matter how close they were - or weren't - Dean was still his big brother.

He delved into the box once again, pulling out a wooden 'D' painted red and decorated with holly and ivy. The paint was chipping from where other ornaments had knocked against it over the years. His vision swam as he saw, in his mind's eye, his mother hanging it on the tree. She'd bought it for his first Christmas, and he remembered her telling him that they'd go shopping soon to buy one for Sam.

But she never got the chance.

The light reflected off one of the baubles and for a moment he mistook it for the flicker of flames. He wiped his cheeks with his sleeve and hung the decoration at the front of the tree. He didn't want to overcrowd the branches but before he could pack up the things he hadn't used he needed the tree toppers. As he rummaged for them he noticed a slip of paper tucked into the bottom of the box. Reaching down he pulled it out and saw himself, about three years old, with baubles hanging from his ears and tinsel wrapped around his neck like a necklace. Beside him, his mother was smiling.

He'd never seen that photo before, but had the vaguest recollection of it being taken. Whatever had survived the fire his father had locked up in a storage unit, paying the bill every month and never setting foot in it again. Indeed, it was only after his death that the two of them even knew about the locker. Sam saw no need to keep it so Dean had taken its contents, but he hadn't looked at most of the stuff since. It had just cluttered up his apartment for years. He stroked two fingers across his mother's face then put the photo aside.

Stepping back to view his handiwork, he considered that he'd perhaps gone a little overboard. Despite his best attempts the tree were looking a little cluttered. He looked at the two toppers - a star and an angel - torn between which should adorn the top of the tree.
"Angels are watching over you."

He heard his mother's words as clear as a bell, and he tossed the star in the box before placing the angel on top of the tree. All that was left to do was pack up and put the box away before Cas came home, and then—

The front door opened and closed.

Shit.

"Dean I know you don't do 'tacky' decorations but when I was out for lunch with Balthazar I saw the most wonderful—" Castiel fell silent as he stared at the tree in front of him. "Dean," he breathed.

"I was gonna have all this other crap tidied away before you got back," he said, waving his arm at the mess of tangled tinsel and decorations.

"It's beautiful."

"You think?" Dean asked, taking another look at the tree.

"Yes. Dean, are you alright? Your eyes are red."

Dean rubbed at his eyes. "This shit's dusty."

"If you want I can—"

"No, no," Dean said as Castiel moved to help pack things up. Their fingers brushed and his hearthammered in his chest. "I've got it."

He threw everything into the box and went to shove it in the cupboard. When he came back, Cas was still staring at the tree with an expression of childish awe.

Dean stuffed his hands in his pockets and shifted his weight from one foot to the other behind Cas. "You don't think it's too much?"

Castiel shook his head. "No. I think it's beautiful."

"'Cause I can take some stuff off it if you—"

"It's perfect."

Dean almost lost his balance as Cas threw himself at him, but he relaxed in Cas's arms and hugged him back. "It's been ages since I did Christmas, but I figured you deserved one."

Cas stepped back and looked from him to the tree. "You did all this for me?" he breathed.

"Well, us," Dean amended. "But yeah."

"I could sit and look at it until Christmas Day."

"Don't be ridiculous," Dean scoffed. "Now are you going to tell me what you saw that was 'wonderful'?"

"It doesn't matter," Castiel said, still staring at the tree.

"Yes, it does. Spill."
Castiel looked at him. "I thought we could put up one small decoration, but we don't need it now."

Dean chewed his lip. He'd spent more than he'd meant to on the tree - he hadn't realised just how much prices had gone up the past few years - and if they weren't careful they could easily run out of money by the end of the month. Except, despite Castiel's words, Dean could see just how much whatever he'd seen meant to him. "Whatever it is, let's go buy it. Unless it lights up and flashes. Or sings," he added as an afterthought.

Castiel shook his head. "We probably can't afford it, anyway. I was being selfish. And what you've done," he gestured to the tree, "is wonderful."

"It's Christmas, Cas. Now am I going out alone to guess what it is you saw, or are you coming with me?"

"Dean, no,"

Dean grabbed his car keys. "See you later, then."

"No. Dean!"

He walked out the door and started making his way slowly down the stairs, hoping that his gamble would pay off. Before he'd reached the second floor Cast was shouting at him to wait. He heard the sound of the door being locked, and then Cas was running down the stairs behind him.

When he caught up with him Dean he grabbed his arm and squeezed it tight. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"It's Christmas, Cas!" Dean smirked.

"So you keep telling me," Castiel smiled.

* * *

"It doesn't light up or sing," Castiel insisted. "It lights up and sings."

"Oh, yay!" Dean enthused sarcastically. He took a second look at the snow globe he'd promised to buy Cas.

"If you don't like it we could pick another one," Castiel said, but it was clear that he had his heart set on the Nativity scene.

"No," Dean sighed. "If you like that one then we'll get that one."

"Thank you," Castiel said, scooping up the snowglobe and hurrying over to join the queue for the checkout as if fearing Dean might change his mind.

Dean followed him in no rush, for there were several people in front of Cas. He scanned the shelves, wondering if companies held a competition to see who could design the tackiest ornaments year after year.

He stopped and stared at one of an angel playing the harp, with a glittery star dangling between its legs on a thread. Curious, he pulled it gently. The angel's arms and legs lifted up, and he laughed before he could stop himself. He joined Cas in the queue and held it up to let him see, pulling the star several times.

Castiel rolled his eyes.
Sam had always told him he was as stubborn as an ass and, as he decided to buy it solely so that they were each getting something the other didn't like, he admitted to himself that there might be some truth in the comparison.

* * *

Dean wasn't sure how he'd been persuaded to stay and Christmas window shop, but an hour and a half later they were still wandering around the mall, stopping every five steps to look in yet another window - and they had only covered two of the three floors. Not to mention Castiel had dragged him straight up to the third floor on the way in, so given they were working their way back down to the car he didn't have much of an excuse to give the last floor a miss.

"Didn't you look in all these windows earlier?" Dean asked desperately.

"No - just a couple that caught my eye."

"So now we have to make up for it by looking in every single one?"

Cas said nothing as he disappeared into one of the shops.

A couple of people shot Dean funny looks as he gestured in defeat to Castiel's retreating back, before dutifully following him inside.

"What did you see?"

Castiel held up two stockings, one green and one blue, with matching tartan trim around the top.

"We're not Scottish," Dean heard himself saying.

"I think they're nice," Castiel said a little sharply, putting them back.

"Besides which," Dean continued, "you won't fit many presents in them."

"They're not for presents. Not really. They're more for decoration."

"So basically they're useless?"

A woman with flashing, over-sized festive earrings next to him tutted loudly, but Castiel reluctantly agreed with Dean and allowed his friend to guide him back out of the shop again.

Dean was almost - almost - regretting the decision to celebrate Christmas this year.

They stopped at the railing and looked down at the people milling around the food court in silence for several moments.

"I feel like I've missed out on so much," Castiel declared wistfully. "It's exciting to catch up on, but every time I try something new ten new things follow it."

"You know you don't have to do it all at once, yeah? You've got the rest of your life and, I don't know, about fifty more Christmases to go? Assuming you reach the average life expectancy."

Castiel chuckled. "I could die tomorrow," he pointed out with a wry smile.

"Don't talk like that," Dean said immediately, his expression darkening. He didn't want to think about Cas ever not being around.
"I'm just saying—"

"Well, don't."

They both turned their attention back to the shoppers below.

Dean cocked his head. "Come on," he urged, batting Cas's arm. "We've got to go."

"Where? Why? Dean!" Castiel hurried after him, squeezing past shoppers standing patiently on the escalators with a, "Pardon me... Sorry... Excuse me..." as he struggled to keep Dean in sight. He lost him for a second on the bottom floor and had a fleeting moment of panic at the thought of Dean abandoning him, which he immediately realised was ridiculous because he was a fully grown man in a shopping mall with a cell phone, a key to Dean's apartment, and enough money (he hoped) for a cab home.

Almost as soon as he'd finished berating himself for acting like a child he spotted Dean standing in the midst of a group of children outside Santa's grotto. "Dean, kindly do not race off like that again!" he admonished his friend, realising that he was coming across as the parent in this bizarre scenario.

"Reindeer, Cas," Dean grinned.

Only then did Castiel see the two reindeer fenced off in a small pen, being hand-fed carrots by a group of excited children. As he stared, an unexpected surge of joy threatened to overwhelm him. "Dean..." he breathed, captivated by the smiles on the faces of the parents and children around them. The young ones couldn't stand still as they ran between their parents and the reindeer, jumping up and down when their name was called to sit on Santa's knee. This was the side of Christmas his father had always discouraged celebrating, because it was commercial and supposedly undermined the 'true meaning' behind the day; but, in that moment, Castiel couldn't understand why spreading joy and cheer could be bad.

He didn't realise Dean had disappeared from his side again until he saw him scratching the head of one of the deer as it munched on a carrot. When he moved to Dean's side, a carrot was pressed into his hand.

"Go on," Dean encouraged him.

Slightly intimidated, Castiel held the vegetable out in offering. Dark nostrils flared wide, and Castiel could feel the animal's warm breath as it snorted. Then it closed its enormous mouth around the carrot, devouring it in one bite.

Castiel laughed.

* * *

"So parents lie to their children, telling them that a fat man in a red suit flies through the sky on a sled pulled by reindeer and comes down their chimney to leave them presents under the tree?" Castiel asked, squinting up at the twinkling lights illuminating the huge tree in the center of the mall as they walked in the direction of the exit.

Dean laughed. "Yeah. But don't talk too loudly or else kids'll hear you."

"Why is it acceptable to lie to children?"

Bringing his attention back to Dean, Castiel watched his friend shrug. "Magic of Christmas, Cas - seeing their smiles on Christmas morning when they see that Santa's eaten the cookies they left out
the night before."

Castiel was baffled. "Santa eats their cookies, too?"

"And drinks their milk," Dean added. "We also lie to children about the Tooth Fairy and the Easter Bunny."

"The..?"

"Never mind," Dean chuckled, shaking his head.

"No, Dean - you have some explaining to do! Who, or what, is the 'Tooth Fairy'?"
"Ow!" Dean cried out for the fifth time in half an hour. He lifted his hand to his mouth and sucked the tip of his finger.

Castiel paused where he had two ends of a sheet overlapping and stared at Dean's mouth. Inappropriate thoughts hovered at the edge of his mind and he chased them away with thoughts of God.

"You aren't being very successful," he observed. He couldn't believe that Dean so easily agreed to help wrap the presents for the children's party.

"I can't believe that you talked me into this," Dean muttered petulantly, conveniently forgetting that he'd volunteered after Castiel's heavy hinting. "It looks like the only rapping I can do is with song lyrics. Not that I like rap music. At all," he frowned.

"Of course not," Cas told him seriously, an understanding twinkle in his eye. The paper he'd been holding together opened up to reveal a Barbie doll, as he rose from his seat and went to retrieve yet another Band Aid from the first aid box.

"Do you think we should charge Dean for a new box?" Father Reynolds joked.

Castiel huffed a quiet laugh and deliberately ignored the plain beige ones in favour of a girly flowery one. Then it was Father Reynolds turn to laugh.

"Dude, what is that?" Dean asked when he laid eyes on it.

"A Band Aid. Now give me your finger."

Dean shot him a suspicious glare. "What happened to the regular - plain - ones?"

"You're wearing them."

"All of them?"

Castiel opted for the lesser lie of saying nothing, simply grabbing Dean's hand and wrapping the plaster around the tip of his finger. "Perhaps we should join forces," he suggested, looking at the pile of badly wrapped presents on the table in front of Dean.

"Are you saying I suck?"

"I just thought we should make an effort to save your fingers," Cas replied diplomatically.

"Sammy and me used to just cover things with newspaper pages. We didn't have the money to waste on wrapping paper, let alone bows."

Castiel swallowed. The way Dean spoke was so matter-of-fact, and there was no hint of the usual
regret he conveyed on the rare occasions he's mention his brother.

"Then we'll make sure that every child gets a bow," he promised.

* * *

"Thank you for helping out today," Castiel said some time later, as he shrugged off his coat in their apartment.

"So when's the party?"

"Next week."

"You got a Santa?"

"Yes. Cain, one of the elders from the church, volunteered."

"Cain, huh?" The name wasn't familiar, but it wasn't like Cas mentioned everyone he spoke to at the church.

"He lives outside of town because he likes the quiet," Cas revealed. "He keeps bees."

"Bees?"

"It was his honey you had on your toast this morning."

"Well I'll have to tell him thank you!" Dean grinned. It had been some damn good honey.

"I'll get a start on dinner," Cas said, already heading towards the kitchen.

"If you want I could—"

But the phone interrupted him before he could offer to help.

"Hello? Sam!" he exclaimed, surprised at hearing his brother's voice on the other end of the line. Wasn't he supposed to still be in rehab? "I thought you got home tomorrow?"

"No, today," Sam told him.

Dean must have miscounted the days. He took the phone into the living room and sat down. "Are you doing okay?"

"All things considered," Sam admitted. There was a moment's pause before he said, "Jess told me she called you."

"Would you have told me if she didn't?" Dean snapped. He shouldn't have to hear about his brother's problems secondhand.

There was a longer pause before Sam answered. "Probably not."

"I didn't think so," Dean said bitterly.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry you don't tell me anything?"

"We're not exactly on speaking terms," Sam pointed out.
"You're still my brother!" he shouted.

His voice must have startled Cas, because there was a loud clang as he dropped something metallic in the kitchen.

"I still want to know that you're doing okay!" he hissed. "Is it... Was it because of mom?"

"No," Sam answered, much too quickly before adding, "Kind of."

"Which is it?"

"I don't have to answer to you!" Sam snapped.

"Oh, yes you do!" Dean growled back. "Unless you want me to come out there and kick your ass?"

"Do you even know where I live?" Sam asked quietly, effectively defusing the argument before it got out of control.

"S not the point," Dean mumbled. Sam and Jess had lived in several apartments over the years before settling down. How was he supposed to keep up when Sam didn't always tell him they'd moved again?

Sam sighed. "There was a party. A... A work thing. We were drinking, I had a few too many, some guys started doing E, and when they asked me I didn't say no."

"E?" Dean asked carefully, because it wasn't as hard as some of the stuff Sam had been on in the past.

"Yeah. I sobered up and checked myself into rehab first thing in the morning."

"Jess said you'd relapsed, dude! I was thinking—"

"I... I wanted, Dean. I wanted something so bad. And with the 2nd being so close, I was scared."

Dean let out a breath.

"You were worried about me?" Sam asked, a note of hopefulness in his tone.

"Of course I was worried about you! You think I don't worry about you?"

"I worry about you, too."

Neither of them said anything for a while. It had been a long time since they'd shared a moment like this - talking about their lives, and their feelings. Maybe they didn't always have to fight.

"So, uh, have you and Cas got any plans for Christmas?" Sam asked.

"Not really. I haven't exactly done the whole Christmas thing in years."

"Maybe you should," Sam suggested. "I'm sure Cas would want to."

Dean was sure he did as well. "I put up a tree," he told him.

"Well, that's better than nothing. But what about food? Presents?"

"We'll scrape something together. Keep it cheap and cheerful, you know?"
"I could give you—"

"No!" Dean said adamantly, his neck burning. "I don't need you to keep trying to come to the rescue. We can manage."

"I'm sure you can, but it's Christmas."

"I don't care if it's Star Wars Day and George Lucas is in town, I am not taking your money!"

"I'm giving you it," Sam said firmly. "Call it an early Christmas present."

"I don't want it," Dean said childishly. "You're always bailing me out."

"Then stop needing to be bailed out!" Sam snapped. "Grow up and stop drinking your rent money!"

"Screw you!" Dean yelled, hanging up and throwing the phone across the room.

It smashed off the wall and he stared at it where it lay, in pieces, on the floor.

"Fuck."

So much for not always having to fight.

* * *

The next day Dean left the garage during his lunch hour to check his bank balance at the ATM round the corner. He looked at the number on the screen, telling him that his brother had indeed transferred the grand sum of $200 into his account. He took his card out of the machine and walked away, trying not to think about how happy Sam had sounded when Dean had told him that he and Cas wanted to do the whole Christmas thing.

Well he wasn't going to touch Sam's money because they could have as good a Christmas as anyone on a budget, thank you very much.

* * *

Unfortunately, he quickly realised as his monthly bills came pouring in, refusing Sam's money might be easier said than done.

"Bills, bills, bills," Dean chanted to himself as he flicked through the pile of envelopes: water; electricity; rent. Then he fell silent.

The only sound in the small kitchen was the gurgling of the coffee maker. Castiel glanced over his shoulder to see Dean staring at one envelope, the rest lying forgotten about on the table.

"Dean?" he asked quietly.

Dean didn't answer; just kept staring at the envelope addressed to him as if he was trying to see through it to the contents inside.

Cas moved over to him, and when he rested a hand on Dean's shoulder the other man relaxed minutely at his touch. "What is it?"

"It's, uh," Dean started to say, then cleared his throat. "A while back I was living with this woman, Lisa. We were together, and, ah... She moved away."
"And she writes to you?" Castiel assumed, ignoring the jealousy churning in his stomach.

"No. I mean yeah, occasionally, but... She has a son, Ben. He's a great kid," Dean smiled fondly, and Castiel couldn't help but smile with him. "I thought he might have been mine, 'cause we were together before, but... I don't know."

Castiel wrapped his arms around Dean's shoulders and rested his chin on his shoulder. "You miss him," he observed.

An empty laugh burst past Dean's lips. "So much, Cas. You've no idea."

"What does he say?" Castiel asked, slipping into the seat next to him.

Dean looked at him, eyes dropping to stare at Castiel's mouth when he couldn't hold his gaze. Castiel licked his lips as his heart beat a little faster, and Dean's eyes tracked the movement. After a moment Dean looked back at the envelope as he turned it over in his hands and tore it open.

He pulled out a Christmas card - a humorous one in which Santa was stuck in a chimney - and chuckled. When he opened it a folded letter fell out, and he passed the card to Cas.

Cas smiled at the humor, but didn't read the message inside. It was none of his business. The coffee machine had finished so he poured Dean a mug of coffee and put it down in front of him, but Dean was too engrossed in Ben's words to notice. He took the card through to the living room and displayed it next to the TV.

It looked lonely and a little pathetic sitting on its own.

He sat down on the sofa and stared at it, picturing several more standing around the TV.

"I'm going out!" he called through to Dean decidedly, as he retrieved his coat and wallet.

"Thought we were going to the supermarket?"

"Later - I need to do something first!"

"Alright."

Castiel popped his head into the kitchen on his way past. "Will you still be here when I get back?"

"Hmm."

Castiel took that as a yes. "I won't be long."

He all but ran down the stairs. It would take him just over twenty minutes to walk into the town - less if he walked briskly - and he hoped to be back within the hour. He passed the play park at the bottom of the street which sat empty; the day too cold for parents to want to sit and watch as their children ran around.

Considering how reluctant Dean had been to celebrate Thanksgiving, Cas had doubted very much that his friend would get into the so-called 'spirit of Christmas'. But perhaps he'd been wrong. After all, he had bought and decorated a tree for their small apartment. Almost tripping over his feet, he came to a faltering halt as his eyes were drawn to a ground floor apartment with windows framed by fairy lights. There was something about Christmas lights, whether in people's windows or the shopping mall, that made him happy.

He shivered as the wind picked up, and started walking again. Maybe he should have borrowed one
of Dean's jackets. He needed to buy a warmer one for himself, he decided, quickening his pace as he neared his destination. The hot blast of air from the overhead heater was a relief as he stepped into the card shop.

It was a small and cramped shop on the best of days, but with the busy festive period bringing more shoppers out more often it was positively claustrophobic. He looked around at the sections, seeing Christmas cards for mothers, fathers, brothers, and sisters, sending a pang of remorse coursing through him.

"Excuse me," he said, squeezing past a couple of teenage girls as he spotted the section for friends.

* * *

Dean stared at the blank pad of paper, several sheets crumpled up and tossed in front of him. A floorboard in the corridor creaked, announcing Castiel's return. He was uncomfortably aware of Castiel just being there, like his conscious passing judgement on what a shit excuse he was for being the closest thing Ben had to a father figure.

"I don't know what to say," he said defeatedly when he realised that Castiel wasn't going to say anything. "I never do. Ben sends me these letters about soccer tournaments and school prizes and I just send him a card - Christmas, birthday, Easter..." He trailed off, feeling guilty at how much time he'd wasted. The past few years were just a blur in his mind; a drunken haze of cars and women. The reason he never knew what to say was because he'd never done anything worthwhile, and he was never going to get those years back.

"It's not like you have nothing to tell him," Castiel interrupted his thoughts conversationally.

"No offence, Cas, but I think he'd get bored if I wrote him a letter telling him all about the guy who moved in with me," Dean said lightly.

"I didn't mean me," Castiel chided him gently. "What did we see on Saturday?"

"What do you mean, 'what did we see'?" Dean echoed sceptically. "We only went to the mall."

"And what did they have at the mall?" Castiel pushed patiently.

"Shops?"

"At Santa's Grotto..."

Dean had no idea where Cas was going with this. "Elves?"

"That you spent twenty minutes feeding with carrots..." Castiel prompted, smiling fondly at the memory of Dean being more excited than some of the children.

"Oh," Dean said when he realised what Cas was referring to. It took him a moment longer to realise that Cas meant for him to tell Ben about it. "Oh!" Then he frowned. Ben was, what? Twelve? Thirteen? Even fourteen? God, he couldn't even remember how old his might-be kid was, he thought, rubbing his face with his hands. He tried to remember what he'd been into at that age, but it was mostly looking after Sam and cleaning up after their dad's latest bender. "D'you think he'd want to hear about that?"

"Given the crowds of children gathered round the reindeer I'd say yes."

Cas was looking at him with the patience of a kindergarten teacher explaining (for the hundredth
time) why you need to put your hand up and wait instead of just shouting out. Castiel's level of patience for his bullshit never ceased to amaze him because, coming from anyone else, it would probably sound patronising. His pen hovered over the page, but he still wasn't convinced.

"I think he'd have loved to be there with you," Castiel hinted heavily.

Ben, Dean scrawled, wondering if he was supposed to put a 'Dear' before his name. He licked his lips in concentration as he tried to put Cas's suggestions into his own words. *You'll never guess what I saw at the mall on Saturday. (Well you might, because it's Christmas.) They had reindeer! Actual reindeer! I'd never seen one before - my dad never really went in for all that Christmas stuff.* Dean paused, contemplating striking through that last line before smiling at a memory which they shared. *Reminds me of the time me and your mom took you to that crappy grotto, and they had donkeys with antler headbands to make them look like reindeer.*

He was so busy scribbling words onto the page that he didn't notice when Cas left the room again.
"Come on, Dean!" They were going to be late.

"I thought we were leaving at three - you didn't tell me the thing started at three!"

They grabbed their coats on their way out, putting them on as they hurried down the three flights of stairs. When Cas had mentioned to Dean about needing a thicker coat, he'd admitted that Sam had given them some more money and awkwardly shoved $40 in his hand. He hadn't meant it to sound like he was asking for help but Dean wouldn't take it back, so he'd been forced to admit that he needed it and bought himself a thick black coat. With his own money he'd bought a burgundy scarf and matching gloves. He thought he looked rather smart - or at least he would, if he could get the coat buttoned up. As he fought with the large buttons Dean raced ahead, taking the stairs two at a time. Halfway down Castiel had to stop and fumble in his pocket when his phone started ringing.

"I thought you didn't want to be late?" Dean shouted up at him.

"Hello?" Castiel answered his phone, ignoring Dean. "Wait, say that again? ... What do you mean you have the flu? ... Who else is going to be Santa?!" he exclaimed. The phone went dead as Cain hung up.

Dean jogged back up to him. "What's wrong?"

"Santa has the flu."

"Don't you have a back-up Santa?"

"No," Castiel said, stressing out. "I didn't think we'd need one, and everyone else I know is already helping out in one way or another."

"Not everyone," Dean reminded him pointedly.

Castiel stared at him. "Who?"

Dean raised his eyebrows.

"Who?"

"Me, dumbass. My only job is to get you there and bring you home."

Castiel stared at him. "You would be Santa?" he clarified.

"You sound surprised. I'm good with kids."

"But you're so... Scrooge-like," Castiel finished.

"I am not Scrooge-y!"

"You drink, you don't go out unless it's to get drunk or laid, you don't celebrate anything—"

"We celebrated Thanksgiving and we have a Christmas tree!"

"Both of which you've admitted are only because of me," Cas pointed out.
"Bah, humbug," Dean grumbled, because he knew Cas was right. "Now do you want there to be a Santa at this thing or not?"

* * *

"I look fat," Dean declared an hour later, staring at himself in a mirror.

"Of course you look fat," Castiel told him impatiently. "You're wearing a fat suit."

Dean rubbed his padded belly and pulled a face.

"You're not fat. Here," Cas said softly, pulling him away from the mirror and handing him the one-piece hat and beard. "Now the presents are in that bag, and they're all labelled."

"Okay."

"And this is for you."

Dean frowned, dropping the hat on the table and taking the envelope from him. He pulled out a classic Christmas card with the Nativity scene on the front, and Castiel watched him as he read the message he'd written neatly inside, underneath the card's message of Seasons Greetings.

_A few months ago I didn't think I'd still be alive this Christmas. Because of you I can look forward to a better new year. So thank you for everything. I hope that you get everything you deserve next year._

Dean read it twice, and his eyes were wet when he finally looked at Castiel. "Cas," he breathed, trying to hide how choked-up he was getting.

Castiel simply smiled and nodded.

"Okay let's get this show on the road," Dean said loudly, forcing his emotions down. "Santa is in the building."

"Not quite," Castiel grinned, looking pointedly at the hat sitting on the table.

"Oh, yeah." Dean grabbing it and shoving it on his head.

Cas adjusted it until the beard was sitting straight.

"Let's do this."

* * *

Castiel quietly re-entered the hall where the children were laughing and dancing. Some parents were joining them, while others sat at the tables that lined the walls eating the party food. He sat down near the door he'd just come through and nibbled on a mini sausage roll, waiting for the tell-tale jingle of bells that would announce Santa's arrival.

It only took a minute for Dean to follow him through and, when they could hear the bell on the end of Dean's hat jingling as he paced in the corridor just on the other side of the door, Father Reynolds led the children in a rendition of _Jingle Bells_. Castiel nodded along waiting to join in at the chorus, for that was all he'd managed to pick up from hearing the song being rehearsed in choir practice after the Sunday service.

The children sang the chorus even louder than the verse and, towards the end of the song, they screamed with excitement when Dean toddled in with a merry, "Ho ho ho!"
Castiel raised a hand to his mouth in an attempt to hide his smile.

"Have you all been good boys and girls this year?" 'Santa' boomed, purposefully deeper and huskier than Cas was used to.

Castiel turned away from the children to let out a soft laugh. Dean hadn't been in the room thirty seconds and already he couldn't imagine Cain playing the part. Straight away the green-eyed Santa Claus had them eating out of his hand. The kids formed an animated, yet orderly crowd as they waited eagerly for him to read their names out and receive their presents.

As he watched Dean interact with the children under the guise of Santa Claus, he couldn't help but feel his heart swell in his chest. His friend had prevented a lot of disappointment and truly saved the day, all for him.

A fond smile lit up his face as he watched him lean over and hand a little blonde girl her present. The way the child's face lit up when Santa wished her a "Merry Christmas!" was worth all the hard work put into today. He watched as she skipped over to her parents, her short curls dancing around her ears, and tore into the wrapping paper, excitedly waving her new Barbie doll at them.

Cas caught Dean's eye a while later and flashed him a discreet thumbs-up. The bright smile peeking through the fake beard he got in return made his heart skip a beat.

"You should tell him," Father Reynolds advised.

Cas jumped in surprise, not having noticed Father Reynolds appear beside him. "Tell him?"

"How you feel about him."

"I don't... No. I have no feelings for Dean except gratitude," he lied. He didn't know why he felt the need to lie to Father Reynolds, when he could simply tell him that Dean already knew.

Father Reynolds tutted. "Perhaps your sessions with Pamela aren't going as well as you have previously suggested, if you can't acknowledge your own feelings. Honesty is important, Castiel."

Perhaps it was his father's influence, he pondered as Father Reynolds made his way over to one of the parents. Admitting his homosexual feelings to a man of God wasn't the same as revealing to Dean that his feelings were becoming increasingly romantic.

There was a chorus of disappointment from the children as they realised there were no more presents, and Castiel volunteered to show Santa the way out.

"You know, there's one in this sack for you," Dean told him once they were back in his makeshift dressing room.

"What?" Castiel asked, as Dean pulled the hat off and scratched his jaw.

"That beard itches," he muttered, reaching into the bottom of the sack and pulling out a small, crudely wrapped present to him. "You must have been a very good boy, this year," Dean told him, winking.

Curiously, Cas tore the wrapping paper off, revealing the green and blue stockings he'd been admiring the other day.

"Thank you," he whispered with a smile, clutching them to his chest.
When they got home, the first thing Castiel did was get changed. One of the boys had eaten too many sausage rolls and thrown up all over him during a game of musical bumps. He took his soiled clothing to the bathroom, coming to a halt when he saw Dean already in there, shirtless and looking at himself in the mirror. A sudden urge to touch Dean hit him, and he had to clench his hands tighter around the t-shirt he held. Dean was beautiful. It wasn't fair. His gaze was drawn to his muscular back, and he smiled when he noticed that Dean's freckles weren't limited to his face.

Dean hadn't noticed him come in, and he looked down at his stomach as he rubbed a hand across it.

Castiel cleared his throat.

Dean jumped and turned around, reaching for his shirt and yanking it over his head.

"Sorry, I didn't realise you were in here," Cas tried to explain, working on keeping his voice even.

"It's okay," Dean said curtly, moving past him. "I'm done."

When he came out of the bathroom, Castiel found Dean in the kitchen brewing himself a coffee. "I'm sorry," he apologised after a moment. "I really didn't realise you were in there."

Dean just shrugged. "Forget about it."

Castiel remembered Dean's complaints about looking 'fat' as Santa and wondered if his friend might be a little insecure about the softness around his belly. It would be a shame, because Cas quite liked it. Not that he should really be looking, but there were some instances in which he couldn't help but notice. In an attempt to offer some quiet reassurance, he rested a hand on Dean's shoulder. "I wish I looked half as good as you."

Dean snorted dismissively, but then turned to glance at him with an amused smirk on his face. "Are you flirting with me, Castiel Milton?"

Pulling away, Castiel's cheeks suddenly felt very hot. "No, I just..."

"Relax, dude. I'm just kidding," Dean chuckled, taking a sip of his coffee. "But at least now I know you think I'm hot."

Castiel rolled his eyes at Dean's teasing and started searching the freezer for something they could defrost for dinner. "I know I've said this already, but thank you for today," he said, as he set a tub of soup on the counter.

Finally Dean looked at him. "The look on those kids' faces, was... They were so happy."

"I know."

"It felt good."

"I know."

"I had fun."

"I could tell," Cas smiled.

"So, uh, what's next?"
"Next?" Cas echoed.

"Yeah. You got any more church stuff that needs doing?"

"Nothing," Castiel shrugged.

Dean almost looked disappointed that there were no other duties for Castiel to rope him into helping with.

"Now we get to focus on our own Christmas," he told him.
Chapter 30

To Dean's surprise, when he walked through to the living room on Christmas morning, there was a small pile of presents under the tree.

"Uh… Cas?" he called unsurely over his shoulder, unable to tear his gaze from the shiny, glittering packages.

"Yes, Dean?"

Dean jumped, because he hadn't realised Cas was right behind him. He waved his hand in the vague direction of the tree. "What is this?"

"It's a Christmas tree."

"Yeah, but what about the stuff under the tree?"

"Christmas presents," Cas smiled, disappearing into the kitchen.

"But where did they come from?" Dean persisted, following him.

"Me, mostly. Some under the guise of Santa Claus, of course."

"I…" Dean looked embarrassed.

"What do you want to eat?" Cas asked, already searching the cupboard for the frying pan.

"I didn't think we were doing gifts. I mean, I thought you might have got me one, but nothing like this."

Castiel shrugged as he moved to the fridge. "Bacon? Pancakes?" he asked, eyeing the available ingredients.

"I'm not really hungry."

Finally Cas stopped and looked at him, immediately concerned. "Are you feeling okay?"

"I didn't… It's too much. You got me too much."

"You won't say that once you've opened them, Dean."

"Yeah, I will."

Castiel grabbed Dean's arm. "Come with me." He didn't give Dean much of a choice as he practically dragged him back into the living room and thrust one of the smaller presents into his hands.

"Do you think you've put enough bows on it?" Dean smiled despite himself.

The parcel in question had two, and okay, Cas might have gotten a little carried away making sure Dean's presents got enough bows to make up for the lack of them on his childhood gifts.

"Open it."

Reluctantly Dean tore at the neatly wrapped package, revealing a bar of festive chocolate.
Castiel looked him in the eye. "I told you, they're not much."

"There's still a lot," Dean complained.

"The quantity is irrelevant," Castiel growled.

"What – 'it's the thought that counts'?'" Dean asked mockingly. "You wouldn't be saying that if I was the one who'd bought you a hundred presents."

"Don't be ridiculous. There aren't one hundred presents under our tree."

"No, I was exagg—" Dean stopped. Our tree, Cas had said. It was, wasn't it? It was their tree. This was Castiel's first real Christmas, and already he was starting a fight. "Shit, I'm sorry," he apologised, both for being ungrateful and also for not getting Cas much.

Castiel huffed, already moving back to the kitchen. "I don't need you to apologise, Dean. I need you to tell me what you want for breakfast."

"Bacon," Dean replied.

"Okay."

"And pancakes?" Dean pushed hopefully.

Cas rolled his eyes. "In that case you're helping."

"Got it."

* * *

After a sickeningly fattening breakfast of sausage, bacon and eggs, pancakes with syrup, and then, in Castiel's case, a small bowl of fruit with yoghurt, they collapsed on the sofa and groaned in union.

"Fuck, I can't move," Dean moaned.

"You did not need two breakfasts."

"Says the man who had three!"

"Fruit is healthy," Castiel insisted. "I needed something to make me feel less guilty about the number of calories I'd just consumed."

"Fruit has calories, too," Dean pointed out.

"It also has vitamins."

"Are you gonna pass me my presents before I have a heart attack?"

"Get them yourself."

"You're the one giving me them, so give them to me!"

"They're labelled. And besides, they're not all from me."

"Yeah, some are from Santa," Dean laughed.

"And there's one from Sam."
Dean stopped laughing. "What?"

"Why are you so surprised? He is your brother, after all."

"Yeah," Dean said absently, heaving himself up because he had to see this present for himself before he could believe it. It was the biggest one there, but when he saw the label his shoulders sagged. "From Sam?" he read sceptically. "I know your writing, dude."

"Yes, I wrote the label. Yes, I wrapped it. But that is from Sam."

"Yeah," Dean said disbelievingly.

"Sam mailed it to me, asking me to give it to you."

"Really?"

"Really. But I don't understand why he'd give you that."

Intrigued now, Dean pulled at the ribbon and ripped the paper. A grin spread across his face and he burst out laughing when he saw what was inside. He pulled out the giant rainbow slinky and showed it to Cas, before remembering that Cas had already seen it.

"It's, uh..." But he couldn't really find the words to explain exactly what it symbolised.

"I have no idea what it is, but I don't think it is age appropriate."

Dean laughed. "Not really, no. Do you know what this is?"

"It appears to be a child's toy?" he questioned.

"Dude, what did you play with as a child? No – on second thoughts, don't answer that."

Castiel rolled his eyes as Dean brought his other gifts over to the sofa.

"What should I open first?"

"It really doesn't matter."

"Okay," Dean said, cracking his knuckles. "Let's do this."

One side of Castiel's mouth turned up and he sat back to watch Dean as he unwrapped everything, revealing a navy scarf, a car magazine featuring a special on the '67 Impala ("I had to double check with Bobby that that was your car!") and a copy of the sequel to *The Shining*, half price sticker still stuck to the cover. Dean laughed at that.

"I didn't want you to feel bad about me spending money," Castiel said. "I remembered you talking about it a while back."

"You do realise you're probably going to get 'round to reading this before me?"

Castiel bit his lip and shrugged, his mouth twitching in a half-smile.

"But seriously, thanks," he said, surveying the items laid out before him. "I mean that."

"I know you do," Castiel smiled. "I told you they weren't much."

"It's more than I've had the past few years, Cas. And they're..." Dean trailed off, reminiscing over
past Christmases with his brother. "They're perfect."

"I wouldn't go *that*—"

"They're perfect, Cas," Dean repeated firmly.

A small, pleased smile spread across Castiel's face. "You're welcome."

"Don't move," Dean commanded, heaving himself to his feet again.

"I don't think I can," Cas replied, rubbing a hand over his bloated belly.

Dean left the room, reappearing a moment later with a rather large present, compared with the ones Cas had given him. It was simply – if untidily – wrapped, and he held it out to Castiel.

"Dean," Cas breathed when he saw the size of it.

"It's not much," Dean said, echoing Castiel's earlier sentiments.

"Stop," Castiel ordered. "You wouldn't let me talk down my gifts to you, so you're not allowed to do that either."

"Okay, okay," Dean said, blushing.

He fidgeted beside Cas as he watched him unwrap it, peeling back layers of paper until several second-hand videos were revealed. Castiel said nothing while he read the titles and examined the covers with interest.

"Stephen King," Dean explained. "I know you've been reading his stuff, so I thought... I'm sorry they're not new," Dean apologised, rubbing a hand across the back of his neck.

Castiel lunged across the sofa until he was practically in Dean's lap, and threw his arms around him. Chuckling, Dean brought one hand up to pat his back and pressed a kiss into his messy hair without thinking. As he realised what he'd just done, his grin faded into a frown. Why the fuck had he done that?

As suddenly as Castiel was on him, he pulled away again. "I'm sorry, I— Thank you. You don't need to feel bad that someone else enjoyed these before I will."

"You don't know that you'll—"

"After all, you're the one paying the bills and rent. I know what I contribute isn't much."

"I've told you before, you don't have to contribute."

"But I want to."

"And so I let you. I don't grudge you wanting to pay your way. I just wish I could afford to buy you a decent present."

"There is nothing wrong with these, Dean. Perhaps we could watch one tonight?"

"Sure. Horror movies are very Christmassy," Dean said with a smirk.

"Did you want to watch a Christmas film?"
"I thought you might."

"I didn't really think about it."

"He who wanted a 'real' Christmas," Dean chuckled.

"Then what would you recommend?"

* * *

Dean wasn't sure how it happened, but they found themselves watching The Holiday of all things.

Okay, he knew how it happened - he'd wanted to watch Die Hard but they'd put on the TV and Cas got engrossed in The Holiday which had just started - but he wasn't sure how it happened. He should have told Cas that they'd already decided what to watch, but Cameron Diaz had been kicking her boyfriend out and couldn't cry and damn it if Cas hadn't gotten hooked and so now they were watching Cameron fall in love with Kate Winslet's brother while Kate hung out with a bunch of old men - and Jack Black.

"You realise the only reason I haven't put this off is because of Jack Black?" he asked, determined to preserve his reputation because this was a chick flick for crying out loud. They were watching a chick flick!

"What?" Castiel asked, his attention being distracted from the movie.

"Jack Black - he's the only reason we're watching this."

Castiel's brow furrowed, but then he smiled. "Admit it, you're watching it for Kate Winslet, aren't you?"

"No!" Dean cried, scandalised. But he had to give Cas points for remembering her name. "Titanic will never be seen within these four walls."

Cas looked confused but said nothing.

"Dude, you haven't seen any of the movies Jack's raving about. Oh, look - there's Dustin Hoffman!"

"Dean, I have no idea who he is."

"Wait a minute, I know this scene. Hoffman wasn't even supposed to be in this. He just saw the cameras when he was driving by so stopped and they wrote him a cameo part there and then."

"Really?" Castiel asked, impressed. "Wow."

"Yeah, he talked about it on some chat show."

They watched the rest of the film in relative silence; Cas patting Dean's arm and smiling every time something overly romantic happened.

"Dude, you're a man. Act like it," Dean complained half-heartedly. Truth be told, it was nice seeing Cas so happy and relaxed.

"Well that was sentimental," Cas declared once it was over.

"Tell me about it," Dean complained. "Can we watch a real Christmas movie now?" He fumbled with the video tape, at first pushing too hard and not giving the VCR time to take it, before it
eventually slid in smoothly. After fast-forwarding the trailers and copyright warnings at the start of the tape, he sat back and declared, "Now this is a real Christmas movie!"

Once bullets started flying and people started dying, Cas had serious doubts as to the accuracy of Dean's statement.
"So what does your family usually do for New Year's?" Dean asked, still buttoning up his shirt as he walked into the kitchen.

"We pray," Castiel answered, rinsing the suds off a mug and resting it in drying rack.

"You..." Dean trailed off with a shake of his head. He really shouldn't be surprised.

"It's a time for reflection - to give thanks for all the good things we have received in the past year, ask that God look after those we've lost, and pray for his continued love."

Dean fought the urge to roll his eyes, telling himself that just because he'd never had much reason to believe in any God didn't mean that it was a load of bull. "You guys prayed a lot, huh?"

"I guess it would seem like a lot to you," Castiel replied as he dried his hands.

That was one of the awesome things about Cas - he never made Dean feel like he was being judged for not believing.

"Hey, man, whatever you wanna do. Here, let me do that," he said, taking the towel from Castiel's hands. He picked up a plate from the draining rack and started drying it off.

"I think I'd like to do whatever it is that you do," Cas said.

Dean looked confused. "What?"

"For New Year."

"You wanna head down to the Roadhouse with me?" Dean questioned because, although Castiel often came down with him, he was never the one to suggest going.

Castiel smiled. "Why am I not surprised that that's where you spend New Year's?" he teased playfully.

"Am I really that obvious?" Dean laughed.

"You are a creature of habit, Dean Winchester. Bad habits, admittedly, but still a creature of habit."

Dean rolled his eyes, throwing the tea towel in Cas's direction playfully. "The Roadhouse it is, then."

* * *

As they waited for Ellen to pour their drinks, they were surprised to see Bobby, Andy, and Benny gathered round a table, until Castiel quietly exclaimed, "Of course - it's the staff night out tonight."

"Do we join them?" Dean asked Cas.

"I suppose it would be rude not to," Castiel replied hesitantly, careful not to sound like he was deciding for them both. This wasn't the night out they'd planned, and he wasn't sure what Dean would prefer to do.

"I suppose you're right," Dean agreed, nodding his thanks to Ellen and picking up their glasses.

"Come on." He slid into the chair between Bobby and Benny, deliberately ignoring the surprised
looks on their faces.

Castiel moved an empty chair over from a nearby table, causing Andy and Benny to part and make room for him. "Hi," he greeted them.

"Hi," three surprised voices echoed.

"Sorry we're late," Castiel apologised politely, so as not to make things awkward.

"That's okay, son," Bobby said. "You're here now." He cast a sideways glance at Dean.

"Yeah, I get it, none of you expected me to be here. I can go if you want?" Dean grumbled, unable to ignore their stares any longer.

"Don't be like that," Benny drawled. "Specially not on New Year's."

Dean humphed but let it go, taking a long sip of his beer.

"So, did you boys have a good Christmas?" Bobby asked, throwing a handful of peanuts into his mouth.

"It was alright," Dean shrugged. "Watched TV, ate too much."

"It was really good," Castiel said, casting a frown in Dean's direction. "Dean gave me some Stephen King movies."

"Cool," Benny grinned. "I'll have to borrow them off you some time."

Dean stared at the beer mat he was turning over on the table. "You can't," he said quietly. "Your video player broke."

"Damn thing was ancient!" Benny laughed. "You couldn't get them on DVD?"

"I prefer videos," Castiel cut in, not taking his eyes from Dean. Their Christmas had been special, but it was obvious Dean was ashamed that he couldn't have done more. He wished Dean could understand that what he'd done was enough. "DVDs never remember where I turned it off." Dean glanced up at him over his drink, and Castiel gave him a small smile.

Benny laughed. "Andy, tell them what you got your missus!"

"She's not my missus," Andy grumbled, throwing an empty chip packet at him.

"And she never will be if you keep buying her the wrong sized clothing!"

"Oh, Andy, you didn't!" Dean grinned.

Andy buried his face in his hands as Bobby and Benny laughed loudly, while Cas and Dean waited to get the whole story.

"Didn't you learn your lesson after last time?" Bobby asked.

"I thought I'd gotten it right this time!" Andy practically wailed.

"Last time?" Dean asked.

"Maybe if you got your head out of the cars once in a while you'd know what happened last time!"
Bobby told him.

"You pay me to work, not gossip," Dean retorted.

"Bought a dress two sizes too big," he summarised curtly.

"Tracey thought that I thought she was fat, and wouldn't talk to me for a week," Andy elaborated reluctantly.

"This time he bought her underwear that was too small," Benny announced.

"Tell everyone, why don't you," Andy grumbled.

"What's wrong with that?" Castiel asked, confused.

"The panties fit perfectly, but the bra was too small. Now she thinks she isn't 'big enough' for me."

"I'm telling you, women, dude!" Dean laughed, taking a gulp of his beer.

Four pairs of eyes stared at him.

"Now that, Winchester, is why you're single," Benny shook his head disapprovingly.

"I thought it was because I didn't want to get tied down?" he shot back.

"You keep telling yourself that," Andy warned, "and you'll be a lonely old man before you know it."

"Is that a grey hair I see?" Bobby teased.

Dean ran a hand protectively through his hair. "Not as many as if you'd look in a mirror."

"Ohhh!" Benny and Andy exclaimed together as Bobby slapped him round the back of the head.

"Do you want to be unemployed?" he grumbled.

"Easy, old man," Dean grinned. "I'm just kidding."

"Less of the 'old'."

"There's nothing wrong with the hair on his head," Ellen declared, seeming to appear out of nowhere as she leaned over the table to gather their empties.

Bobby's cheeks turned pink.

"Some men younger than him haven't got any," she continued. Pretending to examine Dean's head, she asked, "Is that a bald patch?"

"Is it just me or is the service in this dump really slow?" Dean complained.

"Watch your mouth, Dean, or you'll find out just how slow my service can be when I don't like you."

Dean grinned.

"But seriously, it's good to see you."

Dean waved a hand dismissively. "What are you talking about? You see me all the time!"
"Not like this," she said pointedly. "Another round, boys?"

"Yeah, I think it's Bobby's turn!" Benny exclaimed. "Make mine a double this time," he winked.

"If you want a double you can buy it on your own round," Bobby grumbled, heaving himself up and following Ellen over to the bar.

"Anyone fancy a game of pool?" Andy asked, noticing that there was an empty table.

"I'm in!" Benny said immediately. "I've got to get you back for last time."

"Admit it," Castiel smiled once they were alone. "You're having fun."

Dean shrugged at him. "I never said I wasn't."

"Then why do you never come to the staff Christmas party?"

"It's hardly a party, Cas," he answered, gesturing around them. The usual bikers were lined up at the bar, and several small groups of people were gathered at various tables and around the dartboard to see in the new year. It was still early, so there weren't as many revellers gathered in yet. "Besides, who have you been talking to?"

Castiel glanced over at the bar, where Jo was pretending to flirt with some bikers for tips.

Dean followed his gaze. "Should have known," he muttered. Raising his voice, he hollered over to her, "Harvelle, when are you going to learn to keep your mouth shut?!"

She looked confused at his seemingly random outburst, but flipped him off before pocketing her tip with a smile.

"Do you want to play?" Castiel asked, as another pool table became free.

Giving Cas a sceptical look, Dean asked, "Can you play?"

"How hard can it be?" Castiel mused as he got to his feet.

Dean sniggered.

* * *

"Yes!" Castiel exclaimed, finally pocketing his first ball of their second game - even if it wasn't the one he'd been aiming for.

"Great," Dean grinned. "Except that wasn't your ball."

Cas pouted and stared at the table, head tilted at a slight angle. "Which colour am I, again?"

"Yellow."

"I thought I was red?"

"You were red last time."

"Oh."

"So that means..?"
"You get two shots," Castiel finished unhappily.

All he could do was watch as Dean cleared the table, potted the black, and then proceeded to pot all of Castiel's balls for good measure.

"Show off."

"Two, nothing. Loser buys the drinks."

"I didn't agree to those tems," Castiel said, nevertheless fishing his wallet out of his back pocket. "Does anybody else want anything?"

"Whisky," Bobby said instantly.

"You've just been waiting for someone else to get a round in, haven't you?" Dean grinned.

"Well, I got the last two," Bobby grumped.

"Two lagers over here," Andy said, waiting until Benny was just about to hit his ball before flicking his cue.

"Hey, that's cheating!" Benny protested, watching in dismay as the white ball sank into the corner pocket.

"Beer?" Castiel asked Dean.

"Yeah."

He had to wait five minutes before Jo was free to serve him. "Same again?" she asked.

"Except make mine a soda."

"Sure thing. Will I just charge you the same and call the extra my tip?"

"You're terrible," Castiel told her. "Fine."

"Aw, thanks!" She smiled sweetly at him as she started pouring drinks.

"Well, hey there, Clarence," Meg purred in his ear as Jo finished lining drinks up in front of him, draping one arm around him. "Gonna buy me a drink, too?"

"How nice to see you again, Meg," Castiel said, sounding anything but pleased to see her again. Behind the bar Jo raised her eyebrows. "And another for Meg," he agreed.

Shaking her head at him, she began mixing up another mojito.

"So, is the cutest guy in the room going to ask the prettiest girl in the room for a dance?" Meg asked, trailing a finger down his chest.

"Um," Castiel's breath hitched as he looked around.

Meg sighed. "I mean you and me."

"Oh, I... I can't dance."
"Bull. Come on," she insisted, dragging him into the middle of the room where there was only a handful of other people dancing.

"Dean!" Castiel shouted above the music as they passed their pool table. "The drinks!" He pointed at the bar.

"Twenty-eight, seventy-five," Jo told him as he came up to collect their drinks.

"This was supposed to be his round!" Dean exclaimed, glancing back again at Castiel, who looked horrifically uncomfortable in the middle of the room with Meg.

"Well, he went off for a dance before he paid."

"Son of a... What's this?" he asked, pointing at the mojito.

"That's her's," Jo answered disdainfully, pointing at Meg who was draping herself all over Castiel.

"She doesn't even work at the garage," Dean muttered to himself, glancing back at Meg in disgust before pulling three tens out of his wallet and handing them over. "Keep it," he said as she opened the till.

"You want a hand with these?" Jo asked, as she helped him load the drinks onto a tray.

"Nah, I've got it," he told her.

She grimaced as the drinks wobbled on the tray, and he nearly dropped it twice on the way back to his group. It wasn't his fault - at least, not the second time. It was the dick who shoved his chair back from his table without looking first.

"Where'd Andy go?" Dean asked Benny, looking around for his colleague when he returned with the drinks.

Benny shrugged. "Phone rang and he ran off."

"Is he coming back?"

"How would I know? Do I look like his girlfriend to you?"

"Maybe if you shaved?" Dean joked.

Benny glared at him, taking several large gulps of his drink.

"Well, rack 'em up!" Dean instructed, grabbing a discarded cue.

"Yes, sir!" Benny said sarcastically, nevertheless grabbing the balls out from under the table.

* * *

"Watch this!" Dean commanded, leaning over the table and lining his cue up with the corner pocket. Never taking his eyes off the ball, he slid the cue forward once, twice, three times, before he struck, missing the ball completely.

Benny laughed, doubling over so quickly he lost his balance and had to grab the table to stop from falling over.

"Wait, wait, wait," Dean insisted, lining up to take his shot again. There were two white balls in front
of him. Which one did he aim for? He blinked, and there was only one again. "I got this!" This time he hit the ball, which sent his yellow ball rolling away from the pocket he was aiming for. "Damn!"

"Hey, Dean," Benny said, holding his glass upside down. "I'm empty!"

"So get another!"

"'S your turn," Benny slurred.

"No, I got the last..." Dean ticked them off on his fingers. "How many's that?" he asked, holding up three fingers.

"Get your ass up to the bar!" Benny demanded with a grin, pushing him in the direction of Jo.

Dean staggered forward, colliding with two empty chair, before stopping beside her. "Hey, Jo!" he grinned, draping an arm around her. "How's it going?"

Grabbing his hand, she removed it from around her shoulders. "What do you want?"

"Another round!"

"Of..?" she prompted.

"Drinks!"

"Of course," she replied.

"What were we drinking?" Dean asked her.

"You moved onto whiskey," she told him.

"One for me and one for... him," Dean said, pointing to a man sitting two tables away from Benny.

"Aha," she nodded agreeably. "Are you sure you wouldn't rather have a beer?"

"Do I want a beer?"

"You do," she persuaded him.

"A beer it is!" he exclaimed.

"You know I think this'll be the first year you haven't picked up some random chick?" Jo teased him as she poured his drinks.

"There's still time!" he protested.

"Nah," she said, her nose wrinkling. "The only person you'll be taking home tonight is Cas."

A dopey smile spread across Dean's face as he looked around the bar to locate his blue-eyed friend. He chuckled when he saw him attempting to sway on the spot while Meg twirled herself around him. "Yeah," he agreed, motioning for Jo to give him another beer. "Or maybe he'll be taking me home."

"A drunk man's words are a sober man's thoughts," Jo teased him, a huge grin on her face.

* * *

Castiel finally managed to escape from Meg's clutches when a sandy-haired man bought her a drink.
"Can I get another beer, please, Jo?" he asked, already reaching for his wallet and thrusting some crumpled ones at her.

"What do I look like, a stripper?" she exclaimed, waving them in front of his face.

"No," Castiel told her seriously. "You're wearing far too many clothes for that."

Jo laughed as she smoothed them out on the counter before slipping them into the till. "You're a hoot, Cas."

"I'm a what?"

"A hoot." When he still looked confused, she tried again. "You're funny!"

"Oh."

"So have you talked to Bobby yet?"

"Yes, we spoke when we arrived."

"About the website?"

"Oh. Oh, no."

"Well, now's your chance," she said, stepping out from behind the bar. Thrusting an almost empty bottle of whiskey into his hand, she shoved him in Bobby's direction.

"I didn't order that," Bobby said as Cas refilled the glass down in front of him. He squinted. "And you're not Jo."

"No," Cas smiled. "I'm not. Jo— I mean, I, uh, thought you'd like another."

Bobby grinned. "Well, you thought right. You're a good kid."

"I realise that now is hardly the time to talk business, Bobby, but I had an idea I wanted to run past you."

Bobby waved a hand to silence him as he drank up. "Keep 'em coming."

Cas poured another generous helping into Bobby's glass. "We both know that the garage is struggling, and the only reason you could afford to pay me to help out in the office was because it allowed you to get back into the shop," he started.

Bobby waved his empty glass in front of Cas, who dutifully refilled it for him.

"Even then, business is still slow." He took a deep breath. "What if I could get you more customers?"

"You can do that?" Bobby slurred.

"I think I can," Cas replied. "But you need to get your computer connected to the internet."

"'S not my computer," Bobby told him. "'S practically yours."

If only it was his.

"'Sides, I dunno how to get inter-thingy."
"Internet. If you give me the okay, I can make some calls and arrange the whole thing. All you have to do is pay for it."

"Okay."

"Oh... Bobby, did you just say okay?"

Bobby nodded, looking at Cas as if he had four heads.

"You—" Castiel beamed. Jo had been right. It felt deceitful, doing it this way, but he genuinely believed it was for the best. He got to his feet, intent on thanking her straight away. "Thank you, Bobby."

"Cas?"

"Yes?"

"Leave the bottle."

* * *

Castiel gave Jo the thumb's up and she shrieked. "I'll call Charlie tomorrow!"

"It's not set up yet," he reminded her.

"No, but she'll want to start planning a layout. Here," she said, sliding a beer in his direction.

"Thank you," he said, gulping down half the glass.

"Hey, take it easy!" Jo exclaimed, but he barely heard her.

His head was spinning. The garage was going to get internet, Charlie would design it a website, and if all went well there would be more customers to serve. Bobby might even be able to afford to pay Dean overtime! He bit his lip. Best not to get too excited yet.

"There you are!" Meg cried. "I've been looking for you everywhere!"

"Oh, have you?" Cas asked her warily.

"Yes! This is my favourite song!"

Help, he mouthed at Jo as he was dragged back onto the floor.

So much for spending New Year's Eve with Dean.

* * *

"I think Meg likes you," Dean observed, an hour later.

"She's a woman, Dean," Castiel informed him, dropping into the seat next to Dean. His drink sloshed in his glass and spilled over his pants.

Dean grinned. "Just 'cause you're not into her doesn't mean she's not into you."

"Please don't go there."

"So no more of the 'straight-second-chance' crap, then?"
"No," Castiel shook his head. "I'm as gay as a... as a... as a gay man," he declared, throwing his arm around Dean.

"Good for you," Dean grinned, picking up his beer. "Cheers!"

"Cheers," Castiel agreed, clanking Dean's glass with his own. "Although," he began after downing the rest of his beer at a speed that made even Dean's eyes widen, "I am sensing that you don't like Meg very much."

Dean snorted, rolling his eyes. "She's like the Devil's daughter, Cas. That woman would have a man like you for breakfast."

"A man like me?"

"You know..." Dean gestured vaguely with his free hand. "Nice guy image with pretty eyes. You're too good for her, dude."

There was a long moment of silence between them as they caught each other's gaze.

Castiel opened his mouth to say something, but all that came out was a deep burp. He immediately covered his mouth with a hand, cheeks flushing as Dean threw his head back as a fit of laughter left him gasping for breath.

"I'm sorry. That was rude," Castiel muttered quickly.

When Dean finally caught his breath, stomach aching, he laid a hand on Cas's shoulder. "Oh, dude. Don't ever change."

* * *

"Tell me I'm not blind. Tell me there's something there."

"Where?"

Jo smacked Ash on the arm. "There. Dean and Cas."

"Whoa, slow down! Dean's never batted for that team."

"That we know of."

"That's true," Ash nodded, contemplating the idea.

On the other side of the bar, Benny took a sip of his drink and shook his head. "You're seeing things, sister. They're just good friends, is all."

Jo opened and closed her mouth, because she couldn't tell him that he was half-wrong without betraying Cas's trust. But she was pretty sure she wasn't imagining Dean's feelings, even if they were buried beneath layers of macho, no-homo bullshit.

They all looked across the room, to where Castiel and Dean were sitting practically on top of each other, laughing hysterically.

"See?!" Jo urged.

Ash tutted, shaking his head. "That doesn't prove anything," he pointed-out. "But, I'll give you 30/1 if you want to make it interesting?"
"Ten bucks says Dean is as straight as the pole up Castiel's ass," Benny grinned.

"Fifteen says it'll soon be Dean's dick up Cas's ass," Jo countered, a smug grin creeping onto her lips as Benny choked on his drink.

"Confident. I like it," Ash nodded. "I'm always happy to take your money."

"Joanna Beth!" Ellen called sharply. "You shouldn't be betting on people's love lives. Especially when they're our friends."

"But—"

"Go wipe down some tables."

Jo sighed loudly and flounced off to gather up the empties around the room.

Ellen turned to Ash. "Put me down for twenty," she murmured quietly.

"For or against?"

"For, of course," Ellen replied, as if to bet otherwise would be crazy. "That poor boy doesn't realise it yet, but he's got it bad for Cas."

* * *

"We could walk, you know," Castiel mumbled, as they waited on a cab. Dean's suggestion had come as a surprise given his confession.

Dean snorted, looking down at where Cas was sitting, slumped against the Roadhouse wall. "You think you can?"

"One foot... in front of the other..." Castiel told him, attempting to demonstrate on the ground until his legs were straight out in front of him. He squinted as he became surrounded in bright light, and Dean turned to see the cab pulling up beside them.

"You boys 'Winchester'?" the driver hollered.

"Yeah!" Dean turned back to Cas who was trying, and failing, to get to his feet. "I gotcha," he told him, grabbing his arm and hauling him up so fast that Cas nearly fell over again.

"You boys make a mess, you pay to get it cleaned," the driver warned as the doors clicked open.

The cab drove them home slowly so as not to upset their alcohol-laden stomachs, and probably to fleece more money out of them.

Cas patted Dean's hand. "'S okay," he slurred. 'S not far."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, unconvinc. He wasn't sure it it was alcohol or fear that was twisting his stomach until he wanted to throw up.

Halfway home, Castiel's head landed painfully on his shoulder. "Hey!" he protested but, as he tried to shake him off, he realised Cas was sleeping. "Oh." Cas's hand was warm, and kind of reassuring, where it still sat on his. When the cab ran over a drain cover and jostled him in his seat, Dean slapped his other hand on top, sandwiching Cas's hand between both of his own as he sought reassurance.

"You're here, you can get out," the driver grumbled once they'd jolted to a stop.
Dean opened his mouth to wake Cas, then closed it again. He licked his lips. "D'you mind giving us a minute?"

"Suit yourself, but the meter's running."

Dean peered down at Cas, mouth hanging open and saliva drooling out of the corner of his mouth. "Nice," he mumbled to himself. In the darkness Castiel looked pale, his skin contrasting with the long, dark eyelashes that fluttered every now and then. "What are you dreaming about?" Dean asked him quietly.

When Cas swallowed and mumbled, Dean realised he was awake and shook his shoulder slightly until Cas sat up. "We're here."

Draping one of Castiel's arms around his shoulders, Dean half-carried him into the elevator where Cas nearly fell asleep again. "Whoa, hey, stay awake just another minute, yeah? I don't wanna be carrying you bridal style."

"Am I your bride?" Castiel drawled, a goofy grin on his face, eyes half-lidded.

Dean chuckled. "If you are, this was an arranged marriage."

After the elevator dinged and the doors slid open, Dean practically dragged Cas towards his apartment. He tried to prop his drunken friend up against the wall so he could unlock his door but Cas made a noise of protest and wrapped his arms around his neck, pressing up against him.

"Okay, okay." As Dean tried to peer around Cas' shoulder to get the key in the lock, he caught a whiff of his scent. Cas smelled surprisingly good; a mix between the shampoo they shared and a slight earthy smell. Dean cleared his throat, shaking himself out of his distraction as the door finally swung open after three attempts. "Move," he muttered, slapping Cas' ass as they entered the apartment. There was no way either of them were going to be able to make the sofa bed up, so he half-dragged Cas in the direction of his bedroom. "Come on, Sleeping Beauty."

"Hm, you're beautiful," Cas sighed wistfully.

Dean faltered in the doorway, glancing down at his wasted friend. Why had his heart suddenly began hammering against his ribcage? Suddenly he could hear Jo's voice from earlier as clear as a bell: 'A drunk man's words are a sober man's thoughts.'

"Let's get you in bed," he said, his throat closing up as he tried not to think too much about how genuine Cas sounded, even though he was totally wasted.

At the mention of 'bed', Cas's feet started moving again, and they finished their journey across the room, finally collapsing on top of the covers

Dean did his best to tug the sheet out from under Cas, draping little of it he'd freed over his already snoring friend and took a few seconds just to gaze down at his peaceful face.

"Night, Cas," he whispered softly before turning out the light.
In the morning Dean stirred, wondering why his covers felt so heavy. As he tried to kick them off, they grunted. He opened his eyes to find Cas lying half on top of him. Squinting against the light streaming through the curtains, he tried to remember how Castiel ended up in his bed. The pounding in his head served as a reminder, making him groan in discomfort.

"Cas," he mumbled sleepily, trying to untangle himself from the other man's arms, though they only tightened their grip. "Cas!" he tried again, slightly louder. As he tried to nudge his friend off of him, he turned to his friend only to be greeted by warm lips pressing against his own. He froze for a second, feeling like his heart had stopped. "Dude, what the hell?!" he shouted a second later, prying Cas off him and rolling away so fast he fell out of bed with a grunt.

Castiel's eyes flew open and he scrambled into a sitting position as Dean got to his feet. "Dean, I— I'm sorry! I didn't mean..."

"Don't, Cas," Dean said quietly, having a hard time looking directly at him. "Just... don't." He ran a hand through his hair. It had been a shock, yeah, but it wasn't as weird as he'd have thought kissing a guy would be. Not that he'd kissed Cas. But then why should it be weird? A kiss was a kiss, right?

"I'm sorry," Cas whispered again, biting his lip nervously.

Dean finally looked over at him, guilt filling his stomach as he took in the sight of his disheveled friend; hair sticking out in all directions, eyes bloodshot, bottom lip caught between his teeth, a look of pure shame on his face. He couldn't let Cas feel bad about this.

"I'm sorry," Dean said, still not looking him in the eye. "I overreacted. I mean you were half asleep and dreaming, right?"

Castiel nodded quickly.

"Yeah," Dean agreed with himself. Last night Cas had called him beautiful. This morning he'd kissed him. He wasn't sure how he was supposed to react to that. "I'm gonna go shower now."

"I'll put the coffee on," Cas said automatically.

It was all so domestic, and if Dean wasn't so distracted by the fact he could still feel Cas's lips on his he might actually like it. It had been a long time since any four walls had felt so much like home.

The bathroom felt colder than usual as he stripped off, the hairs on his body standing up on end. He turned the shower dial up a couple of notches, hissing as the hot water hit his skin. After a few seconds, however, it started to feel pleasant. Stretching his neck from side to side, he began to feel angry about what Cas had done. It was irrational, he knew that, and it didn't matter that he didn't hate it because Cas shouldn't have done it in the first place.

He rubbed a hand through his hair frustratedly. It was partly his fault, though, he figured. He was the one who'd dragged Cas into his bed the night before - not that Cas had put up much of a fight. Hell, he probably hadn't even been aware of where they were. His anger at Cas faded and he started to feel angry at himself. Cas liked him. Or at least, he had. Still did, if ten minutes ago meant anything. Had he led Cas on? They were close - closer than a lot of friends - but then neither of them really had anyone else.

Well, he didn't have anyone else. Cas had Balthazar. Jealousy boiled up inside him. It was stupid,
but he liked spending time with Cas. Sometimes, when Cas was out, he'd find himself talking to an empty apartment before remembering that Cas wasn't there.

Fuck, Cas had kissed him!

He hadn't kissed him back - or had he? Dean tried to replay the moment in his mind wondering if he'd reciprocated the kiss, but it was like hitting pause on an old video - time froze, but he couldn't get a clear enough picture.

Dragging his hands across his face, he groaned. He'd never been into guys, so shouldn't he have been repulsed by it? Given the choice he'd kiss a woman, but if someone offered him a million bucks to kiss a dude he wouldn't say no. That didn't make him gay.

Being forced to doubt himself directed his anger towards Cas again, and he grabbed the shower gel so forcefully that the gel oozed out from where the cap hadn't been closed properly.

"Damn it!"

* * *

Castiel was standing stiffly beside the cooker when a freshly-showered and dressed Dean stepped into the kitchen.

"I made you a bacon roll," he announced, forcing himself to keep his voice even.

"Thanks, but I'm late," he said hollowly. "I'll just grab a coffee then I'll be off."

It was then that Cas noticed Dean was wearing his work clothes. "Dean."

"I'm really not hungry."

"Dean."

"I'll pick you up at lunch."

"Dean."

"What?!" Finally Dean paid attention to him, but now frustration had crept into his tone.

"It's New Year's Day," Cas told him quietly. "The garage is closed."

Dean was silent for a long moment as the information sank in. "Then I'm going back to bed," he announced, grabbing the bacon roll Cas had made for him and wrapping it in a paper towel. "Alone," he emphasised.

Castiel watched him stride off, swallowing back the hurt of Dean's reminder that their kiss - if you could even call it a kiss - meant nothing to him. Leaving the dishes in the sink for Dean, even though he knew he'd end up being the one who washed them after lunch, he got changed into his running gear and headed out.

* * *

January was always a slow month, or so Bobby had told him. Although it would mean there were would at times be too many mechanics for the amount of work to be done, Cas was looking forward to flying through a stack of paperwork. And, if he was being honest, an excuse to avoid Dean. The past couple of days had been unbearably uncomfortable around Dean. It had gotten to the point that,
if Dean was in the living room, he'd find chores to do in the kitchen to put space between them - he wasn't above spending the morning on his hands and knees, scrubbing the oven until it shone, to avoid making conversation with his friend.

Unfortunately, Bobby had decided that getting Dean to help him with the paperwork would be a good idea.

"So what can I do?" Dean asked after Bobby had left, shuffling from one foot to the other and not looking at Cas.

"Um, those need sorting into date order, starting with the nearest," Cas suggested quietly, gesturing to a tall stack of papers.

"Okay. You know, I can't believe you know how to use one of those," he said conversationally.

Castiel's eyes flicked up over the top of the computer monitor. "I wasn't raised in a barn."

"No, but—"

"I really need to concentrate on this," he interrupted, focusing his eyes on the screen again. The tiny numbers were a blur, however, as his attention remained solely with Dean.

"Right," Dean said, picking up the stack of papers and looking around for somewhere to sit. "Sure."

He settled on the floor in front of the filing cabinet, where there was space to spread the papers out.

It was a lie - what he was doing was simple and didn't require a lot of concentration - but Cas couldn't pretend like everything was normal. Not after... Another wave of shame washed over him as he wondered what he'd been thinking. Except, he hadn't been thinking. He's been dreaming that he and Dean were together and— It didn't matter. They weren't, and never would be, together.

Now he had no idea whether he'd messed up their friendship for good.

* * *

Castiel pushed himself a little harder, and ran a little further every day. Today was like no other; keeping his mind purposefully blank, he focused on the sound of his feet hitting the pavement.

Thump! Thump! Thump! The past few days hadn't just been about burning off the pounds, though. So long as he focused on his feet, he was able to keep his thoughts from straying to Dean; able to forget the crushing rejection he's experienced after a moment of madness; able to pretend that the past few days hadn't been hellishly awkward and uncomfortable.

He could see the bridge up ahead. Every day when he reached the bridge, he crossed at the crossing at the far end, then turned back. He'd never made it there without stopping, yet. Gritting his teeth he pushed himself harder still. Timed his breathing to the fall of his feet - in, two, three, four, out, two, three, four - he ignored the fire burning in his lungs and the way his legs were begging him to stop.

Lunging towards the railing with heavy footsteps, he doubled over it to catch his breath. Below him, the fast-moving water churned; white froth gathering on the surface and quickly being dragged downstream by the strong current.

Shaking his water bottle to find it all but empty, he trudged across the road when the little light told him to walk and stumbled into the newsagents. Paying for a refreshingly cold water straight from the fridge, he downed half before he even left the shop.

"Someone chasing you?" Balthazar asked as he stepped outside.
Castiel started, water dribbling down his chin as he turned to face his friend.

"Hi," he panted. Then he realised that he hadn't fully heard what Balthazar had said. "What?"

Leaning against the wall, Balthazar took a long drag of his cigarette. "The only excuse for running is if you're being chased."

Castiel laughed, his gaze falling to the cigarette burning in Balthazar's hand. The curl of smoke seemed to beckon him closer. "Can I..?" he asked, pointing at it.

"No," Balthazar told him. "It's a filthy habit."

"Please?"

Balthazar looked him up and down quizzically, before holding it out to him. "Breathe deep."

Castiel raised it to his lips and did just that. Warm smoke filled his mouth, travelling down his throat which constricted involuntarily. Choking, he doubled over and tried to take several gulps of water to ease his retching.

Balthazar laughed and grabbed the cigarette from his hand before he dropped it.

"How can you do that?" he asked, repulsed.

"Practice," Balthazar said. "Like a lot of things, it gets easier."

"It's disgusting."

"I did warn you. So what's up?"

"Not much."

"Bullshit. The running I can take. This," he said, waving his cigarette in front of Castiel's face, "tells me there's something wrong."

"Why, is it a psychic cigarette?" Castiel asked humorlessly.

"It's Dean, isn't it?" Balthazar guessed.

Castiel pressed his lips together and avoided his friend's gaze.

"Come on. I'll buy you a coffee and you can tell me all about it."

Allowing himself to be led round the corner to Starbucks, Castiel wondered if loving Dean would ever get any easier.

"I kissed him," he revealed, once he had his hands curled around a warm Styrofoam cup.

Balthazar's eyes widened. "Dean?"

"I was half asleep and dreaming," he explained, echoing Dean's words. "Except I wasn't. Not really. I just... forgot... for a moment."

"You forgot that you weren't together?" Balthazar queried in disbelief. "Oh, Cas, that's not good."

Castiel bit his lip. "I'd been dreaming. About us," he explained. It had been nice. He and Dean, snuggled together on the sofa, together... And then he'd woken up.
"Are you sure you don't want to move in with me?" Balthazar asked softly.

It hurt to think about leaving Dean, but he wasn't sure if it hurt more or less than it would to stay with him. "Maybe I should," he said quietly.

"Just say the word, and I'll make up the couch. It's starting to sag a little, but it's got some life left in it yet."

Maybe some space would help him, and help their friendship. "I'll think about it," Cas promised.

* * *

Dean was bored. He'd been matching purchase orders with delivery notes for over an hour, and he still wasn't halfway through the pile Cas had allocated him. He had no idea how Cas had managed to take on the whole damn office, when he was bored after just a few days.

He glanced over at Cas, who was staring intently at the screen on front of him, fingers tapping wildly at the keyboard. As he'd done the past few days, Castiel had asked for silence as soon as he'd given Dean a task. Neither of them had said a word since, and it was suffocating. It wasn't like that morning they'd woken up together had meant anything, right? So it shouldn't be so uncomfortable.

Except a little voice in his head pointed out that that wasn't strictly true. Cas liked him. So even if Cas had been half asleep, it hadn't been meaningless.

And Dean hadn't exactly pulled back straight away. Sure, he'd been shocked, but he also hadn't been completely turned off by it. He couldn't count the number of women he'd been with, and he could count the number of guys he'd been into on one hand.

Wait. That made it sound like... He'd never been into a guy. Not like that, not... He forced that particular memory back into the depths of his mind. But then there was Cas, who had wormed his way into Dean's life until Dean never wanted him to leave. He felt whole when Cas was with him, in a way he wasn't sure he'd ever felt before.

He was confused.

* * *

Cas was confusing.

There was an old lunch order among the invoices, so he crumpled it up and threw it at Cas. When it hit off his nose, he laughed.

"Dean, what—"

"The silence is driving me mad."

"I told you, I need to—"

"Concentrate, yeah. Except you've never complained about me interrupting you before."

Cas said nothing, and Dean knew he'd got him.

"You're not still embarrassed about... you know... Are you?" he asked, desperately trying to make it a bit of a joke.

"Dean, I never intended to—"

"I know," Dean said, staring into Cas's eyes firmly to get his point across. "Now, if I put the coffee
Cas's hard expression softened slightly. "Yes, please. Some coffee would be nice. It's freezing in here."

"Maybe I'll take a look at that heater - see if I can't get it to actually give us some heat," Dean grinned.

"My feet would be very grateful," Cas quipped.

* * *

Clearing the air between them helped ease the tension that had been building, and Cas forgot about his promise to consider moving in with Balthazar. Until, that is, his friend reminded him the following week.

"I... Things are good, now."

"Good?"

"Yes."

"Do you still love him?"

"Yes," Castiel answered truthfully.

"Then things aren't good," Balthazar insisted, shaking his head. "They're extremely unhealthy."

"Balthazar—"

"No, I don't want to hear it. You've got yourself twisted into this deluded fantasy that something's actually going to happen—"

"I know it's not."

"But you hope it will."

Castiel couldn't deny it. "Are you still coming to Dean's party?" he asked, changing the subject.

"It might be his birthday, but I'm not going for him."

"Is that a yes?"

"Yes," Balthazar said reluctantly. "I'll be there."
"Jo doesn't believe that Dean's really going to go through with this."

Castiel looked over at Charlie, who was taking photos of Dean's car before fiddling with buttons on her camera. "Why not?"

"Something about him 'being objectified'?” she replied. "Personally I think he's being a bit overdramatic. I mean, it's not like we're asking him to pose in the nude or anything."

Castiel bit back an aroused smile at the image Charlie's words put in his head, hoping his cheeks weren't as red as they felt.

"Though that would go viral,” she mused thoughtfully.

Before Castiel could ask whether 'going viral' was good or bad, Dean stepped out of the office and made his way over to them.

"I'm ready for my close-up," he purred, posing seductively over the hood of his car.

Castiel cleared his throat and turned his attention to Charlie. "Are we ready?"

"Almost," she replied absently, still puzzling over her camera.

Castiel turned back to Dean, a conflicted expression clouding his face as he looked him up and down.

"What?"

"You look very... clean," Cas observed.

Dean looked down at himself. "Yeah?” he said questioningly, unsure what Cas's problem was. "I got scrubbed up and changed my overalls."

"You're a mechanic, Dean. We don't want people to think you're just a pretty face. We need them to know you're more than just a model we hired."

Dean clenched his jaw. You're pretty. You have delicate features for a mechanic. You're just edible. All things he'd been told by much older men, determined to make him uncomfortable. Especially in his younger years. But Cas didn't mean it like that, he reminded himself. Cas wasn't like any of the sleazy guys who'd tried to hit on him in the past. He forced himself to shoot Cas a flirty smile and flutter his eyelashes. "You think I'm pretty?” he asked, attempting to deflect any awkwardness he felt.

The sound of Andy laughing caused him to straighten up self-consciously and look away from Cas. Jesus, what was wrong with him?

"I think Cas is right," Andy said, handing him a can of oil. "We need to dirty you up a little."

"Oh, no," Dean protested, shaking his head and stepping away from his baby. "No, no, no!" He screwed his face up as Cas dragged an oily hand down his chest. "I hate you," he grumbled, dutifully standing still as Cas spread dark stains across his clean overalls.
"Don't forget his face!" Andy shouted out gleefully.

"Bite me, Gallagher. Don't you dare!" Dean told Cas, taking the oil can from him and dirtying his own hands. He scratched his chin and wiped the side of his thumb across his forehead, both natural actions that had Cas nodding in approval. "How do I look?"

Castiel cocked his head. "Boop," he said, tapping Dean's nose with a finger, leaving a black smudge. Dean scowled.

"You look like a mechanic," Cas told him fondly.

Dean stared at Castiel's lips as he spoke, a fleeting urge to press his own against them - so that this time he could remember what it felt like - hitting him before he swallowed it down. As he moved towards the Impala, that he'd somehow been convinced to volunteer for their photoshoot, Cas grabbed his arm to stop him.

"Thank you for doing this."

"Yeah, yeah," Dean grumbled, his cheeks tinged pink.

"Yeah, thanks for doing this, Dean," Andy swooned, in a not unkind impression of Castiel.

Castiel lowered his gaze to the oil can.

"Give me that," Dean said, taking it from him. "Make yourself useful, Andy! Take this away and don't come back."

Still laughing, Andy took the can from him and retreated into the garage.

"Ready!" Charlie declared finally.

"Pop the hood," Cas instructed him smugly.

"Oh, you've got the dialogue down," Dean teased him. Then he stared at the torque wrench Cas was holding out to him.

"Wrong size?" Cas asked, all traces of him knowing what he was talking about rapidly fading.

Silently Dean walked past him and exchanged it for a socket wrench, playfully booping Cas on the nose with it in passing.

They took several shots of Dean tinkering with the Impala and, as Charlie circled the car to get a different angle, she laughed.

"What?"

"Look at your arm."

Dean glanced at where she and Cas were looking. A large, oily handprint marked him. "Great," Dean smirked. "Now I look like I'm getting molested on the job."

"I could have grabbed your ass," Cas joked, causing Benny to laugh loudly. "Try hiding that when you're bent over her."

Warmth spread through him that Cas had addressed the Impala as her, and he was glad that Cas was
feeling relaxed enough about their kiss to joke with him again.

"Now, we'll have none of that talk," Benny drawled, coming up behind Dean. "If anyone's gonna grab that ass, it'll be me."

A deep, throaty chuckle caused Dean to shudder. Spinning round, he smacked Benny's hand aside from where it was miming grabbing his ass. Benny stared at him, eyebrows raised. Benny. The guy he'd worked with the past three years and had never once treated Dean like... He took a couple of calming breaths, forcing his pounding heart to slow down. "You're just jealous," Dean said, forcing himself to laugh it off. He slapped his own ass for good measure.

"Yeah, that's it" Benny agreed carefully, as if trying not to spook a wild animal. "'Cause maybe if I had an ass as fine as that, the girls would be all over me!"

Dean grinned, and Benny relaxed enough to laugh again.

Castiel just stared at his friend who, just a split second ago, had been unrecognisable from the man he knew.

* * *

"Dean?" Castiel asked hesitantly, when he saw him lying on the sofa watching TV. "Are we staying in tonight?"

"You can go out if you want - I'm not stopping you. But I just don't really feel like it."

"Are you unwell?"

"No."

"Then forgive me, but who are you and where is my Dean?"

That elicited a small chuckle. "Your Dean?"

"Come on," Castiel urged, tugging at one arm. "Just a few quiet drinks."

"Not tonight, Cas."

"Please?"

Dean's mouth opened and closed as he struggled to form words. Castiel was looking at him so pleadingly that he'd almost - almost - be tempted to compare his expression to Sam's infamous puppy dog eyes. "Why are you so desperate to go out?" he asked suspiciously. "Usually you leave me to go and hang around at the bar."

"No, you usually leave me to go and steal people's money!"

"That's not— I don't—" Dean spluttered. "I leave you?"

Castiel nodded, and he could almost see the wheels turn in Dean's head. "Why don't we go out and you can teach me how to play pool," Cas suggested. "Just you and me. And we won't leave each other."

Dean looked from Cas to the TV and back to Cas again. "Oh, alright," he sighed, heaving himself to his feet. "But I think you're up to something."
"What could I possibly be up to?" Castiel asked innocently.

* * *

"Surprise!" several voices shouted in unison as they walked through the doors of the Roadhouse.

Dean shook his head and turned to Cas. "I'm gonna kill you."

"No you won't," Castiel said smoothly. "And Bobby's given you the week off, so you can - and I quote - let your hair down."

"The week?"

"He also said to make sure I told you that next year if you don't book your holidays he's not going to give you them."

"That's illegal."

"I don't think he was being serious."

Cas moved over to talk to Ellen, and he could hear him telling her she'd done a wonderful job decorating and he looked round the Roadhouse. Sure, there was the usual crowd of people hanging around - bikers and students and what Ellen affectionately called 'her regulars' propping up the bar - but a birthday banner had been strung up in one corner of the room with balloons and streamers and party hats and Dean really was going to kill Cas, but after. There were two groups of people - he could see Bobby, and was surprised to see Benny and Andy as well; and he assumed the other group was Castiel's friends because he recognised Balthazar. It said a lot about him, didn't it?

Castiel reappeared at his side. "Are you going to stare at us all evening or are you going to join us?"

"You arranged all this for me?"

"Yes."

"Do you not think it says a lot about me?" When Castiel looked confused, he elaborated. "I mean, your friends and my colleagues? You must think I'm so pathetic."

He meant it as a general 'you' as in 'everyone who came', but Castiel took it personally.

"I don't think you're pathetic, Dean," he said, a hint of anger in his tone. "I think you've cut yourself off from people for too long and I wanted to do something nice for you! We all did."

"No, no, Cas, I get it. I do," Dean said, hastily backtracking. "And I'm grateful."

Castiel narrowed his eyes.

"I really am. I just don't know half these people."

"Then introduce yourself," Castiel stated, a little curtly.

Dean looked over at everyone, and Balthazar caught his eye. "Okay, okay, but I've got to do something first." He strode over to Balthazar and greeted him with a, "Hey."

"Dean," Balthazar greeted him coolly.

Dean couldn't blame the other guy for being a little unsure of him. "Uh, thanks for coming," he
started awkwardly.

"I didn't come for you. I came for Cas."

Dean bristled, but he buried his retort. "Yeah, well, I would have understood if you didn't. What I'm trying to say is sorry," he said, the word feeling foreign on his tongue. "I was worried, I was stressed, and I was rude," he continued, when Balthazar said nothing.

Balthazar looked him up and down. "You should be sorry. But buy me a drink and we'll call it even."

He looked like he wanted to say something else but didn't, so Dean let out the breath he'd been holding. That hadn't been so hard. But he still wanted to smack Balthazar one in his smug face. "Sure." He turned to head over to the bar and found Castiel standing behind him, grinning. "What?"

"Thank you," he said quietly.

"Don't get too happy," Dean smirked. "It doesn't mean I like him."

"Then thank you even more."

"Eh." Dean shrugged off his thanks and went to buy Balthazar a drink. As he reached the bar, however, he let himself smile as he glanced over his shoulder at Cas. It was crazy how something as simple as making Cas happy could make him happy.

* * *

It was weird, being at his own birthday party and not knowing a lot of the people there. He moved around, meeting the people that Castiel had become close to, and was pleasantly surprised to find that they weren't all as annoying as Balthazar. Meg creeped him out, but Zeke seemed like a nice enough guy - the kind of guy Dean himself might socialise with. And maybe he should start socialising more. Cas had always wanted to go bowling again - maybe Zeke would want to go. He looked around, wondering who else might be up for it and who Dean could stand for more than five minutes.

"Meg is making sexual advances towards me again," Castiel announced.

Dean jumped, because a minute ago Cas had been on the other side of the room.

"Tell her that unless she's hiding a dick underneath that leather skirt of hers you're not interested."

"I did - though not in so many words - but it doesn't seem to make a difference. If I understood her correctly she implied that she could be an active third party." He turned to Dean and in all seriousness stated, "I don't think sexual intercourse is an instance in which a third wheel would provide greater stability."

Dean could argue given his experience with two girls he'd mentally nicknamed the Doublemint Twins, but chose not to. "Thanks for all this, by the way. So when's your birthday, anyway?"

"Evening, boys," a familiar female voice said from behind them. "Is someone having a party?"
They both turned round to see Sheriff Mills smiling at them.

"Uh, yeah."

"It's Dean's birthday," Cas explained.

"Well then, happy birthday. I hope you left that car of yours at home if you're planning on having another of those," she warned, nodding at the beer in his hand.

"Of course," he lied.

"Well I'm not driving, so would you excuse me while I get another?" Cas asked them, holding up his empty glass. "Excuse me."

"I hope you got that taillight fixed."

"I did," he growled. "No thanks to you."

"If it wasn't for me you'd probably be in jail," she reminded him. "So the way I see it, I did you a favour."

Dean scowled at her.

"So, how you doing?"

"Fine," he shrugged. What was with the Twenty Questions?

"Good. 'Cause you weren't so 'fine' the last time we spoke."

Dean clenched his jaw. "I was having a bad week," he said coolly.

"I hope that—"

Raised voices cut her off before she could tell Dean what she hoped. They both looked in the direction of the bar in time to see a guy push Cas backwards so hard that he fell over a bar stool.

Dean's face darkened as images of Castiel's battered and bruised body flashed before his eyes.

"Son of a bitch!" he roared, before storming across the bar, shoving out of his way those too slow to move.

"Dean, I'm alright," Cas assured him as he strode past him. "He's not worth it."

"Buddy, stay out of this," the guy told Dean, backing off. "I don't got a problem with you - just this cock-sucker."

Fisting the man's lapels in his hands, Dean shoved him hard enough against the wall to shake the dartboard off its hook.

"Dean! Dean, stop it! Let him go!" Cas cried from behind him, still rubbing his hip where he'd landed on the floor.

"Why're you so pissed?" the man asked. "It's not your cock he's sucking, is it?"

"Boys! Break - it - up!" Jody yelled.

"You sure don't look like a fag," the man continued.
"You piece of shit!" Dean yelled, fist slamming into the douchebag's jaw. Pain flared through his hand but he barely noticed it. There was nothing wrong with Cas being gay, and he wasn't gonna let anyone, let alone this asshole, hurt Cas. Not like the guy who'd put him in hospital. Dean may not have been there to look out for him then, but he was there now.

"Dean!

Cas's hand on his arm distracted him for a second, and then he was shoved into a table. Glasses smashed onto the floor and Jo swore. "You get off on beating up nice guys?" Dean snapped, wiping blood from his mouth and taking another swing at the sonofabitch who thought he could come into Cas's regular and pick a fight with him.

The man ducked and Dean collided with Benny.

"Easy, there," Benny said, but Dean batted away the hands trying to help him. He didn't want anyone taking Cas away from him. He wasn't going to lose Cas. Throwing himself at the man and fisting his hands in the guy's jacket, which steadied him as the room started to spin around him, he growled, "Look at me!"

When the man did, Dean punched him straight in the face.

"Dean, stop!" Castiel begged from behind him.

Several other people were by now shouting at him by now, but he could only pick out Ellen above them all.

"DEAN WINCHESTER!"

Dean ignored her, blind with rage as he rained blows down on every inch of the man's body that he could reach. In the end it took three well-built bikers to haul him back, allowing the stranger to crumple to the floor.

"What the hell are you playing at?" Ellen shrieked in his face.

Dean was red-faced and panting as he watched the man straighten his jacket. "He was hassling Cas!"

"He's a faggot, and we don't want his kind here!"

The man's friends, who had been noticeably absent during his altercation with Dean, all voiced in agreement.

Cas became visibly upset, and seemed to curl in on himself. Jo stepped around her mother and wrapped an arm around him, whispering something in his ear that seemed to reassure him slightly.

"We don't want your kind here!" Dean shot back, leading to scattered laughter. Belatedly realising how his words had put him in the same boat with Cas, he tried to make himself clearer. "Fucking homophobes!"

Jody stepped forward. "Alright, why don't we all calm down, huh? My name's Jody Mills, and I'm the sheriff round these parts."

"I wanna press charges!" the stranger shouted immediately.

She held up one finger to silence him. "First things first - are you alright?"

"I think so, yeah," he replied, rubbing at a cut over his eyebrow. "Nothing serious, anyway."
"Good."

"So this guy here," the guy began, motioning at Dean, "comes out of nowhere, and then just--"

But Jody ignored him, instead turning her narrowed eyes to Cas.

His eyes widened as she turned to him and he shot a fearful glance at Dean, who tried to shoot him a supportive smile even though his lip was bleeding.

"Now, Castiel. Would you also like to make a formal report about your attack?"

"Not really, I don't—" He stopped before he could say 'want any trouble' when he saw the slight nod of Jody's head. "I mean, yes?" he asked her.

She smiled at him. "Then might I suggest that instead of pressing charges against one another you all just walk away?"

"Absolutely not!" The man protested angrily. "I have rights!"

"So does Cas," Jody told him coolly. "And that includes the right to drink wherever he damn well likes, unhindered by people like you."

Ellen turned her furious expression from Dean to the stranger. "You're barred," she told him, her voice lower and deadlier than Dean had ever heard it. "And so help me, if I ever see you in here again, it'll be me you have to deal with."

"You can't stop me from pressing charges!" the man insisted.

"We all saw you start that fight," Ellen said. "Didn't we, boys?" She shouted the last three words into the crowd, who all vocalised their acknowledgement. No-one crossed Ellen. Period. "Now get out," she hissed.

"Get him out of here!" Jody yelled.

Two more bikers grabbed him and dragged him out and, after a warning from Ellen never to pull a stunt like that again, Dean was released. He pulled his shirt back down and straightened his jacket as Ellen cried, "Free round, boys!" – a cry which was welcomed with a raucous applause.

"Damn, boy," Benny drawled in his ear. "Looks like I've been missing out on a lot of fun. Are your nights out always as fun as this?"

Dean laughed. "Only for whoever's lucky enough to take me home."

Benny grinned. "Why haven't we gone out before?"

"Uh, because I'm a rude, selfish dick who keeps himself to himself?"

"That'd be it," Benny grinned.

"But not so much these days. Or so I'm told."

"Good. I'm glad to hear it." He grinned, clapping Dean on the back. "Maybe we can grab a bite sometime after work. See if we can't have ourselves a little fun."

He swallowed down the automatic no thanks that he'd usually say when offered half-hearted invitations to the pub when he passed within earshot and said, "Yeah. Alright."
"Cool." He motioned to the table where Dean had left his drink sitting. "When you've finished your beer let me buy you another."

Disbelief crossed his face as he nodded. "Thanks."

"Happy birthday, Dean."

As Benny walked back over to the rest of the guys from work, Dean called out to him. "Hey, Benny. Do you like bowling?"

* * *

Castiel tapped Jody on the shoulder. "Excuse me, Sheriff Mills?"

"Sweetheart, do you see a badge on me?"

"Um, no?"

"Then I'm just plain Jody tonight, okay?"

"Am I still supposed to be making a statement? Because I'd really rather not."

"I wouldn't stir up that hornets' nest. Just let it go, and I'll make sure that a-hole out there doesn't cause you and Dean any more trouble. From the sounds of it, any bullshit statement he makes will be contradicted by a lot of other witness accounts."

Castiel looked visibly relieved. "Thank you. And thank you, for... Well, it's not not everyone that would stand up for someone like me."

"You don't have to thank me for doing the right thing," she told him. "But might I suggest - and I know it's Dean's party and all - but why don't the two of you head home?"

* * *

Cas wasn't entirely convinced that Dean was fit to drive home, but once he was behind the wheel his doubts vanished. Even after a few drinks, Dean could always be counted on to keep his baby in one piece. As they passed under a streetlight, Castiel noticed that Dean's hand was bleeding. When Dean dropped him at the apartment door and circled round the block again to try and find a parking space, Castiel went upstairs and looked out the first aid kit.

He knew Dean was back when he heard the apartment door slam shut.

"Dean?" he called.

There was a clatter in the corridor. "Son of a bitch!" Another slam – that would be the bathroom door, Castiel deduced. A few minutes later Dean came storming up the corridor and into the front room, his hand wrapped in toilet paper.

Cas stood and gently removed the paper from Dean's hand to get a better look, undeterred by the fact he was trying to pull away.

"It's nothing, really," Dean insisted.

Castiel shot him a disapproving look. "Sit," he instructed.

"I'm not a dog," Dean protested, but as Cas sat down on the sofa he perched his ass on the table in
front of him with a dramatic, inconvenienced sigh. Castiel opened the first aid kit and removed some antiseptic and cotton balls. "I'm not sorry for what I did."

Castiel said nothing.

"How'd those guys know... that you were... about you?" Dean asked him.

"I don't know," Castiel said quietly. "I don't know them."

"You ever see them around?"

"I said I've never seen them before!" Cas snapped.

Dean's mouth screwed up as the antiseptic stung his hand. "I'm sorry," Castiel murmured, as he tried to be more gentle.

"It's not your fault, Cas. I'm the one who got into the fight."

"I did mean because of this," he waved the cotton ball at Dean, "but then you did get into that fight because of me."

"He deserved it."

"No-one deserves violence, Dean."

"I thought you guys went for whole 'an eye for an eye' stuff?"


"Thanks," Dean said, clenching and relaxing his fist several times. He looked at Castiel, who suddenly looked very small and afraid. "You know I'd never..." How did he say it? "No matter what, Cas, I'd never..." Hit you, he finished in his head. He could never hit Cas. Good, kind, gentle Cas who'd spent fifteen minutes chasing a bee around the apartment the day before, just so that he could be sure it got out safely. He wondered how the hell Cas had put up with being beaten without ever fighting back. "Cas?" he said softly. "Why didn't you move out – you know, get away from your dad?"

Castiel paused for a moment. "I had no money, no job, and nowhere to go," he answered matter-of-factly. Before Dean could pity him, he elaborated, "I didn't have any friends, or savings. What little I earned went to my father as rent, but I lost my part-time job when he... found out... about me."

"You father took your paycheck?!"

"I gave it to him," Castiel corrected.

"Yeah, but all of it? What if you wanted to buy something?"

Castiel shrugged. "I've never really wanted for anything. I always had everything I needed."

"Yes, but what about what you wanted?" Dean pressed. "There must have been something."

You, Castiel thought to himself. "Nothing money could buy," was what he said. "Unfortunately that meant when he decided I would no longer have something I had no other means of keeping it," he added bitterly.

"They shouldn't have sacked you," Dean declared, shaking his head. "They can't do that. It's
called..." He racked through his brain for the term he'd heard Sam use once. "Wrongful dismissal, or something like that."

Castiel smiled sadly, and shook his head. "They didn't sack me. I lived in a small, very religious town. If I hadn't handed in my resignation the townspeople would have boycotted the shop had my sexuality become public knowledge. They were nice people – I didn't wish to see them go out of business."

Dean scoffed. "'Nice people'. If they were really that nice they'd have stuck up for you."

"I know you do not agree with their religious beliefs, but please try to understand that it was my choice to leave."

"'Their religious beliefs'?" Dean echoed.

"I'm sorry?"

"You said their religious beliefs, not our religious beliefs."

Castiel looked at his hands and picked at a piece of skin beside his fingernail.

"Cas?"

"I... I find myself disagreeing with a lot of what I have been taught is right." He licked his lips nervously. "Father Reynolds teaches a more open and accepting version of God's word. I don't always know what to think any more."

Castiel's words resonated with Dean and he placed his hands over Castiel's, which stilled at his touch. He swallowed. "Neither do I," he said softly.

Castiel glanced up at him, head cocked to the side and brow furrowed as he tried to dissect the meaning behind Dean's words. "Dean?" he murmured hesitantly.

"Don't," Dean breathed, hands stroking lightly down Castiel's thighs.

Castiel swallowed, skin tingling and his lips parting at Dean's touch. Dean couldn't really be about to do what Cas thought he was going to do - could he? It had to be Castiel's imagination running wild with want. Dean had made it perfectly clear that he cared for Cas only as a friend, and yet... There was a look in his eyes that Castiel hadn't seen before. Please. Oh, please, he wished. He forgot to breathe as Dean leaned in closer. He was really going to do it! Dean's breath was warm on his mouth as Dean's lips hovered millimeters away from his own. He wanted desperately to lean forward; to close the gap between them and steal the kiss before Dean could change his mind. But he forced himself to wait. He'd already risked their friendship once - he refused to do so again.

God, his heart was hammering in his chest and it felt like they'd been like this forever and yet no time at all. When Dean's warm lips pressed against his, it felt like time stopped. The rest of the world seemed to melt away, like he was floating and only Dean's lips anchored him. All too soon, Dean pulled back; but not far. He rested his head against Castiel's, eyes closed and waiting.

Dean let out a shaky breath. He hadn't planned that, though the idea had been forcing its way more insistently into his mind recently. Cas kissing him had been like a dam breaking; he'd never thought about it before but now it was all that he could think about.

It wasn't enough. Reason gave way to want and Castiel greedily chased Dean's mouth, his hand coming up to cup his cheek. His head was spinning, too focused on the feeling of Dean's lips on his,
Dean’s hands gripping his thighs, to pay attention to the way their teeth knocked together or the slight taste of blood from Dean’s bottom lip.

”Cas, I—” Dean stopped, lost for words. He what? It was too much. Too fast. A part of him wanted this, but another part of him wanted to walk away; to find a willing woman, and lose himself in her soft curves. But if he did that, he’d surely break Cas. And he’d promised that he’d never hurt him.

Castiel stared at him, waiting for Dean to make excuses and reject him. He could almost feel his heart breaking in his chest. If his love for Dean was somehow less than another man’s love for a woman, well then he didn’t want to be straight. Even his father’s beatings had hurt less than this.

Dean kissed him again, but it was forced this time; Cas could feel it. Though he kissed him back, it was with reluctance. He pulled away.

Dean chased his mouth, his kisses slowing to a halt when Castiel failed to reciprocate. ”What?” he asked, frowning a little.

”You don’t want to do this,” Cas observed, avoiding his gaze.

Dean stared at him. Cas wanted this - it was obvious he did - so why was he fighting it? Anger bubbled beneath his hardened gaze. Did he think it had been easy for Dean to kiss him? That Dean understood anything he was feeling? Unable to look at Cas any longer, he rose to his feet so suddenly that Cas instinctively jerk away from him with a start.

”But you do.”

Cas focused all his energy on staying stoic as Dean walked away without another word. He couldn’t watch as Dean stood up and walked away. Footsteps retreated down the hallway, with the bedroom door closing moments later. Only then, did he let a choked sob escape him. Only then did he let himself fall apart, the feeling of Dean’s kiss still on his lips.
So what was supposed to be one chapter sort of got away from me to the point that it was almost 20,000 words. Structuring it has been a nightmare, and I couldn't post the beginning because I kept swapping scenes around to make it flow better. But now that I've got the pacing sorted out it should be an easier job to work on dividing it up.

Dean didn't sleep much that night. At all, actually. He kept thinking about what he'd done, and how there was no going back from it. He couldn't even pass it off on him being drunk because he'd only had a couple of beers. Fuck... What had he done?

He'd kissed a guy... He'd kissed Cas!

Except Cas wasn't just a guy - Cas was Cas. Whatever that meant.

Maybe he was just suffering from a lack of sex. It had been a while - too long, actually - since he'd gone home with a woman. Maybe he should have picked someone up on New Year's, instead of taking Cas home. Jo's words from that night echoed in his mind: *a drunk man's words are a sober man's thoughts*. Did Jo know something? Did she suspect... he didn't know what. But if there was something, what did that mean? Was Jo teasing? Or did she know?

He buried his face in his pillow with a frustrated groan. There was nothing for her to know! Because if there was, then everything he'd ever known about himself was a lie. Nearing the middle of his thirties, surely he had to know who he was by now?

Except he was a completely different person with Cas. He was a better person.

Despite the fact he was exhausted and he still had the day off, Dean went in to work. He couldn't face Castiel – not yet.

Engines were simple, and they helped him think. But it didn't help his thought process much that Bobby was pissed to see him buried in an engine, and got even more pissed when he fixed the right parts on the wrong car. In the end, after giving him an ear-bashing about not paying attention, Bobby sent him home at lunch telling him that he didn't want to see his sorry ass 'til next Monday.

Only Dean didn't go home. He drove around aimlessly until he knew Ellen would have opened the Roadhouse, and he was her first customer that day.

"You've started early today," she noted as she poured his requested whiskey.

"Not as early as I'd have liked," he grumbled in response.

"Oh, honey," she acknowledged sympathetically. "Girl problems?"

Dean flushed. "I— What— When have I ever had girl problems?" he all but yelled at her.

"Hey, easy there, tiger – I'm just asking. We don't want you picking another fight today." She wiped down the bar, making herself look busy, while watching the way Dean studied the liquid in his glass
as he swirled it around and around and around, before finally knocking it back and resting the glass on the wooden surface.

"Another," he said, nudging it forward with his fingertips.

"I didn't hear the magic word," Ellen teased, leaning forward with one eyebrow raised.

He leaned forward to meet her. "Another. Before I take my money elsewhere."

"Whatever," she tutted unhappily, and refilled his glass.

He knocked it back and sighed.

"Have you had anything to eat today?"

Dean ran his tongue across his lower lip and froze, remembering the feel of Castiel's lips pressed against them. He shook his head at the thought. "No."

"Hey Jo! Make up a sandwich for Dean – I don't want him drunk before the lunch crowd gets in!"

Several minutes later, a very large sandwich and a glass of water was thrust at him. "Eat," Ellen insisted. "Or so help me I will send you packing."

Dean looked like he wanted to argue, but he knew better than to try when she got that steely glint in her eye. Obediently he took a large bite, groaning as the flavours exploded across his tongue.

"Good?" Jo asked.

"Oh my God," he mumbled in awe through the food in his mouth.

Jo grinned smugly as she took away his empty glass.

"Can I get another whiskey after I've finished this?" he asked, even though he was the customer and could have anything he damn well liked.

"No."

"No?"

"I will not be responsible for you if you get drunk this early. You can have a beer."

"I don't want a beer!"

"Well you're not getting anything stronger."

Dean groaned. "Fine! I'll have that beer."

"Sure," Ellen smiled. "Once you've eaten that," she added, pointing to the sandwich.

Dean rolled his eyes, but dutifully took another bite because Jo really did make a great sandwich.

"Where's Ash?" Dean asked her after a moment.

"He's out back, trying to devise some method of predicting crop circles or whatever. Something to do with 'subsonic wavelengths' or something like that." She eyed him up carefully. "You know, if it's a guy chat you need, I don't think he's going to be able to help much – unless you've got a robot girlfriend that's malfunctioning," she added with a sly grin.
"I am more than capable of getting a real girl, thank you very much, Ellen," he said defensively, thinking that the last one he'd been with was on the night Cas had ended up in hospital. That had been months ago. And he hadn't been able to get it up. Definitely not his finest moment. He'd really gotten off his game lately.

He took an angry bite of his sandwich and chewed it aggressively. As he swallowed, he thought about how much Cas seemed to float into his mind when he wasn't paying attention. "Have you ever... Nah, forget it."

"Have I ever what?" she asked suspiciously. "Because if the end of that sentence was going to be 'ever considered a threesome' I am kicking you out on your ass."

"MOM!" Jo's shocked voice called out, a grimace on her face.

"You close your ears girl, if you don't want to hear what I have to say!" Ellen replied, laughing at her daughter's obvious discomfort.

Dean shoved the last of the sandwich into his mouth and Ellen exchanged his empty plate for a beer.

"Ever been attracted to someone you wouldn't normally?"

"Like..?"

Dean stared at his drink. "Like… someone who others might think is wrong."

"Define 'wrong'."

"Just... wrong!"

"Like when you were chasing after that Talbot girl even after I told you she was bad news?"

Dean rolled his eyes.

Ellen heaved a great sigh. "Look, as much as I am grateful for you keeping me in business, I am not your therapist. If you can't even spit out what it is you're trying to ask me then you need to quit your whining, be a man, and make your own decisions".

Not long after, the bar began to fill with patrons hungry for their lunch, and Ellen's attention was no longer focused solely on him. Jo, however, was always keen to talk to him. She harboured a bit of a crush on him, he knew that, but she wasn't much older than a kid in his eyes. Besides, Ellen could be scary when she got mad. So, when Jo sidled up beside him he immediately shuffled further away from her.

"I think that so long as you're happy, and you aren't hurting anyone, then what's the problem?"

Dean thought that it was funny how he'd once said the exact same thing to Castiel.

"What anyone else thinks doesn't matter as long as you've got someone who makes you smile. And I can't ever remember seeing you as happy as you've been since Cas came along."

"What makes you think... I'm not talking about Cas!" Dean blustered, forcing a laugh.

"I do have eyes, you know. And it's no secret I had a bit of a crush on you," she admitted, glancing away as redness coloured her cheeks. Then she looked him straight in the eye. "I know you better than you think."
"Joanna Beth, these tables aren't going to clear themselves!" her mother's sharp voice sliced through the lunchtime chatter easily.

"I've got to go," she said with an apologetic smile, and disappeared to clear the empty tables.

He sat there nursing his beer until it could no longer be considered chilled, musing over Jo's words. She was right, and he hadn't realised just how unhappy he'd been until Castiel had literally fallen into his life, and now... Now he couldn't imagine not having Castiel there. He had nothing against gay people, it was just he'd really never been that way inclined. Though kissing him had felt nice, before he'd started overthinking it. He dragged a hand down his face, realising that he needed to be having this conversation with Castiel. Awkward.

He heaved himself off the stool with difficulty, for his legs had begun to cramp from sitting squashed up at the bar for so long. After he tossed a few crumpled bills down beside his glass, he shouted, "The change is yours, Jo!" as he turned to leave.

* * *

As he walked into the kitchen, he was greeted by the smell of apple pie baking in the oven.

"Where did you go so early this morning?" Castiel asked carefully.

Dean swallowed, everything he'd practiced saying in the car on the way home fading from his mind. Every move Castiel made as he cleaned up the mess on the counter was controlled and deliberate, like a beaten wife trying to prevent an argument. He'd never seen Castiel like this, not even when he first moved in, and he wondered if this was what life had been like for him at home. "I needed to clear my head."

"At Ellen's?"

The words were casual, but there was a hint of accusation beneath them.

"Did she call?" He was seriously beginning to regret giving Jo his number.

"You smell like whiskey."

"I only had one," he said, wondering when he'd gotten so defensive about his drinking habits.

"It's barely past lunch."

"Yeah. I know. That's early even for me," he conceded with a half-hearted/bitter chuckle.

Castiel walked over to him and placed a tentative hand on his arm. "Is everything alright?"

Dean looked down at his hand and a thousand thoughts flew through his mind: that he wanted Cas to touch him more; that he wanted to do anything and everything he could to bring back his Cas; that he wanted to kiss Cas again; that he always ended up hurting the people he cared about.

"Don't," he snapped a little too sharply, jerking his arm away.

Immediately, Castiel put space between them. "I made pie," he said quietly.

"It smells good." Dean stood there, watching Cas as he tidied up after himself. "Look, about last night... Well, you know I'm not gay, right?"

"I know. It was a mistake," Castiel said for him.
That wasn't what he was trying to say at all but Dean, ever the coward when it came to talking about his emotions, didn't correct him.

"You were drunk," Cas continued.

"No I wasn't, I only had—" He stopped, realising that Cas was offering him a way out. He could take it, or he could ignore it. He could tell Cas that he wasn't drunk. That it wasn't a mistake, and that he wanted to do it again. He could admit to Cas that he was scared. That he had no idea what he was doing. That he had feelings, desires he didn't understand. "Yeah," he heard himself agreeing. "I was drunk."

* * *

The sound of a truck reversing outside woke Dean at ten past four. He sat up and stretched his stiff neck as he tried to remember why he was sleeping on the couch. He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. He'd come through here to give Cas space and must have dozed off.

The sun was going down, so he closed the curtains and put the light on. "Cas!" he called out, heading through to the kitchen. It was empty, the pie Cas had baked that morning still cooling on top of the cooker. He checked the back of the apartment, rapping his knuckles on the bathroom door before opening it. "Cas? Cas!" he shouted, trying his own bedroom - though what the hell would Cas be doing in there? There was no answer, and no-one there. Returning to living room, he looked around like he'd somehow missed him the first time. That's when he noticed Cas's cupboard door was ajar. He kicked it open and found it empty.

He groaned. He'd royally fucked up when talking to Cas earlier, but he'd fix it. He still wasn't sure how he felt or what he was going to say, but he could at least tell Cas that it wasn't a mistake. Right?

He called Castiel, leaving him a message when it went to voicemail asking him to come home.

Then he called Castiel again, leaving another message asking him to call back.

Dialing Cas's number a third time, he left a message that he was going out to look for him.

He strode into the Roadhouse. Jo and Ellen were nowhere to be seen, which meant they were through the back. Not having time to wait he stormed past Bobby, who was sitting at the bar, and pushed open the door to the back room.

"Ellen, have you—"

"If you're not stock you don't belong back here."

"I just—"

"Out!"

He shuffled back with an impatient sigh until he was on the other side of the door again.

"Behind the bar!" she insisted, shooing him round the front of the counter. "Now, what do you want?"

"Have you seen Cas?"

"Not since last night. You want your usual?"

"I... No," he said, shaking his head as he slid onto a stool and dropped his head into his hands.
"Well you shout if you change your mind, but keep your ass on that side of the bar!"

He groaned, running his hands roughly through his hair as if trying to stimulate his brain to work harder.

"Somethin' wrong, boy?" Bobby asked.

"You haven't seen Cas, have you?"

"Nope."

"I— I think I've done something stupid."

"What did you— No, I don't want to know. Just fix it."

"I don't know how."

"Idjit!" Bobby exclaimed. Then he sighed. "If anyone's going to know where that boy'd go when he was hurtin', it's you."

But Dean didn't have a clue. Apart from Balthazar, who Dean had no way of getting in contact with and who he doubted would tell him anything even if he could, the only people who might be able to help him were in the Roadhouse and hadn't seen him.

Everyone except Father Reynolds.

"Thanks, Bobby," he called over his shoulder, already on his way out again.

Driving out of the parking lot and turning back the way he came, Dean drove past his apartment block and kept going. He swerved to a stop in front of the church, spraying gravel up behind him. Reaching the top of the church steps, he wasn't sure if he should knock even though the door was open. Making his decision he headed inside, momentarily struck by the grandeur of the interior. Though he'd been here several times before, now, he'd never set foot in the nave.

"Father Reynolds?" he called out, before wondering if you weren't supposed to shout in a house of God. "Father?" he called again as he made his way closer to the altar, in a more hushed tone this time.

"Can I help you?"

Dean turned, and the Father's eyes widened in recognition.

"Dean! This visit is... unexpected. I hope Castiel is well?"

His concern for Cas was comforting. "That's why I'm here. You haven't seen him today, have you?" he asked urgently.

"No. No, I haven't. Is something wrong?"

"I, uh, I hope not."

"I know you don't believe, but would you like to talk about whatever it is?"

It'd be awesome if someone could explain his feelings to him, but he wasn't the type to talk about them. Besides, even if he was, he didn't have the time to offload onto the Father. "No. I mean, no thanks. I just want to find Cas."
"Have you tried calling him?"

A sarcastic laugh burst past his lips before he could stop it. "Yeah. Several times. He's not answering."

"Hmm," he hummed thoughtfully.

"What?" Dean asked.

"You seem troubled."

"Yeah, my best friend's gone missing and he hasn't exactly got the best track record."

"Did something happen?"

Dean narrowed his eyes suspiciously. "What makes you ask that?"

"In my experience, I find that people who 'go missing' don't normally do so for no reason."

Dean clenched his jaw.

"Perhaps, if something did happen, that is where the answer lies."

Dean hesitated. The Father's logic made sense. What was it Bobby had said? Something about Cas going somewhere when he was hurting? "Have you got a number for that shrink he was talking to?"

"I have some of her cards in my office, yes. I'll be right back. I'm not sure how much help she'll be, however, as her conversations with her clients are confidential."

"Yeah, well, I'm desperate."

Time seemed to drag on forever as he waited for Father Reynolds to return. While he waited, he cast a glance up at the crucified Jesus hanging above the altar. "I don't even know if you're real, but I could use a little help here."

He'd told Cas that he wasn't gay, but he couldn't deny that he felt something for Cas, whatever it was. There were so many things he'd wanted to say to him; that he'd been afraid to say, or even admit them to himself. He'd thought there would be plenty of time to figure it all out.

"Here you go."

Dean snatched the card out of his hand with a hurried, "Thanks!" before all but running down the aisle and out the door. Digging his phone out of his pocket, he tapped his hand impatiently off the roof of the Impala as he waited for his signal bars to light up.

Curse buildings that seemed to repel mobile phone signal.

He had to force himself to take his time typing the number in so he didn't make a mistake.

"Hi, can I talk to Pamela Barnes please?" he asked when her assistant answered the phone.

"I'm sorry, she's busy at the moment. Can I take s—"

"My name's Castiel Milton, I'm a client of hers," he lied.

"I'm sorry, what did you say your name was?"
"Castiel. This is important!"

"Hold for one moment; I'll see if she can spare a minute."

Dean kicked the gravel as an annoying tune tinkled in his ear.

"Castiel?"

"Ms Barnes, have you heard from Castiel today?"

There was a pause before the therapist spoke again. "Who is this?"

"My name's Dean, I'm a friend of—"

"My assistant said you were Castiel."

Dean cleared his throat. "I, uh, don't know where she got that idea," he lied.

"I see," she said coolly. "Dean, I am a very busy woman, so make this quick."

"That's what I'm trying to do!" he snapped, taking a second to pull himself together before he spoke again. "Have you heard from Cas today?"

"Is there a problem?"

Dean huffed out a bitter laugh. "Hell yeah, there's a problem!" he cried, running a hand frustratedly through his hair. "He's gone! He was there, and then he wasn't, and now... I'm worried about him."

"I see," she said, sounding troubled.

"You've heard from him. Please, you've got to tell me where he is!"

"I can't."

"Can't, or won't?"

"Can't," she said crisply, "because he didn't tell me."

"Fuck!" Dean shouted at the empty parking lot.

"He called me to apologise," Pamela said carefully.

"For what?"

"I... I can't," she said, sounding upset. "It's confidential."

"You've got to give me something here!" Dean begged. "I've got... I've got to fix this!"

"You know him better than anyone, Dean."

"Did he say he was going to leave?" he pleaded. "Please, I don't want anything to happen to him. I can't let it!"

"He apologised quite a lot. I offered to clear my schedule so we could talk through whatever problems he might have been having, but he said no," she replied. "I'm sorry, Dean, that's really all I can say."

"I see," she said coolly. "Dean, I am a very busy woman, so make this quick."

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"You know him better than anyone, Dean."

"Did he say he was going to leave?" he pleaded. "Please, I don't want anything to happen to him. I can't let it!"

"He apologised quite a lot. I offered to clear my schedule so we could talk through whatever problems he might have been having, but he said no," she replied. "I'm sorry, Dean, that's really all I can say."
Great, so Dean was a problem now. He tried to focus on Cas and not his own failings. Running his hand through his hair again, he tried to work out where Cas might go if he was upset. Shit, when he'd met Cas Cas was a wreck. Wait, what if Dean had pushed him over the edge? He started to panic, thinking of where Cas could be, what he could have done, of how alone he was...

Over the edge.

Dean's stomach dropped. It was an innocent expression but, with a sinking feeling, he realised he knew where he might find Cas. As much as he wanted to find him, he hoped that he was wrong. If he was right, though...

"Dean? Dean?"

Dean hung up on her without another word. He drove slightly too fast and slightly too dangerously until he was on the back roads out of town, driving to where he'd first seen Cas all those months ago. Hunching over the wheel, trying to peer for a better view through the trees, he thought he could see a figure standing on the bridge, looking down.

"Cas!" he shouted desperately out of the window, not even waiting until the car had come to a complete stop.

Castiel turned back to him, obviously surprised to see him. "Dean? What... What are you doing here? How did you find me?"

"I just knew. Don't ask me how, I just did," he babbled, hurrying towards his friend. "I looked everywhere for you, dude! I didn't hear you leave—"

"You were sleeping."

"—and when I woke up you were gone. Just gone. You didn't even say goodbye, or leave me so much as a note, so I called everyone you knew, and I think I ran a red light on the way over here 'cause I was so freaking worried!" He paused then, forcing himself to speak more calmly, asked, "What are you doing up here?"

Castiel looked from Dean back to the churning water below. Dean's concern was just another reason to love him, and it hurt. He'd been afraid that if he'd tried to say goodbye he wouldn't leave, and he needed to. Balthazar was right - he couldn't stay. So he'd done what Pamela was always chastising him for - not facing up to things by running away. "I wasn't going to jump, if that's what you mean."

"No, that's not—I didn't think you were," Dean told him, inching closer anyway. "Not really."

"Being rejected by you isn't quite enough to make me suicidal, Dean," Cas told him sharply. "I'm stronger than that. It took my father years to push me to that point. Not even you could do it in just a few months."

"No, of course you are. I didn't—I don't know what I was thinking. I was just afraid. What were you thinking? Coming up here?"

"I wasn't thinking - not really. I was drawn here. I needed space - room to breathe. I was suffocating in the apartment."

"But why here?" Dean pressed. "If you weren't planning to... you know."

"I suppose it's because I feel closer to you here. You touched me for the first time on this bridge, and you changed my life," Castiel explained. "You changed me. I'm stronger, now – more in control of
everything I do. And that's all down to you."

"Not all of it," Dean pointed out. There were so many others who had helped shape Castiel into the hardy man he was now.

"But I can't stay with you," Cas continued. "Not any more."

Dean's heart wrenched painfully in his chest. "Cas—"

"I think I'm going to stay with Balthazar for a while."

"Balthazar?" Dean spat, jealousy replacing the worry twisting his stomach. How the hell could Cas choose Balthazar over him? After everything they'd been through?

"He offered me his couch. It might not be as comfortable as yours, but I think we both need space."

It sounded like Cas was trying to break up with him, and if it wasn't so painfully close to the truth it might have been funny. "I don't need space, Cas! I need—"

"You're not the only one who needed to clear their head," Castiel continued over him. Dean didn't know if he was even listening. "I don't know what happened last night, but I'm sorry."

"You don't have to be sorry, Cas!" Dean exclaimed, practically shouting to get Cas to listen to him.

"I do!" Castiel shouted, fighting back tears as he fist his hands in Dean's jacket. God, how he hated that thing. Dean had such a beautiful body, and to hide it away in a leather jacket two sizes too big should be a sin. "Last night you were drunk and I let you kiss me when I should have told you to stop, but I was weak and selfish and I just wanted to pretend that you actually wanted me except now I ache inside and I don't think I can stay with you any more," he said in a rush, dropping his hands to his side and turning away.

Dean's head was spinning. "You've got nothing to be sorry for," he emphasised. "It's me who should be apologising." He took a breath, building himself up to say what he knew he had to before he chickened out. "What I said this morning about me being drunk and it being a mistake, that's bullshit. I wasn't drunk, and I don't know what it was."

"Dean—"

"I don't know what it was, but it was something," Dean continued, grabbing his arm to make him listen, "and that scares the shit out of me. I mean I know I've done a lot of things with a lot of people, but this," he said, waving a hand between them, "isn't one of them. I like being with you. I have fun with you, but I—"

"I love you," Cas blurted.

Dean fell silent. He'd known that Cas had a thing for him, because he'd admitted as much, but loved him? Love was such a strong... It was...

Castiel was no longer looking at Dean; perhaps because of his silence. "If you don't want me to leave, you have to give me a reason to stay."

A reason? Dean could give him a hundred reasons if given enough time - he just wasn't ready to acknowledge any of them. He opened and closed his mouth several times before he could finally force words out. "We're friends," Dean told him.
Cas shook his head slightly; that's not a good enough reason.

"Cas, I don't know what it is that you want me to say!" Dean exclaimed, angry at himself for not being able to find the right words. He wasn't even sure that if he knew the right words to say, he'd be able to get them past his lips.

Castiel looked disappointed but resolute. "Can you please take me to Balthazar's?"

* * *

Arriving back at his apartment some time later Dean found himself standing, alone, in the middle of their living room.

*His* living room, he reminded himself. Cas didn't live there any more.

The walls had once felt too close together, but with Cas they had begun to feel homely. Now, however, they felt a hundred miles apart. And the silence... The silence was suffocating. He felt like a stranger in his own apartment.

Moving almost on autopilot, he walked to the kitchen and pulled out a glass and the bottle of Jack that sat beside it. It felt like he'd barely touched the stuff since Castiel moved in, except when he'd been trying to chase his nightmares away. He sat down in the dark living room and, pouring himself a generous glass, tried to forget about Cas.

* * *

"You're doing the right thing," Balthazar told Cas as he set his small bag down beside the sofa.

"It doesn't feel like it," he replied hollowly. Every fibre of his being felt like he was being ripped apart; his heart screaming to return home.

"It might feel like that now but, I promise, it'll get better."

"*It'll get better.*" Castiel's father had said those exact words to him when he'd proclaimed that he couldn't force himself to want a female partner, and he replied the same way now as he did then; "How do you know?"

Unlike his father, who was so full of conviction without justification that he could argue until he lost his voice, Balthazar was at a loss for words.

"I'm tired," he lied and - thankfully - Balthazar left him alone, squeezing his shoulder in silent support as he passed.
Chapter 35

The shrill ringing of his alarm woke Dean the next morning, and he buried his face in his pillow as he blindly fumbled to turn it off. Stretching his neck as he trudged towards the kitchen, he realised he couldn't smell any coffee brewing. That was strange, he mused to himself as he stopped in front of the empty coffee pot. Cas usually— Oh. Yeah. Cas was gone.

He shook cereal into a bowl, the noise deafening in the silence. As he reached out to fill the coffee pot, he paused with his hand on the handle. The apartment was quiet. Too quiet. The coffee machine wasn't gurgling, the newspaper wasn't rustling, the shower wasn't running, Cas wasn't talking. He let go of the pot, suddenly losing his appetite. That was when he noticed Castiel's pie, still sitting on top of the cooker, mocking him. Cas had gone, but the pie was still here. Lashing out, he grabbed the pie and tossed it in the trash. Leaving his breakfast on the counter, he went back to bed.

* * *

On the other side of town, Castiel woke up to a spring digging into his back and an ache in his neck. For a moment he was disorientated because he wasn't at home, but then he remembered. Dean's apartment wasn't home any more. Technically speaking, he supposed he was homeless again - because staying with Balthazar wasn't meant to be permanent. But then again, neither had staying with Dean.

The kitchen was empty, so he ventured in the direction of his friend's bedroom to see if he was awake. The sound of snoring told him that, for the moment, he was alone. Hesitating, he wondered if it would be rude to help himself to breakfast. But then his stomach, grumbling loudly, made up his mind for him. It wasn't like Balthazar was the type to take offence over little things. Come to think of it, he'd never seen Balthazar take offence at anything.

Opening and closing cupboard doors, he tried to find everything he might need to make himself breakfast. He put two slices of bread in the toaster, then turned to the coffee pot. It was different from Dean's - more complicated with a lot more buttons - but after pushing several it finally whirred into life with a beep, so he assumed he'd worked it out. As he waited for the toast to jump up suitable browned, he found himself reaching for things that weren't there: the jar of jam that Dean always left out to grow mould, despite Castiel telling him almost daily that it should be stored in the fridge and would keep longer if done so; the long-handled cappuccino spoon Dean claimed he had stolen from Starbucks many years ago during a trip with his brother, that he insisted was better than an ordinary teaspoon for reaching into the bottom of jars; the sugar sachets taken from cafés that he kept for 'emergencies' - namely when he had drunk his grocery money.

An irrational thought flew through Castiel's mind before he was even aware of thinking it - I want to steal my own Starbucks spoon. His toast popped and he shook his head at the ridiculous thought. "You're pining," he told himself disapprovingly, but without conviction.

* * *

Dean rose sometime around noon, resolving to go to the garage and see Cas once he'd scrubbed up. When he pulled into the yard some time later, however, he realised that he should probably have some excuse for dropping by when he's not scheduled to be working. After all, everyone he worked with knew that he and Cas lived together, and he doubted that Cas would be in any hurry to tell them all that that had changed.

"Dean, I distinctly remember taking you off the rota this week," Bobby grumbled when he laid eyes
on him.

"I just wanted to check my tyre pressure," he lied, his eyes staring at the office door. It was open, and he could see that it was empty. "Where's Cas?" he asked, forcing himself to sound casual as he nodded his head in the direction of the empty office.

"Cas asked for this week off," Bobby told him, scrutinising him from under the brim of his dirty baseball cap. "I figured you two had plans."

"Plans?" Dean echoed, his voice coming out in a squeak. He cleared his throat. "As in, together?"

Bobby touched one hand to the brim of his cap, nudging it upwards on his head. "Yeah. Friends tend to do that."

"Right," Dean breathed, his face relaxing into a grin. "Duh. He went out before lunch, so I guess I just forgot."

"Unlike some people," Bobby said, staring at Dean, "Cas knows that when he's got time off work, he doesn't have to come into work."

"Tyres," Dean reminded him tightly.

"Right," Bobby said, not sounding entirely convinced. "Well, you know what you're doing. Unless you're gonna pay me to do it?"

When Bobby laughed, Dean grinned. "I can do it," he told him. "I can't afford to pay you, what with all the overtime you don't have."

Bobby humphed as Dean moved around the Impala and got to work on his tyres. As he expected, they were well within the recommended range. He waved in Bobby's direction when he left, double parking outside an off licence on the way home to buy himself a bottle of whiskey.

* * *

Castiel stared at his crossword, not seeing the words as he tapped the end of his pencil absently against the page.

"Stuck?" Balthazar asked him. "Or thinking about a certain man?"

Castiel straightened in his seat as he cast a guilty look at his friend.

"It's not going to do you any good if you pine after him."

"I'm not pining for him," Cas protested, even though he knew it was a lie. "He's a friend. I miss him."

"He's more than 'a friend' and you know it," Balthazar pointed out. "That's why you're here." Castiel stared at his crossword puzzle. "What's a six-lettered word for a 'dilapidated car'?" he asked.

"How should I know?" Balthazar asked.

Dean would know. Castiel pouted at the page as he moved onto the next clue.

* * *
Watching Balthazar push the cart around the supermarket was very different from watching Dean, Cas mused. Whereas Dean's grumbling about the length of time it took to get 'round the shop tended to increase the further down their shopping list they got, Balthazar was more laid back and took his time. His list contained only the essentials - milk, bread, eggs, laundry detergent - while he was content to make up the rest as he went along, depending on special offers or simply whatever took his fancy.

Castiel walked alongside his friend as they meandered through the aisles. Occasionally Balthazar would stop to put something in the cart and Cas would find his attention falling on something he never intended to buy, but found Balthazar tossing it into the trolley despite his protests that he didn't want it.

All in all, shopping with Balthazar was a surprisingly relaxing experience, and it seemed like they reached the checkout in no time at all - despite the very full trolley in front of them that suggested otherwise.

As they unloaded their shopping onto the conveyor belt, Cas wondered how much of it they actually needed. He was aware that Balthazar had no reason to be as frugal as he and Dean, but it felt like a terrible waste if they didn't need it. He put the thought out of his mind as he helped his friend pack their shopping away, getting Balthazar to follow his lead on bagging similar things together - chilled items, fruit and veg, tinned goods. As Balthazar put the last of their bags back into the cart, the cashier totalled up their bill and a chill ran down Castiel's spine. What Balthazar was spending for a week was more than what Dean would spend in a month. He tapped his friend on the arm.

"In a minute," Balthazar said, rifling through his wallet for his card.

A wave of nausea came over him. "Balthazar—"

"What is it?"

Cas's eyes flicked down and, in a low voice, told his friend, "I can't afford to pay my share."

Balthazar simply rolled his eyes with a fond smile on his face. "Don't worry about it, Cas."

Lines creased Castiel's forehead. He always paid his way - it was something he and Dean had eventually come to agree on - and he felt better when he wasn't imposing on someone.

"No, I have to pay you."

"No, you don't," Balthazar told him.

"Well at least take this for now," Cas said, hurriedly digging through his wallet and thrusting a few notes at him and a coupon at the cashier.

"Cas—"

"Please."

Balthazar sighed. "Fine."

"Thank you." It really wasn't much - barely a fifth of their groceries - but it was something.

* * *

Cigar smoke formed a noose around Dean's throat, making him gag. He didn't understand the appeal,
but he'd bear it as long as his luck held out. His eyes flicked from the cards in his hand to Cole, sitting opposite him, and he allowed himself a small smirk.

The man to his right exchanged an old card for a new one, then contemplated the cards in his hand for a moment. "All in!" he declared in a booming voice.

Confidence dictating his actions, Dean responded by scooping the untidy pile of money sitting in front of him and pushing it into the middle of the table; crumpled notes disappearing under toppling towers of coins.

The other players around the table either followed suit or threw their cards face down on the table. They weren't as brave as Dean, who was getting giddy at the sight of what would surely be his growing pile of winnings because his hand could beat just about anything the rest of the men could put down.

As he watched the others lay down hands that his would easily trump, he became more and more certain that he would be going home a rich man tonight.

But then Cole played his cards and Dean's mouth went dry. All of a sudden, he became painfully aware of just how much money he was throwing away. It wasn't bravery. It was 

stupidity. He tossed his cards down, allowing the others to see his hand. He'd thought he had a sure thing - queens over aces - but that was before Cole laid down four threes.

There was a hollow pit in Dean's stomach as he walked out of the back room and into the bar, through the throng of people who could afford to throw their money away on a night of drinking and gambling.

You should never gamble more than you can afford to lose, and that was a lesson Dean doubted he'd ever learn. He settled in the driver's seat of the Impala and sat there for a long while, hands gripping the steering wheel so tightly his knuckles turned white. As it sank in just how much money he'd thrown away, he felt like he might throw up. He always paid his rent as soon as his paycheck came in, but other bills weren't due until the end of the month, not to mention four weeks of food to buy. He thumped his forehead against the wheel, groaning when it hurt more than he thought it would.

How the hell was he going to explain this to Sam? Because he'd have to call him - there was no way he'd last the month on the loose change that rattled around in the glove box every time he drove around a corner. And it wasn't like he even had Cas's meagre income to help any more.

He was fucked.

* * *

When Balthazar went out that night, Castiel declined the offer to go with him. Instead he washed up their dinner dishes and put a load of washing on, before wondering what the hell he was actually going to do with himself that evening. If he hadn't moved in with Balthazar, he'd probably read a little. By now he might even have finished the book he was halfway through and started another. He wished he could have brought the book with him, but it was Dean's. If he'd asked he was sure Dean would have said yes, but it wouldn't have felt right.

He soon found himself browsing Balthazar's movie collection. Dean had always been good at recommending movies he should watch (or, more precisely, insisted), but he saw none of them on Balthazar's shelves. He started sliding some at random off the shelves, reading the descriptions on the backs before returning them to their places on the shelf.

He paused at a film called Brokeback Mountain. It sounded like the exact opposite of what he needed right now but, for whatever reason, he found himself sliding the disc into the player. With a
bit of luck and a couple of wrong moves, he finally got the film up and running. Pausing it while he checked for snacks, he was disappointed not to find any popcorn. He did, however, find a small bag of marshmallows. Given there was nothing else, he decided that marshmallows would have to do.

He wasn't ashamed to admit that the film moved him, both in terms of plot and the through the way he could relate to Jack. Unlike Dean, who bottled up most of his emotions under some illusion of being more 'manly' for doing so. When Balthazar came home, he found him sobbing on the couch, surrounded by damp, snotty tissues.

"Brokeback Mountain?" Balthazar chuckled, looked at the DVD box lying on the table. "I can't say I blame you. That film's depressing. And don't expect bottoming to be quite so easy your first time without any preparation!" he advised with a grin, trying to lighten the mood a little.

"I wish I knew how to quit him," Castiel cried, echoing the words of one of the film's central characters.

"Oh, Cassie," Balthazar sighed, dropping onto the sofa beside his friend and wrapping an arm around him in a one-armed hug.

"It feels like a sick joke. I finally begin to accept who I am, and the man I fall for... I have no doubts he loves me in his own way, but it's not enough."

"There are plenty more fish in the sea," Balthazar told him, stroking a soothing hand through Castiel's hair.

"Why would I want fish?" Cas sniffed.

Balthazar laughed. "It's an expression, sweetie. It means there are more men out there for you to choose from, once you get over this one."

Cas slipped his arms around his friend's waist and snuggled his face into his jacket. "What would I do without you?"

* * *

"You look like you're holding something back," Pamela said, topping up his glass of water even though he'd barely touched it.

"I..." He trailed off, realising that it would do him no good to lie. "You know me too well."

She smiled at him. "It's what you pay me for. Or rather, your church."

"And I'm grateful for that. I'm happier, now. Stronger."

"And yet, you don't look happy. Not today, anyway." When he didn't answer straight away, she leaned back in her chair and clasped her hands together in her lap. "Is it... Dean?"

His silence answered her question.

"What has he done?"

"Nothing! Well not nothing... He kissed me."

Her eyes widened minutely. "And, despite your feelings for him, this makes you unhappy? Regretful? Guilty?" she pushed.
"No, nothing like that. I don't think— He didn't want to."

She frowned. "He kissed you because he didn't want to?"

"Yes. No!" Castiel buried his face in his hands. "I moved out," he mumbled against his skin.

"I see. Can I ask why?"

Castiel thought long and hard before speaking. Balthazar had been urging him to leave for some time, and being rejected by Dean had hurt. Though it had been almost a knee-jerk reaction, he still thought it had been the right thing to do. "I know what I want," he said carefully. "I'm not sure Dean does."

"But why did you leave?"

"Because I had to," Cas admitted. "It would hurt too much to stay, even though I didn't want to leave."

Pamela nodded, scribbling some notes down before speaking again. "So you made a choice based on what you thought was best for you. You put yourself first, Castiel. I'm proud of you." She noticed how torn he looked. "How do you feel about the decision you've made?"

Reluctantly, Cas shook his head. "I miss him."

"I understand how difficult this must be for you, Castiel," Pamela said sympathetically. "But what makes you so sure that the kiss was a mistake?"

"Because he told me so." I was drunk. Except... Later, Dean had admitted, I wasn't drunk, and I don't know what it was.

I was drunk.

I wasn't drunk.

I was drunk.

I wasn't drunk.

I was drunk.

I wasn't drunk.

What if... He swallowed. "Have I made a mistake?" he asked her quietly.

Pamela pursed her lips as she thought how best to respond to his question. "Putting yourself first is never a mistake, Castiel."

"But what if..." He trailed off, knowing how Balthazar would scorn his pitiful hope that maybe, just maybe, Dean's feelings had changed.

"What if Dean feels the same way?" she guessed.

He nodded. "Go on. Tell me I'm being delusional."

"You're not delusional, Castiel. At least not medically speaking." She sighed. "Unfortunately, I don't know how Dean feels about you. What I do know is that you have to weigh up the pros and cons of
holding on to that hope. The way I see it, you have two choices. If you believe there to be more positives than negatives, you have an honest discussion with Dean about your feelings. If you believe there to be more negatives, you're going to have to let go, Castiel. The most important question is: What's best for you?"
Chapter 36

Chapter Notes

Just a short chapter this time, guys.

Dean leaned over the pool table, bringing his hands together and sticking his elbows out to form a triangle around the balls and the cushion. After moving the balls into their correct positions within the triangle, he took aim with the cue and fired the white ball in their direction. Ball after ball, he sank them with ease.

He got no pleasure in clearing the table, for it was no challenge messing about by himself. As he bent over to take an easy shot at the black, he glanced up at a couple sitting in his line of vision. A bald guy and his Latino friend were sitting at a table, drinking and chatting quietly between themselves. They might be decent opponents, he decided, tossing his cue down on the table and making his way over to them.

"Hey," he said when they looked up at him. "Wanna play?" He beckoned in the direction of the pool table.

"Depends," the Latino guy said. "Is it going to be worth my while?"

Dean shrugged. "I could throw some money down."

"Cesar, don't," the bald guy pleaded. "We didn't come out for this."

"It's just a little fun, Jesse."

"It's no fun for me if I'm watching you play pool with someone else."

"Don't be such a bonehead. What's wrong with making a little money off the guy?"

"Nothing, if you win. What if you don't?"

Dean laughed. "You guys fight like me and my brother."

Jesse seemed to curl in on himself as Cesar said, "Well... it's more like an old married couple."

Dean chuckled, but Cesar leveled a challenging stare at him as if waiting for Dean to start a fight. Jesse, on the other hand, simply dropped his head and closed his eyes as if awaiting the inevitable abuse he thought Dean might throw at them. Another glance between the two men, and his eyes widened in realisation. "Oh! So..." As Dean motioned between the two of them Cesar visibly relaxed, a grin spreading across his face at Dean's acceptance.

"So, uh, do you want to play or not?"

Cesar looked at Jesse, who looked a little more secure than he had a moment ago but gave a small shake of his head. With obvious reluctance, Cesar said, "Thanks, but no thanks."

"Fair enough," Dean said, moving back to the table to rack the balls up again. "Hey!" he snapped at
the youths gathering around the table. "Did I say I was finished?"

They scarpered back to their table, grumbling amongst themselves. As he played, Dean found himself paying more attention to Cesar and Jesse than the balls. A look here, a touch there... It went against everything he'd ever believed gay men could be - real men, as his dad would probably have put it, and yet completely in love with each other. But then, it wasn't like Cas fit Dean's image of what a gay man should be like, either.

As they murmured quietly between themselves, occasionally laughing at something the other said, Dean wondered if this would be Cas for the rest of his life - introducing his partner and bracing for a fight. Cas didn't deserve that. Dean would make sure that nobody gave him shit for loving someone.

His gut wrenched as he realised that Cesar was him, ready to leap to Jesse's defence if need be.

He hit the cue ball so hard it missed the ball he was aiming at entirely and jumped off the table.

"Foul!" Cesar shouted over with a laugh.

Dean forced a half-assed grin.

"Come on over, friend - we'll buy you a drink. It'll make a change from being alone?"

Only the temptation of a free drink stopped him from no. "Alright," he said, dropping the cue ball and his cue on the pool table. As he sat down, he could see the students on the other side of the room eyeing up the table. He glared at them for a long moment, before nodding his head at the table.

In a blink they were crowded around it, jostling each other as they set up for a game.

Jesse nodded at him, a small smile pulling one corner of his mouth upwards. Maybe something Cesar had said had loosened him up a bit, Dean mused.

They beckoned over to the waitress to bring them another round, then Dean began to realise that Cesar didn't do small talk.

"So tell us - why's a man as good-looking as you moping around a pool table all alone on a weeknight?"

Whether it was because he knew they were married or due to his conflicted feelings for Cas he didn't know, but his instinctual response to tell the guy he was barking up the wrong tree died in his throat. Instead he let out a self-conscious chuckle, wishing he had a beer in front of him already. Being able to down a beer would delay, however briefly, having to answer that question.

"It's a girl," Jesse predicted in a murmur, sounding bored with the conversation.

"It's not a girl!" Dean protested. Why did everyone always think he had girl troubles these days?

"You mean it's a guy?" Cesar asked, sounding surprised.

At Cesar's surprise, Dean found himself wishing that he hadn't been so quick to correct them.

"You didn't strike me as the type."

"I didn't say that!"

Cesar laughed. "So it is a guy." His eyes raked over Dean thoughtfully. "Is he straight?"

"No," Dean replied automatically. As soon as the word was out of his mouth, he wanted to smash his head off the nearest wall. Why didn't he just tattoo it on his fucking forehead that a part of him
wanted more than friendship from Cas?

Cesar's eyes softened in sympathy. "First time?"

Dean clenched his jaw, unwilling to answer the question, and ignored the waitress as she placed a drink in front of him.

"Well, you're never too old to switch teams," Cesar told him warmly. "If you've got a good support network, you should do alright."

He wasn't switching teams, damn it! Liking Cas didn't make him gay. He didn't know what it made him, but he still liked women. Still thought about their soft curves when he took his hand to himself at night.


At this, Cesar reached for his hand and gave it a squeeze.

"But I know I'm not wrong. You're not wrong."

It was the most Dean had been aware of Jesse saying all night. All three of them sat in silence for a long moment, letting his words sink in.

"It's not like that," Dean croaked, breaking the silence. His mouth was dry, and he reached for his drink.

"No?" Cesar questioned.

"I got nothing against...you know...people like you."

"Except being one."

Cesar's accusation hung in the air, creating a barrier between them.

Dean's hand, resting on his knee, clenched under the table. He wasn't homophobic! He supported Cas. He'd taken the guy to a damn gay bar! "It's not...I'm not..." He couldn't deny it. His hard expression softened as he thought about Cas. "It's complicated," he settled for.

"Love isn't complicated," Cesar told him.

"Who said I loved him?" Dean exclaimed, straightening up in his seat.

"You didn't have to."

"Cesar's right," Jesse told him. "Love isn't complicated unless you make it that way."

"Whatever it is - and I'm not saying it's love - I don't know how to uncomplicate it," Dean admitted after a moment's pause.

"Do you want to?" Cesar asked.

"Yes. No... Maybe."

"Start by figuring out which it is," he advised. "Don't mess him around, whoever he is. Whoever he
is, he deserves better than that."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "He does."

"Who is he?" Jesse asked.

"Who? Cas?"

"If that's the guy you like," Cesar nodded.

"Yeah, he's... he's weird," Dean remarked thoughtfully, smiling to himself as he pictured Cas in his mind. "He's a weird, dorky little guy. Dark hair, blue eyes... Sensible shoes." He stopped when he saw Cesar's wide grin. "What?"

"I was expecting something a bit more personal."

Dean's cheeks grew warm and he leaned forward to grab his beer. After taking a long sip, he set it back on the table, index finger running around the rim as he stared into the half-empty glass. "What? You want me to tell you about the little things? Like the way he tilts his head when he's confused? Or that when he smiles it's like the freakin' sun? Or maybe you want to know how smart, forgiving and friggin' selfless he is? How about the fact that when he looks at me, I feel like I mean something - like just being around him makes me a better man."

"He sounds like a nice guy."

"He is," Dean agreed quickly. "He's the best."

"It's no wonder he turned your head."

"Might turn mine, if I didn't have Cesar."

As if receiving a signal, they both reached out to touch the other; a shoulder, a knee. There was nothing sexual about their actions, but at the same time there was an intimacy that had Dean's stomach twisting in jealousy.

"What's it like?" he heard himself ask. "Settling down with a guy?"

"Smelly, hairy. Twice the worrying about getting prostate cancer."

Cesar's tone was light-hearted, and though it wasn't funny Dean laughed anyway.

"Well, what did you expect me to say?"

"I dunno."

"We've got a nice little spread in New Mexico where we raise horses. Tomorrow we pick up a new stallion before making the long drive back."

"It's a life," Jesse said. "A happy one. Better than anything I thought I'd have when I was a kid. Back then, all I had was my brother. Everyone else..." He trailed off with a small shake of his head.

Dean licked his lips, wondering what his brother would say, knowing how screwed up he was getting over a guy. He finished his drink, then left enough money to buy the couple another round. "I gotta get out of here," he declared. Before he told them anything else. Before he thought too hard about their questions, and the implications of his responses. He'd already shared too much with them. He'd never have said this much to Jo, or Ellen, or anyone else he knew. So why, then, had it been
easier to confide in these strangers he'd never see again?

"Take care," Cesar told him.

Jesse, a man of few words, echoed his husband's sentiments with a nod.

* * *

Castiel walked up the steps to Balthazar's front door, reaching into his pocket for his keys. His friend had given him a spare key so he could come and go as he pleased, which came in useful when Balthazar was out and he wanted to go for a run. Running usually cleared his head, but tonight he couldn't help but wonder what Dean was doing.

Balthazar was right. He was pining.

When he walked into the living room, the last thing he expected to see was his friend's naked ass greeting him over the arm of the sofa.

"Balthazar! What?!!" he spluttered.

"Shit, sorry!" Balthazar laughed. "I forgot this was your bed now."

Castiel really didn't want to think about how many times Balthazar had had sex where he now spent his nights.

"Did you have a nice run?" Balthazar asked as he rose to his feet, his hard cock jutting out proudly and bouncing a little as he moved.

Cas could feel his face flushing and he focused his attention behind his friend, on the darkened screen of the television set. "Yes, thank you."

The girl Balthazar had on the sofa giggled and murmured something in his ear, then Castiel was relieved to hear his friend say, "We'll take this to my room."

"Okay." Feeling hot and sweaty after his run, Cas decided that once Balthazar had retreated to his room he'd have a shower and try to forget about the antics he'd intruded on so that he could eventually sleep.

"You're welcome to join us," Balthazar offered, interrupting his thoughts. "It might take your mind off of—"

"No, thank you!" Castiel said quickly. His first time certainly wasn't going to be in a loveless orgy. Not that he'd judge anyone who engaged so freely in such sexual activities, but it just wasn't for him.

"Suit yourself," Balthazar shrugged, ushering his 'guest' in the direction of his bedroom. "My door won't be locked if you change your mind."

Starting to feel peckish after his run, Castiel mentally postponed his shower in order to prepare himself a snack. While Dean had fattened him up on a wide variety of Eastern takeaways, Balthazar had introduced him to Mediterranean tapas and he knew his friend had some leftovers in the fridge. Helping himself, he piled a plate with a piece of Spanish omelette, some stuffed olives, a few slices of cured meats - the names of which he couldn't pronounce - and a wedge of focaccia bread. He quickly sliced up a small carrot and a stick of celery as well, finishing off the plateful with a large spoonful of hummus.
He couldn't imagine Dean eating this without a great deal of persuasion - but it would be his loss.

He left it sitting on the table in the living room with a glass of red wine - not the usual beer that Dean would accompany any and every meal with - while he showered. He could make out Balthazar's and the girl's grunts and groans of pleasure above the sound of the water, and he was grateful that Dean had never brought anyone home while he'd lived there.

The headboard started to bang vigorously against the wall and Castiel was hit with the sudden and unexpected urge to cry. He missed Dean. He missed *his* bed, not that it was even a proper bed. And he wanted to go *home*. Balthazar was a good friend, but Dean was *family*.

As Balthazar and the girl quietened down, Castiel dried himself off and went to eat his supper. He found that the wine burned a little on the way down, but it didn't mess with his head the way the tequila had on Balthazar's birthday.

He'd forgotten a fork so he ate with his fingers, wiping up the last of the hummus with the bread. After rinsing his dishes and leaving them beside the sink for morning, he tucked a sheet around the sofa cushions. As he settled down beneath a layer of thin blankets, he heard the girl start moaning again. He hoped they wouldn't be at it *all* night, or else he might not get any sleep.

Though, he thought to himself with a half-hearted chuckle, he probably wouldn't be complaining about being kept up all night if he were in *Balthazar's* shoes.
Chapter 37

Chapter Notes

I think I might have been hungry when I was working on this chapter... ;)

"Just checkin' in. Hope you're okay." Dean sounded miserable.

*Beep.*

"The hell does everyone think I have girl troubles?" Dean slurred down the phone. He snorted, then added, "Only trouble is I haven't had a girl in... in... I dunno, dude. *Weeks.*... Never thought I'd settle down. Tried, 'course. Lisa. Fucked that up, didn' I? 'M no good. Not cut out for domestic shit. ... Alone's underrated. Can't lose what you don't have."

*Beep.*

"When did things get so complicated 'tween us, huh? Things were good. We were good. ... 'S probably for the best tha' you moved out. Don' have to deal with my crap no more. Deserve better than—"

*Beep.*

"Y'know 'm not hom'phobic, don't you? Tell me you know."

A single tear slipped down Castiel's cheek as he clutched the phone harder to his ear. "I know," he whispered.

"Not sayin' I'm not an ass..." There was a pause and the sound of something hitting the floor with a soft thud before Dean's voice broke as he whispered, "Please come home."

With a heavy heart, Castiel erased the fourth and final voicemail that Dean had left him last night. He had clearly been drinking, and the eleven text messages he'd also sent had just been a mass of random letters.

"You should tell him to stop calling."

"He's my friend, Balthazar. And he was drunk. He probably doesn't even remember what he said."

"But it's messing with your head. That's why I've booked us a table for dinner tonight. Eleven courses ought to take your mind of him."

"Eleven courses?" Cas echoed. "*Eleven?*"

"Yes, but they're all small," Balthazar replied with a grin.

Castiel couldn't believe that someone had one day decided that three courses weren't enough.

"Don't look so glum, Cas!" Balthazar said, slapping him on the back. "You need a good night out."

"What I *need* is a quiet night in." Warm hands gripped his shoulders and he met his friend's gaze.
"Castiel, listen to me," Balthazar said, his voice more serious than Cas had ever heard it. "You are in love with a man who is unable to care for you the way you want him to. You've taken the first step in moving out, but you can't spend your evenings moping around in my house."

"I'm not moping!" Cas protested.

"Whatever," Balthazar said, clearly not believing him. "You need to get out. It's just dinner - nothing loud or over-the-top."

"A big dinner," Cas reminded him, but he seemed a little mollified.

* * *

When a single mussel was placed in front of him, Cas began to realise just how 'small' these portions would be for them to eat eleven courses. It was soon followed by a tartlet that he devoured in two bites.

"Do you come here often?" Cas asked Balthazar. Then he laughed. "I'm sorry, that sounded like a bad pick-up line!"

Balthazar chuckled. "No, not that often. I sometimes bring clients here for business lunches - of course we only have five courses, then."

"Of course," Castiel echoed sarcastically.

Balthazar laughed. "Sometimes I bring dates here. And sometimes," he said, raising his wine glass, "I bring good friends who need to get out of the house."

With an amused smile, Castiel raised his own glass and clinked it against Balthazar's. "Just tell me something - are all the courses this small, or am I going to have to run twice a day for the next month?"

* * *

Beef madras, naan, deodorant, beer, porn mag... Dean watched the cashier scan his items and place them in a brown bag.

"That'll be thirty-two dollars and forty-seven cents," she told him cheerily.

He handed her his card, but a moment later she returned it to him. "I'm sorry, sir, but your card's been declined."

This is what happens when you throw away your money in a card game, he told himself. Clearing his throat, Dean opened his wallet and counted what change he had left. "I'll just take these," he told her, keeping the food and beer. He couldn't forget the beer. "How much is that?"

After voiding the other items, he only just had enough cash to pay for his dinner. Annoyed that he had to leave his porn behind, he left wondering how much longer he could put off calling Sam.

* * *

After an aperitif cocktail called a 'Heavenly Haze', Cas and Balthazar were served a small bowl of soup.

"It's cold," Castiel whispered, leaning forward in his seat.
"It's supposed to be," Balthazar told him with a smile. "It's gazpacho."

"Oh."

"Try it."

It was nice, though it felt strange to be eating cold soup. Nevertheless, Castiel quickly emptied his bowl. "You said you bring clients here?" he asked. "So what exactly is it that you do?"

"Oh, international business. It's really very boring and not good dinner conversation. But what about you? You can't spend the rest of your life working part-time in that dirty garage."

Castiel looked at his bowl, wishing he hadn't eaten his soup quite so quickly. Given his education had been 'interrupted', he wasn't sure what other options he had. "I like the garage," he said instead. It wasn't a lie - the work was simple, and the people were nice.

"And Dean works there," Balthazar added.

But Cas shook his head. "That's irrelevant. There's Bobby, and Benny, and Adam... They're all really nice. They're very good to me."

"But it's not necessarily good for you. Cassie, I worry about you. And they wouldn't stop being your friends if you got another job."

"I know that," Cas insisted, as a waiter took their bowls away.

* * *

Dean dropped the grocery bag on the counter, causing the bottles inside it to clink together. He tore off the cardboard wrapper and, grabbing a sharp knife from the drawer, aggressively stabbed the film covering before shoving the curry in the microwave. He set the timer for ten minutes and put the beer in the fridge, before making his way to the bathroom.

Once there, he yanked his shirt over his head and filled the sink. Gripping the edge of the basin, he stared at himself in the mirror. For a split second, he thought he saw Castiel staring back at him. Looking just like he had on the first night Dean had taken him home - dishevelled hair, scruffy beard, untidy clothing - he stared back at him from the mirror. Dean blinked, and the vision was gone. Cupping his hands, he splashed water on his face letting the droplets merge with the tears that had filled his eyes.

He missed Cas.

* * *

Seaweed must be an acquired taste, Castiel decided, unable to force another forkful into his mouth, but the salmon had been beautiful. He'd have to make it for Dean one day, but— But you don't live with Dean any more, he reminded himself.

"Thinking about him again?"

"The salmon, actually. It was lovely."

A different cocktail menu was placed in front of them, then.

"Now you have an intermezzo," Balthazar told him.
Castiel cocked his head thoughtfully. "Like intermediate? In between?"

"Exactly!"

Castiel scanned the titles of the drinks. They all sounded delicious and exotic. "Do you recommend anything?"

"I recommend you try what takes your fancy."

Castiel chewed his lip. Upon closer examination he didn't recognise many of the alcoholic ingredients in the cocktails, but the 'Great Pumpkin' reminded him of Dean and Hallowe'en. That's what he would have.

* * *

Drinking another mouthful of beer as he waited for the counter on the microwave to hit zero, the smell of burning drifted into Dean's nose. He glanced over at the toaster where smoke was starting to curl out of the slots.

"Shit."

He popped the lever up, but the naan had jammed inside. Ignoring the microwave as it started beeping urgently at him, he grabbed the knife he'd left lying on the worktop to force out the bread. Only after he'd gotten it out did he realise he should have switched it off, first.

He sat down in the living room to eat, catching the last ten minutes of an episode of Dr Sexy. He knew what was going on since he'd seen it before, but even if he hadn't, he wasn't paying it enough attention to be confused.

After swallowing the last of his chicken and rice, Dean wiped a chunk of blackened naan around his bowl. The sauce wasn't enough to disguise the burnt taste but, as he dumped his dishes beside the sink and grabbed his keys, he was sure he'd drown the taste out with more beer once he got to the Roadhouse.

* * *

"Oh, wow," Cas said when a rack of lamb, still pink in the middle, was placed in front of him. It was accompanied by a minted pea purée that smelled divine.

"You're not one of those people who ruin a good piece of meat by preparing it well done, are you?" Balthazar joked, as Cas cut into his meat.

"No, but then I wouldn't usually serve it this pink, either."

"If you send it back I'm disowning you."

Castiel narrowed his eyes at his friend, but his amusement was obvious. "I'll try anything once."

"Now that's what I like to hear! Especially in the bedroom..."

Castiel turned as pink as his lamb. "Balthazar!"

"Oh, Cassie, you're such a prude!"
"I'm not a prude. I just think that there's a time and a place to discuss... sexual relations... and a public restaurant isn't it."

"Honey, we both know you haven't done it."

Castiel fidgeted under Balthazar's teasing gaze. "Not with two parties involved, no."

"Now, you've either just admitted to masturbating or having a threesome," Balthazar declared playfully. "Which is it?"

Castiel didn't dignify his friend's question with a response.

* * *

"Dean," Jo smiled when she saw him.

"Jo," he muttered back at her.

Shaking her head sadly, she slipped the cap off a bottle of beer and placed it in front of him without being asked.

"Gimme a whiskey as well," he asked, downing the drink as soon as she placed the glass in front of him.

"Smile, honey," Ellen told him, watching as he took a swig of his beer. Her voice was warm but her expression was one of concern.

"Nothin' to smile 'bout," he told her glumly.

"If I didn't know better, I'd think some girl broke your heart."

Dean glared at his beer and drained the glass, pushing it towards her. "Fill me up," he said gruffly, rubbing a hand across his eyes. He wasn't drunk enough to dull the pain.

A moment later, a fresh beer was placed in front of him. "You take it easy, you hear?"

He ignored her as he took a couple of deep gulps from his glass.

* * *

The lamb was followed by a trio of salads, and Castiel was beginning to wonder how he wasn't full yet despite there being another three courses still to come.

"You're almost there," Balthazar told him with a smirk, when he noticed Cas hadn't eaten a bite in five minutes.

"I just need a minute," Cas said, pouring himself a glass of ice water from the jug on the table.

"Pace yourself. If there's something you don't like, don't force yourself to eat it. Save room for the next course."

Castiel watched as his friend tucked into his salad, wondering how the two of them had hit it off so well when they were completely different. Their lives, their personality, even their age... Balthazar was older, with laughter lines permanently etched around his eyes. They made him look wise and, well, old. Though it wasn't like he and Dean were close in age. He had laughter lines when he laughed, but they took years off him. Or maybe that was his smile... When Dean laughed, you
couldn’t help but laugh with him. He rested his chin in his hand as his gaze dropped to the deep ‘v’ of Balthazar’s neckline, where a silver chain lay over a light spread of hair. Balthazar had a penchant for wearing v-neck shirts, the deeper the better, that clung to his strong, lean frame. Dean, on the other hand, seemed to keep as much of his body hidden as possible - often beneath several layers of clothing. Perhaps it was to disguise the softness around his middle, the softness that Castiel found so becoming.

He closed his eyes and sighed. *Everything* reminded him of Dean.

"Don't tell me you're full?"

Balthazar's voice forced him out of his reverie, and he stabbed a forkful of shrimp salad. "No," he replied, though he was close.

"Trust me, you're going to want to save room for dessert."

Castiel rested his fork on his plate. "First you urge me to eat, then you urge me *not* to eat."

Balthazar grinned a cheeky grin, the lines around his eyes deepening. "I want to make sure you get your money's worth, so to speak. Try *everything*, you know?"

Weighing up how much he had left on his plate versus how much room he had left in his stomach, Castiel decided that he’d had enough salad. Dabbing his mouth with his napkin, he waited for Balthazar to finish so they could start the next course.

* * *

One drink turned into two, and three. He lost count after the room started to spin.

"Hey," Jo said, hopping onto the stool next to Dean. "Mom says you're not looking so hot."

"I always look hot," he protested half-heartedly.

"True," she agreed. A moment passed, before she asked, "Are you okay?"

When was the last time anyone had asked him if he was okay? Sure, Jo and Ellen were nice to him, but at the end of the day he was just another regular. Cas would care, except he was gone now. A choked sob pushed past his lips and he looked away, clearing his throat forcefully because he *wasn’t* going to break down at the bar like a forty-something whose wife had just left him.

"Cas is gone," he mumbled around his fist and damn it, what did he just say?

Jo frowned. "What do you mean ‘gone’?"

"Gone. Left. Moved out," he said.

"Cas left you?" Given the depth of Castiel's feelings for Dean, she wondered what had happened to make him leave. Then she realised it was probably something *Dean* had done.

"Left the apartment," Dean corrected her, thinking that she was probably more right than she knew. "I dunno where that leaves me." Tears blurred his vision as he said, "*Everyone* leaves me."

Jo took a moment, trying to work out what to say next.

Before she even got a chance to respond, Dean nudged his glass, accidentally sending it toppling over on the counter. "Top me up?"
Chewing her bottom lip, she rounded the bar and complied. Dean fell silent and, instead of charging him, she just added the amount to his tab. When Dean got like this, it was easier just to bill him when he’d sobered up. She wet a cloth and started to wipe down the bar so her mother couldn’t complain that she was doing nothing. It was amazing how many glass rings one person could leave on the wooden surface, she mused.

"I miss him," Dean mumbled into his glass, startling her. "'S that weird?"

"No," she assured him. "He's been a big part of your life these past few months. You've seen him every day."

"He used to make me coffee every morning," Dean reminisced fondly with a sad, lopsided smile. "I don't think that he liked how much I... hic... drink."

"Nobody likes how much you drink," she pointed out. "But if we don't serve you here, you'd just go somewhere else - somewhere with nobody to look out for you."

"Cas was always looking out for me. Nagging me to eat more fruit. Putting vegetables in everything. Have you ever had peas and mushrooms in rice? Cas made vegetable rice. It was nice."

Jo mentally face-palmed. If Cas was a girl, would Dean realise how he felt? Eh, probably not, she admitted to herself.

"It was great with this butternut squash curry he made. Real spicy. Not so great the next morning, you know?"

Scowling, she threw her cloth at him.

He stared at it, then waved it in front of her. "Hey, d'you lose a cloth?"

She snatched it back from him as her mother shouted, "Joanna Beth—"

"I'm on my break, Mom!" she called back.

"My ass you are," Ellen grumbled, just loud enough for her to make out over the clamour in the bar.

"I should probably get back to it," she told Dean quietly. Running a hand fondly through his hair, she added, "Don't get too drunk."

"Can't get drunk enough," he slurred with a bitter chuckle.

* * *

Castiel would have to say that his favourite course, though on its own he'd consider it more a snack than a meal, was the goat's cheese. Three pieces of cheese rolled in different coatings - herbs, peppercorns, and dried fruit and nuts - that they spread on chunks of crisp, warm baguette. It was also the first course he'd wished they'd been given more of, other ten courses be damned. Even the sweetness of the millionaire's shortbread, much needed after so many savoury dishes, couldn't beat the deliciousness and simplicity of the cheese course.

As he scanned the cocktail menu for his digestif, their eleventh and - thankfully - final course, Bathazar reached across the table and plucked the menu from his hand.

"I haven't decided yet!"

"I'm ordering for you."
"What happened to, 'whatever takes my fancy'?'"

"That was then. This is now. Do you trust me?" he asked, seeing Castiel's hesitation.

"Fine," Cas conceded. "You may order for me."

"Great." When their waiter reached their table, a wicked grin spread across Balthazar's face. "We'll have two Screaming Orgasms, please. God knows my friend here could use one."

* * *

"You're a wreck," Bobby remarked when he saw Dean slumped over a beer, several other glasses sitting empty in front of him. "Having a midlife crisis?" he joked. His grin faded when Dean remained tight-lipped.

"Don't bother," Ellen told him, moving to clear his empties and ignoring Dean's protests to leave them where they were. "He's been like this all week."

"It's not November," she pointed out in hushed tones when she thought she was out of earshot. "So what's wrong with him?"

"Ain't got a clue," Bobby told her. "But he'd sure as hell better snap out of it before he comes back to work."

Dean slammed his glass down so hard it shattered.

Jo and Ellen stared at him, frozen to the spot in shock.

Even Dean seemed to have shocked himself with his rage, for he stared at the glass shards for a long moment before speaking. "You're not my mother," he snapped at her. "So don't worry about whatever's wrong with me!" He turned to Bobby. "And you're not my father!"

Ellen's expression grew cold, but her eyes betrayed her pain at his words.

Bobby's face hardened. "Maybe if I was your daddy, I'd teach you to show Ellen a bit of respect," he replied gruffly. "You take all your crap out on the people that care about your sorry ass, then wonder why you haven't got anybody! Get yourself together, boy!"

Dean clenched his jaw and cast a dirty glare in Bobby's direction. Deep down he knew there was some truth in the old man's words - his 'crap' as Bobby put it had cost him Sam, Lisa and Ben, and now Cas - but right now he didn't want to hear any of it. "I'm out of here," he growled.

"Where—?"

"Somewhere that I'm not going to get hounded by people who think they know me!" he yelled, cutting Jo off before turning on his heel and storming out.
Chapter 38

Dean slowly drifted into consciousness, gradually becoming aware that he was not on his bed. The mattress beneath him was thin, and the bunk hard. Blinking several times, he willed the pounding in his head to subside. As the plain ceiling above him slowly came into focus, he wondered just how everything had gotten so fucked up.

"I'm good," he told himself, wiping a hand down his face. "I'm good."

"From what I've seen, you're far from good," a familiar female voice told him.

He rolled his head to the side and peered at Sheriff Mills standing in front of him.

"We meet again," she said loudly.

He groaned.

"Really?" she asked. "Drinking? Again?"

Dean tried to recall what had happened the night before. He remembered storming out of the Roadhouse, drinking, and playing pool - he won himself a pretty nice watch off some stuck-up student.

"Did I crash?" he groaned. He knew prioritising his car over the possibility of him getting a criminal record was ridiculous, but she was all he had.

"No," she told him. "You didn't even get out of the bar."

"You're gonna have to refresh my memory," he told her, gesturing at his head.

"You beat up some kids over a stolen watch! A thirty-three-year-old man! Beating up some college students!"

"Hey, I'm only thirty-two, and I won that watch fair and square!" he exclaimed, immediately regretting raising his voice.

"Well, in exchange for the return of the watch, they were prepared not to make a statement. So you're not facing assault charges."

"Oh, that's lucky," he groaned sarcastically.

Jody sighed. "Bobby Singer insists you're a good kid, but I just don't see it."

Dean glared at her.

"He told me there were 'circumstances' last year, and against my better judgement I listened to him. But from what I'm seeing, it wasn't a one-off."

"A bar fight with someone who won't honour a bet is hardly the same thing," Dean pointed out.

"Except it's not just one fight! This is the second one you've started in as many weeks - that I know of! It was one thing to defend a friend, but now you're picking a fight with kids half your age—"

"Hey!"
Dean's protest fell on deaf ears. "I gave you a free pass on the drink driving charge, which could have cost me my job. Two fights, two strikes. Third strike, you're out. You've got one last chance to get your act together, because the next time I'll haul your ass to court personally."

"What the hell for?"

Jody crossed her arms and met his irritated expression with a steely-eyed glare. "If last night's anything to go by, probably disorderly conduct and resisting arrest."

He held her stare for several long moments before finally looking to her left with a huff, feeling like a scolded child.

The next time she spoke, it was with a softer tone. "I see a lot of old drunks waste their lives staring down the length of a bottle - you're too young to turn into one of them. You've got your whole life ahead of you." When Dean said nothing, she let out a defeated sigh. "Shift your butt into gear, Winchester. The sooner you sign the paperwork, the sooner you get out of my sight."

At the click of the key turning in the lock he started moving towards the door, trudging through the doorway as she stepped aside to let him past. He followed her to her office, ready to sign whatever paperwork needed to leave the grey walls of his cell behind and get home.

* * *

Back at his apartment, Dean was eager to satisfy the hunger grumbling in his stomach. He went straight to the fridge and opened the door, eyes scanning the shelves before him. A tub of butter down to the last scrapes that would barely cover one slice of bread, several bottles of beer, and some leftover Chinese takeout. Taking the white box that held the remnants of something with chicken and noodles, he twirled a fork around a couple of times and shoved it into his mouth.

Almost immediately, he spat the food back into the box. Whether it was the leftover taste of alcohol on his breath, or that the food had been sitting in the fridge too long, Dean didn't know - but it tasted worse than ass.

Throwing it out, he poured himself a bowl of cereal. Without fresh milk he had to settle for splashing water over it, and he leaned against the counter as he silenced his stomach. Once his grumbling had subsided, he raised his arm above his head and sniffed his armpit. Pulling a repulsed face, he realised it had been a couple of days since he’d last had a proper shower.

* * *

Jo was accustomed to guys hitting on her. So long as they kept their hands to themselves, she'd flirt and smile for the tips. Rarely there'd be a man she wouldn't mind getting a little handsy with, but it never amounted to much. Most men knew that her mother kept a shotgun under the counter, which on the one hand kept her safe from harassment but, on the other, scared off any legitimate interest.

Dean was different. At first, they'd thought he was just like all the others. However, as they slowly got to know him, they realised that - while he was a flirt and slept around - he had a healthy respect for the women he took home. He was charming, if a little rough around the edges, with a body for sin. For a while she'd let herself fantasise about being one of his women, but then she’d realised he almost never saw the same girl twice and she wanted more than just one night with him. Not that she was looking for a gold band on her finger either – just something with substance. And so she'd let that little fantasy go, and gradually her crush faded with it.

Now she'd almost consider him a friend. Hell, she would consider him a friend. Although he was one
regular among many, she and her mother cared about him. He was hard as nails on the outside, but deep down she thought that his steely exterior protected a kind heart. And right now, she was very worried about him. She knew Dean liked a drink – more than was healthy – but she'd never seriously considered that he might have a problem. But the past few nights it didn't seem like he was drinking in excess for pleasure, but for pain. The amount he was chugging back every night was numbing him from the outside in, and she didn't know what to do to make him ease up.

They hadn't seen him last night so, not that she'd admit to her mother, she'd scoured the newspapers for any reports of accidents. Mercifully she hadn't seen his name or a description of him in the pages and, as her mother nodded towards the door making her look over, relief flooded through her as Dean trudged up to the bar.

"We missed you last night," she smiled, already pouring him a pint.

"Wanted a change of scenery," he muttered.

"But you came back here tonight," she grinned. "Did you miss me?"

He caught her eye as she placed his glass down in front of him, and one corner of his mouth turned upwards as he huffed a sceptical laugh. "Yeah, that's it," he agreed half-heartedly.

"Hey!" another customer shouted angrily, thumping a fist off the bar. "Can we get some drinks over here?"

Dean glared over at the guy, then winked at Jo. "Give 'em hell."

"I can take care of myself," she told him. "You take care of you." Her mother had raised her to be able to stand up for herself. Between her own self defence skills, her mother and her shotgun, and the regulars who were practically family, Jo was pretty sure there was no place in the world she'd be safer than in the Roadhouse.

She made her way round the bar, collecting empty glasses and taking orders. And that was how the night passed – in a blur of empty flirting and drink refilling. As she leant over one table to gather up their empties, a large hand squeezed her ass. The glasses clattered to the table as she bolted upright, grabbing his hand and twisting it behind the guy's back as she bent him over the table.

"Hey, let go of me!" he protested, three times her size but no match for her strength and technique.

"What – you can touch me but I can't touch you?" she asked sarcastically.

"I'm not laughing. Now if I just gave your arm a little twist..." She emphasised her point by applying more pressure, provoking an exclamation of pain from the man. "I'd snap your wrist." She let him go and stepped away. "Now finish your drink and get the hell out."

The guy turned meekly back to his drink, and the regular bikers who had been watching the whole scene unfold gradually resumed their conversations.


"You okay?" Dean asked, as she resumed her position behind the bar.

"You might want to ask him that," she grinned.
"Don't care about him. Care about you."

Jo paused, a fond smile softening her features. "I'm fine," she told him. She nodded at his empty glass, having lost track of how many he'd had. "You want another?"

He sat back, allowing her to take the empty from him and replace it with another full glass.

"Have you spoken to Cas?" she asked.

Dean took another large gulp of his drink. She didn't need to know about the voicemails he'd left on Castiel's phone - calls which had gone unanswered and unreturned. "Nope."

She frowned. "Why not?"

He sniffed. "He doesn't want anything to do with me."

Her mouth fell open. That didn't sound like the Cas she knew. "Did he say that?!"

"Didn't need to."

Mentally she rolled his eyes. Dean was putting words into Castiel's mouth and then using that as an excuse to feel sorry for himself. If only Cas would walk through that door now so that she could bang their heads together...

"He made himself pretty clear when he left. Didn't even bother to say goodbye."

"Dean," she started carefully, "he cares about you. A great deal. Have you stopped to consider - at all - that maybe saying goodbye would be too painful for him?"

His sullen silence gave her his answer.

"You're a fool," she chided him. "A stubborn, old fool."

"Hey, hey!" He shook his glass at her, sloshing its contents over the counter. "I'm not old yet."

"Yes, you are. You just look good for your age." She grabbed a cloth and wiped up his mess. "And it's time you started acting like it."

"Like what?"

"Your age. You're not a young twenty-something any more."

"Meaning what?"

She sighed. "I want to see you happy," she told him seriously. "And I don't think a string of meaningless flings will give you that." As she watched Dean drain yet another glass, she wondered how he'd managed to convince himself that he didn't wear his heart on his sleeve. Disappearing through the back, she whipped her phone out of her pocket as soon as she was out of Dean's sight. It rang and rang and rang for a long moment in her ear, until finally Castiel's gravelly tones greeted her.

"Hey!" she said cheerily. "How you doing?"

"Fine."

She bit her tongue to stop herself from telling him that she knew he'd moved out. She didn't think either of them would appreciate her interference, but someone needed to initiate some damage
control. "So, uh, I gotta ask you something."

"Okay."

"You're not the chattiest of people on the phone, you know that?"

"That's what you called me for?"

"No! I just... Dean's a mess and I need you to come take him home."

There was a long period of silence on the other end.

"Cas?"

"Is... Is he alright?"

Jo sighed. "He's not good, Cas. He hasn't been like this since... Well, since before he met you."

Castiel thought back to when he'd first moved in with Dean, and he'd often stumble into the apartment at ungodly hours only to spend half the night throwing up in the bathroom. "I..." He sighed. "Yes. Alright."

He sounded hesitant, she thought to herself as he hung up, but at least he's coming.

* * *

"Nearly there," Cas told Dean, as the reached the steps of their - Dean's - apartment block. It had taken them almost two hours to walk the forty-five minute journey, with Dean leaning heavily on Castiel's shoulder the whole time.

"Home," Dean mumbled.

"Yes, Dean. You're home."

"Home," Dean repeated instantly, like he was trying to tell Cas something important.

Once they were inside, he half-dragged Dean into the elevator and pressed the button for the third floor. The elevator was small, but felt even more crowded than usual with Dean's body pressed against his own. His hand twitched on Dean's waist, wanting to pull him closer at the same time he knew he should push him away.

It seemed to take an eternity for the elevator to climb the three storeys to Dean's apartment, but eventually there was a ding and the doors opened. Standing outside Dean's front door, Cas battled with the lock while trying to continue holding Dean upright, finally sliding the key home on his fourth try. He didn't know why he hadn't given the damn thing back to Dean when he'd left.

Kicking the door closed behind him, he said, "Let's get you to bed."

"'M not gay," Dean protested automatically.

Castiel clenched his jaw in response to Dean's words, but his next ones caught him by surprise.

"Yours or mine?"

"Yours," he stated gruffly. Why did Dean keep doing this to himself?
"Good. Don't think I'm in no state to make yours up."

Castiel was caught off guard by Dean's comment but, as he tried to dissect any possible meaning behind his words, his thoughts were interrupted by a loud belch in his ear, closely followed by the overpoweringly sweet stench of alcohol that made his stomach turn.

"'M gonna throw up."

Dean's warning gave him just enough time to get him to the toilet. With a sigh, Castiel wet a cloth - his own still hanging next to it, he noticed - and crouched beside his friend. Months had passed since he first moved in, and yet in that moment it felt like no time at all.

Once Castiel finally had Dean stripped to his t-shirt and boxers and into bed, he pulled the covers up to his shoulders. "Good night, Dean," he whispered.

"'Night, Cas," Dean murmured back. "Hey, Cas?"

"Yes, Dean?"

"C'mere."

Cas leant closer, expecting Dean to mutter something to him. But what happened next was the last thing he expected.

Dean kissed him.

He pulled back, seconds later than he should have. But, as he turned to leave, Dean's arm shot out and grabbed his wrist.

"Stay."

Yes. No. I can't. I want to. Words got stuck in Castiel's throat, so he simply pulled his arm out of Dean's grasp and retreated into the hallway, shaking his head as he went. Tears pricked his eyes as he locked up behind him, Balthazar's words in his mind telling him to stay strong. It seemed to have gotten colder in the twenty minutes he'd spent in Dean's apartment, and he shivered.

Pulling out his phone, he opened a new message to Balthazar. Please don't say anything. I am outside Dean's apartment. Can you pick me up?

Within seconds, his phone beeped. On my way.
Chapter 39

Late Saturday morning Dean found himself driving out of town without knowing where he was going - just desperate to get away from interfering people who mostly meant well but he couldn't stand the sight of.

Fine rain seemed to hang in the air like a mist as Dean stared out at the dull bay, a hundred shades of grey and nothing like the last time he'd stood here. With Cas, he remembered bitterly. It had been warm and the sun had shone down on them as they played in the waves.

He had no idea why he'd come here. He'd just wanted to get out of the apartment. Away from the quiet and the emptiness. Maybe his subconscious was trying to tell him that he missed Cas. But he knew that. But, now he was here, he wished he could be anywhere else.

His stomach grumbled, protesting his week's diet of alcohol with a side of grease. There wasn't many places around there to get something to eat, but it was a short walk to the chip shop. Maybe that was why he usually liked going to that little beach - a fish and chip shop was a very British thing, wasn't it? So it felt like getting away. He trudged to a stop in front of the empty shop, reading the notice that read 'closed for the season'.

A seagull squawked loudly at him, cocking its head as it determined whether or not he had any food.

"Fuck off," Dean told the bird.

It stretched its wings but didn't go anywhere.

"Go on!" Dean shouted, making shooing gestures with his hands. "Get out of here!" He grabbed a stone from near his feet and launched it in the bird's direction. "Fucking leave!"

With a forlorn squawk, the bird reluctantly took wing and flew off across the waves.

* * *

Pink, and yellow, and orange, and just about every colour under the sun was being waved in front of Castiel and it was blinding. Flags that he was certain didn't belong to any country, past or present, were waved around proudly, and men and women walked hand-in-hand with the same sex and no-one batted an eye.

"Are all these people..." Castiel trailed off, unsure how to word his question.

"They're not necessarily gay," Balthazar replied. "Most aren't straight, but there'll be a few allies out there."

"Allies?"

"Straight people who don't hate us," he explained.

"Like Dean."

Cas didn't fail to notice the way Balthazar's expression darkened for a moment at the mention of his friend.

"They want us to be treated equally," he continued, "and have the same rights as everybody else."
"Allies," Castiel echoed, as if trying the word out for size. "Why can't everyone be an ally?"

"Because we live in a world that is full of intolerance and hatred," Balthazar said bitterly.

Unfortunately, Balthazar was right. Some people were so quick to show kindness, while others were quick to turn their backs. Dean was quick to show kindness. Quick to accept, and to love... Though not in the way Cas wanted him to.

As he gazed around at the number of people proudly declaring who they were, he realised Balthazar was right. He'd thought it was enough that the people closest to him accepted him, and it was, but this... For the first time he felt truly free of the doubt that always niggled away in the back of his mind, wondering if he really was as normal as everyone else.

Though his emotions felt bittersweet as he wished that Dean could be here to share this with him. Dean had helped him so much, that it almost felt wrong for him not to be here now.

At that moment a drag queen wrapped a feather boa around his neck and kissed him on the cheek, before continuing down the sidewalk.

A tissue appeared in front of his face. "You've got lipstick on your cheek."

Cas took the tissue from Balthazar and rubbed frantically at his face.

"Better," Balthazar nodded.

Cas unwrapped the boa from his neck, for it it was scratching his skin and tickling his ear. "Swap?" he joking asked Balthazar. He wasn't actually surprised when Balthazar agreed, draping the boa gloriously over his shoulders and and shoving his flag into Cas's hand.

They turned his attention back to the parade, the winter sun filtering through the clouds to shine down on the revellers like a holy light.

* * *

Dean had been doing his best to avoid his apartment all week, however subconsciously, but sitting in it on Saturday slowly began to drive him mad. There was a half-eaten microwave burger on the table in front of him, and he couldn't remember if it was left over from Thursday or Friday. Either way he was pretty sure he hadn't eaten anything all day, but the latest in a long line of whiskey bottles he was cradling between his legs was causing the days to blur into one another. He hadn't shaved in a few days, either, so his usual stubble had almost become a thin beard.

Just four weeks ago Dean had remarked that it had been a long time since four walls had felt like home, but now they felt foreign and unfamiliar. If a drunk man's words are a sober man's thoughts, then Dean was very drunk right now. "Maybe it wasn't here that felt like home," he said aloud. "Maybe it was you."

Blinking, he wondered how it had gotten dark so quickly. When he'd gotten home from the beach the sun was still high in the sky, but it was now early evening.

When a car backfired outside, it seemed to jolt him out of whatever reverie he'd gotten lost in, and he reached to pick up the television remote. It took him more than a few attempts to press the right button to bring the television on and, when the screen did finally come to life, he found himself watching the familiar scene of an alien bursting out of John Hurt's chest.

He laughed bitterly as he remembered the way Cas had grabbed his arm at that point, never taking
his eyes off the screen as if afraid the chestburster would burst its way out of the television set. The ghost of Cas' touch lingered on his arm even now.

Although he knew he was imagining it, he heard himself talk to Cas as if he was there anyway. "Tell me all about how the alien's symbolic of rapey shit," he asked, his voice hoarse from not being used all day. He couldn't remember exactly what he'd speculated, but could still hear the words 'homosexual penetration' in Castiel's gravelly voice. "You know, I never told you," he told the empty room, "but the alien's mouth is made from shredded condoms. I'm sure I read that somewhere."

The memory of Castiel's hand on his arm seemed to squeeze tighter and, when he glanced down to prove to himself that he was imagining the touch, he was surprised to see his own hand clenching his arm.

At first it was like his hand had a mind of its own, refusing to relax its grip on his arm, but eventually he persuaded it to let go and he picked up the remote to turn the TV off instead. As silence engulfed him once again, so did the painful reminder that he was alone.

Without realising what he was doing, he raised his arm and threw the remote across the room. It hit the wall and the back flew off, letting the batteries fall to the floor. Piece of shit, he thought, getting to his feet to retrieve it. But that small act of violence was almost cathartic, so instead he picked up his plate and threw it, too. It smashed into several pieces, the burger landing on the floor with a flop, leaving a streak of red sauce on the wall. An empty bottle of beer, a newspaper, and some tacky glass ornament of a bee that Cas had picked up at some charity shop followed suit. The bottle broke, the newspaper pages fluttered to the floor before they'd even gotten two feet away from him, and the damn ornament shattered into so many pieces that he'd still be picking them out of the carpet come his next birthday. He kept throwing things, not caring when they broke. He took solace in the sound of things shattering, drowning out the silence, until he picked up Castiel's Bible - the one Dean had bought for him at the beach. It felt heavy in his hand. Staring at its worn brown cover, gold debossed lettering faded and scuffed, he wondered why Cas had left it behind. Maybe Cas hadn't wanted the reminder of Dean. Maybe he'd simply forgotten it. Or maybe he'd wanted Dean to have something of his.

At the thought of Cas leaving his Bible behind as a final goodbye, Dean's knees gave way. Sinking to the floor, he clutched the book to his chest even though he didn't believe a word written on its pages, and cried.

* * *

Dean drummed his fingers impatiently against the wheel as he waited for the congregation to leave. He needed to see Cas, needed to speak to him. When he'd woken up that morning, he'd realised that his self-destructive behaviour had to stop. He couldn't keep living like this. He needed to accept that he wanted Cas, that he liked Cas, even though his feelings felt alien to him. He didn't have a clue what to say; just hoped that, when the time came, the right words would come to him. Finally the doors opened and people started to leave. Dean scanned the crowd for Cas's trench coat but he couldn't see it anywhere. As the leavers trickled off, Dean's heart sank. He knew where Balthazar stayed, but he didn't think Balthazar would let him anywhere near Cas if he went round.

Just as he was about to give up and go home, Cas appeared in the doorway of the church talking to Father Reynolds. They stood there for a few minutes, Dean subconsciously holding his breath until Castiel made his way down the stone steps. He didn't see the car - wasn't looking for it - but when Dean got out and the car door slammed shut, he glanced over.

Cas stopped where he was and stared. Though clearly surprised to see Dean, he also looked relieved,
or happy.

Despite the conflicting emotions raging inside Dean's heart at that moment - guilt, joy, sadness, relief - it was like he could breathe again for the first time that week.

They stood staring at each other for a long moment, before Cas made his way over to Dean.

"Hello, Dean."

Dean held the Bible out to him. "You left this behind."

"Thank you," Cas said softly. "I left in a hurry."

He reached to take the book from Dean, but Dean's grip tightened and he didn't let it go. They stood there, each holding onto the book, looking at each other like they'd been apart for months rather than days.

"I can't lose you," Dean blurted out.

"You're not going to lose me, Dean. I will always be your friend. I just... can't live with you."

"Why not?" Dean knew it wasn't a fair question to ask as soon as the words left his mouth, but he couldn't take them back.

Castiel's expression hardened with resolution. "You have to decide what it is you want. I can't just keep waiting and hoping." *Balthazar would be proud of him.* "It's not fair on me, Dean. If you can't figure out what you want - if *I'm* what you want - then you need to give me the space to move on."

"What if I don't want you to move on?" Dean growled, Cas's words giving him a kick up the butt and forcing him to be honest.

"Dean—"

"I don't know what this is, but I can't figure it out if you're not here!"

Cas stared at him, lost for words as he tried to process Dean's admission that there was something between them.

"Cas, please. We're family," he pleaded brokenly. "I need you. I can do this." No. He couldn't. Not alone. "We can do this."

Cas faltered.

"I miss you," he admitted softly.

Castiel looked at Dean, with his flat, unstyled hair and neglected scruff that was becoming a beard. He'd never seen Dean look so lost, so broken. Tentatively, he reached a hand out and cupped Dean's face. His beard was rough on his hand, but not unpleasantly so. He stroked Dean's cheek with his thumb, and Dean seemed to melt into the tenderness of his touch.

Cas's shoulders sagged. He knew, then, that he'd do anything Dean asked. Was the ability to love really a strength, when it made him so weak? "I miss you, too."

A small, hopeful smile dared to tug the corners of Dean's mouth upwards, and his hands slipped from the book. "Yeah?"
The relief in Dean's tone was obvious, and Castiel gripped the Bible tighter to keep himself grounded in reality. "You're sure that this is what you want? That I'm what you want?" Castiel pressed, needing to know that, this time, Dean wasn't going to walk away.

Dean took a breath to steady his nerves. This was it - the point of no return. "Yeah," he said, his voice shaking slightly. "And I'm not gonna lie - it scares the shit out of me."

"Why?" Castiel asked, eyes narrowed. "Because I'm a man?"

"No. Well, yeah. People are gonna..." Dean swallowed. He told Cas not to care what people thought, so he should try to follow his own advice. "I'm not good for you, Cas. I'm not good for anyone."

Cas shook his head. "Don't say that."

"It's true!" Dean laughed hollowly. "I've fucked up every relationship I've ever had - Lisa, Ben, Sam, you."

"But you're fixing those," Castiel reminded him. "Sam still wants to be a part of your life. You're communicating with Ben." He licked his lips. "I'm still here."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. But for how long? a voice in his head asked. "But I don't know what we do next," he finished helplessly.

They stared at each other for a long moment, the only sound that of cars passing by. It felt like an eternity to Dean as he waited for Cas to do something; say something.

Then Cas slowly slipped one hand into Dean's, his expression soft and hopeful. "We don't have to do anything," he assured him. "Not yet."

Dean looked down at their linked hands, Castiel's thumb rubbing soothingly across the back of his. It was wrong. It was all so wrong. And yet, on some level - though it scared him to admit it - it felt kind of right.

A short, chaste kiss pressed against the corner of his mouth, and then Castiel hesitantly asked, "Was that okay?"

"I... Yeah, I guess... Yeah," Dean stuttered, feeling like he was back in high school and kissing his first crush all over again. She'd been a couple of years older than him, and they'd made out in the music rooms a few times under the guise of guitar lessons. If someone had told him then that he would one day have similar feelings for a guy, he'd probably have punched them. But then came Castiel, who was looking at him with such joy and hope in his eyes that Dean felt like he was drowning. He felt like he should say something more but he'd never been good with words, so he pulled Cas into a hug and squeezed him with everything he had. "Come home," he whispered into Cas' shoulder.

For a long moment, Cas didn't move. Then he raised his arms and clung to the back of Dean's jacket. "Okay."

Dean let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding as relief washed over him. Neither of them moved for what seemed like a long time.

"Dean?" Cas asked after another minute.

"Hmm?"
"As nice as this is, it's getting cold and I'm a little hungry."

Dean laughed. He'd been too busy freaking out about seeing Cas to think about food up until that point but, now that he thought about it, he was hungry too.

"Me, too," he grinned. Then his face fell. "But, uh, there's not much to eat at home."

"Then let's go out."

Dean shook his head. "I sort of don't have any money."

Cas frowned. "Didn't we get paid last Friday?"

"Yeah. I kind of, uh, lost it."

Castiel's eyes narrowed it.

"I had a damn good poker hand, okay!" he snapped defensively.

"Clearly not good enough," Castiel said, half teasing and half scolding.

"Yeah, okay, I don't need you to kick me when I'm down. I've beat myself up over it enough already." Fishing the keys out of his pocket, Dean walked over to the open car door and stopped. Castiel paused as he opened the passenger door and looked across the top of the car at Dean.

"What?" he asked warily. He caught what was thrown at him without thinking, and looked to see the Impala's keys in his hand and Dean walking around the front of the car. "Are you..." he trailed off.

Dean took the bag from him. "Scared? Yeah."

"I was going to say sure," Cas said.

"That too."

"I haven't got my permit yet," he said, trying to give Dean back the keys.

"I won't tell if you don't. But you hurt my baby, I hurt you," Dean warned, only half joking, as Castiel nervously made his way over to the driver's side.

"Don't worry, Dean – I'll look after her," Castiel promised as he slid into the driver's seat.

"You'd better."

Dean gave him a quick rundown of the basics he'd need to use to get them home, and while Castiel wasn't a natural behind the wheel he wasn't as bad as Dean feared he could have been; however it didn't change the fact that Dean was still really tense by the time Castiel stopped in front of Dean's apartment building.

He turned to Castiel, trying to hide his relief that his baby - and they - had survived intact.

"That was really brave, Dean," Castiel said seriously. "I'm proud of you."

"I don't know about brave—"

"Letting someone else drives scares you, yet you relinquished control of her to me."

Dean couldn't help but smile at Cas referring to the Impala as 'her'. "Yeah, well, don't go expecting
any full lessons just yet," he said, brushing off Castiel's praise.

"I'll get my permit first," Cas stated. "But perhaps you could help me learn everything I need to know?"

"And I thought I left homework behind after I graduated," Dean quipped. "Alright, get out and I'll park up properly."

* * *

Though he'd only been minutes behind Cas, his friend was already in deep conversation on his phone when Dean got into the apartment.

"Balthazar, why are you being so stubborn? ... Those are my belongings, you can't hold them hostage just because you disagree with my life choices! ... Ugh!"

Cas flopped dejectedly onto the sofa, slapping his phone onto the empty cushion to his right.

"Everything okay?"

"Balthazar gave me his spare key, but I didn't take it with me when I left this morning because I knew he'd still be at home when I got back. I asked him if he'd drop my stuff off but he's refusing."

"Why?" Dean asked, feeling like he already knew the answer.

There was a pause before Cas replied. "He doesn't like that I've gone back to you."

Dean crossed over to the back of the sofa and started to rub Castiel's shoulders. He used to do it for Lisa when she got frustrated with bills or work or Ben, and Dean felt pretty guilty at being the cause of Castiel's frustration with his friend. "Well, you can always borrow some stuff from me tomorrow," Dean suggested. "And I could give him a kick up the ass if you'd like?"

Castiel let out a reluctant chuckle. "I don't think he needs another reason to dislike you."

* * *

While they waited for the lunch to cook Dean was channel hopping, unable to find something that could hold his attention for longer than twenty seconds. Cas had curled up beside him to do a crossword, his head resting on Dean's shoulder.

After he'd done a full cycle of the channels and ended up back where he'd started, Dean switched the TV off. He looked aimlessly round the room, noticing the chipped paint on the bottom of the door for the first time. He looked at Cas, whose brow was furrowed so deep in concentration that Dean doubted he'd notice if he did a naked lap of the living room. He quickly pushed that thought out of his mind and looked around the room again. The bare walls that had never bothered him in the past suddenly felt empty. Maybe he could get something to hang there? Like some movie posters, or something?

The sound of a pencil scratching on the paper brought his attention back to Cas. He licked his lips. His fingers twitched, and then he moved his hand a few inches over to rest on Cas's knee. Even though Cas didn't move, Dean could feel the shift in his attention. For a second he contemplated taking it back, but then Castiel shifted and slipped his arm through Dean's before continuing to stare at the book.

"Do you know what a 'dilapidated car' is?" Castiel asked quietly. "It has six letters."
Dean tapped his fingers on his thigh, counting out the letters in the first word that came to mind. "You mean a jalopy?"

Beside him, Castiel grinned. "That'll be it."

A month ago Dean might have found it this a little weird, but right now it was kind of comfortable. Cas was happy, he was happy, and he didn't have to do anything - Cas was just happy for them to be together.

Oh, shit. They were, weren't they? Together? Like, together together? Isn't that what they'd just agreed?

In the space of five second Dean had gone from being strangely comfortable to highly uncomfortable.

What did it mean for him? He'd meant what he said to Cas outside the church - that he didn't know what they did next. Cas had said that they didn't have to do anything yet, but what happened when he did? What happened if - and undoubtedly when - he wanted to—

"Whatever you're thinking about, stop it," Castiel's quiet voice interrupted his train of thought.

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Yes, you do. You suddenly went tense and now you've got this look of panic on your face."

"I wasn't... I just—"

"Stop it," Castiel repeated. "You're fine. I'm fine. We're good."

Dean said nothing.

"You don't have to complicate this."

"It's already complicated, Cas."

"Not if we don't want it to be."

"But what if—"

The sound of the oven timer cut him off.

"I'm not having this conversation with you," Castiel told him firmly, slipping the pencil into his book to mark his place and standing up. "Not now, at least."

They ate their lunch in relative silence; some frozen chicken in a sauce thing that they'd bought at the supermarket a couple of weeks ago, with some potatoes that Cas had managed to salvage from a bag that was starting to sprout. He made awkward small talk about things he did with Balthazar while they ate, and afterwards they washed up without speaking. Like a well-oiled machine, one washed and one dried. The silence hung heavily around them, until the last piece of cutlery was put away and Castiel drained the water out of the sink.

"Did you mean what you said?" he asked.

"When?"

"At the church."
Betrayal flashed across Dean's face. "Of course I did!"

Cas nodded. "In that case," he asked, a little hesitantly, "may I kiss you?"

Dean swallowed. It wasn't like they hadn't kissed before. But this time was different. This time they would both know it was coming and neither of them were going to be able to pretend it meant nothing. Not trusting himself to speak, he simply nodded.

Slowly Cas cupped Dean's face in his hands, thumbs brushing across the thick stubble that shaded his jaw. He took in Dean's eyes, unsure but unafraid, and the dusting of freckles across his cheeks and nose. "I want you," he said simply, pressing chaste kisses to Dean's lips until they parted. That was when he pulled back, and Dean's forehead dropped to rest against his own. Small steps, for both their sakes.

For a long moment they just stood there, Dean's breath warm on Cas's mouth, before he spoke. "You've got to understand that this is going to be weird for me, Cas. I've never been into a dude before."

"It doesn't have to be weird," Cas told him. "We can put a movie on and watch it and go to bed and nothing needs to change."

Except, Dean avoided pointing out, everything had changed.
When Castiel woke up the next morning, he fell into his usual routine - putting the coffee pot on, trudging to the toilet, and brushing his teeth - until memories of the day before came rushing back to him.

He was with Dean. He was with Dean. He felt like he was burning up from the inside out at the thought, but he worried at his lip when he started to wonder what Dean would say now the sun had risen.

It didn't take long for the padding of bare feet trudging up the hall to force Cas out of his thoughts. He turned to stare at the doorway, waiting for Dean to appear. A few moments later, his friend stepped into the room running a hand through his hair, a yawn escaping from his lips. Castiel would never get over how the butterflies in his stomach did a little dance at the sight of Dean's tousled hair before he'd run a comb through it, and the way his eyes looked softer in the morning.

Their eyes met briefly before Dean averted his gaze. "Morning," he murmured.

"Good morning, Dean," Cas replied, a hint of hope in his voice; hope that things wouldn't be awkward between them.

Sadly, that hope was dashed when the silence that followed dragged on a little too long.

He tried to catch Dean's gaze, but those green eyes were darting everywhere apart from Cas' direction. Finally the sound of Dean clearing his throat cut through the silence, and Cas let out a breath he hadn't realised he'd been holding.

"I'm gonna get some coffee," Dean announced, gesturing towards the coffee pot. Glancing away from Dean, Castiel simply nodded.

Castiel carefully shook some cereal into a bowl and poured a meagre splash of milk over the dry flakes while he watched Dean work the coffee machine like it was something that needed great levels of concentration; like it wasn't something he did every morning. He seemed heavily focused on ignoring Cas' presence as he stared intensely at the machine, pushing the buttons forcefully.

Suffocating in the awkward and uncomfortable atmosphere, Castiel reached out hesitantly and laid a hand gently on Dean's arm, letting out a soft, "Dean."

Only the sound of the coffee machine whirring answered him. He could see the muscles in Dean's jaw clenching as he stared down at the hand on his arm as if it were the hand of a ghost. His heart pounded in his ears as he pondered what this meant. Was he moving too fast? He didn't think so, though he had no past experience to fall back on. But then this was different to anything Dean had had before, so...

When Cas leaned closer, pressing his lips against his cheek, Dean stiffened. Closing his eyes, he reminded himself that this was supposed to be okay now; that he could do this. Relaxing slightly, he found himself noticing the scratch of Castiel's stubble against his cheek. It felt alien and weird and he wasn't sure if he liked it.

"It doesn't feel like a week since we were last at work," Cas commented, wishing that they could just spend the day at home together.

"No, it doesn't," Dean agreed. "But maybe that's because you weren't here," he pointed out, reaching
out to touch Cas's arm.

The touch didn't last long, but it was enough to quell Castiel's insecurities. For now, at least. He had faith that Dean would be able to trust his own feelings, in time.

"Do you want to do something tonight?" Cas asked. "Go out, get a drink..." He trailed off, wondering if it might make Dean uncomfortable if he made it sound too much like a date. "Or we could stay in? Whatever you decide," he shrugged, moving back to his cereal. "I'm happy just to be with you."

This whole being with a guy thing was going to be a whole lot easier if Castiel kept acting like a chick, Dean thought to himself with a bemused chuckle. "We could finish that movie we never got to the end of the other night?" he suggested. He rubbed his neck as he realised that it wasn't exactly a couple-y thing to do. He'd watched films with Lisa before, but this was different. This was Cas. They spent a lot of time watching movies. Too much time, if he was being honest. But then there wasn't really much else to do.

"We could," Castiel agreed, cutting off his train of thought. "Although the premise of the film is absurd, I'd like to know if the hero gets his face back."

For a moment, Dean tried to picture Cas with another dude's face. What would that be like? Would that still make him Cas? Logically Dean knew that of course he'd still be Cas even with a different face, but he was forced to admit that it would change things. He was rather fond of Castiel's appearance, truth be told. If he suddenly had blonde hair and brown eyes - even if he was still the weird, dorky guy he'd brought home - he wouldn't be his Cas. Cas had dark hair that stuck up at odd angles and blue eyes that felt like they were staring right into his soul. His brain seemed to stall as he realised Cas was his type. Dark hair. Blue eyes. Holy shit. Admittedly not all of the people he'd been with had those exact characteristics - Lisa and Cassie to name but two - but, typically, most of his hook-ups did. Like the dancer he'd hired a couple of months back—

"Are you going to stare at your coffee until it goes cold?" Cas asked carefully as he rinsed out his now empty cereal bowl.

Jeez, how long had he been standing there, lost in thought? "I... Uh..."

"I'm going to go shower," Cas told him, momentarily resting a hand on his shoulder before he left the room.

Closing the bathroom door behind himself, Cas let out a slow breath. He felt like he was walking on thin ice with Dean and he didn't want to push too far too fast. Not when they'd come so far. He knew what it was like to feel lost when your life suddenly changed direction.

He reached into the shower and turned the dial almost all the way up. As he stripped down, he thought back to when he'd first decided he was staying. For the first few weeks, at least, he'd never taken a shower that was anything more than lukewarm. Hot water had seemed like a luxury to him after so long cleaning himself with cold tap water in public restrooms, but as the months passed he'd started turning the dial closer and closer to the little red dot. Now he loved taking a hot shower or bath, like the one Dean had run for him on his first night in the apartment.

A soft sigh left his lips. Dean had looked so uncomfortable when he'd touched him; when he'd kissed his cheek. As he stepped into the shower, he wondered if Dean would ever—

He screeched as icy water hit his skin, jumping back so quickly he slipped and almost lost his balance. Gasping in shock, he fumbled with the knob as he sought desperately to stop the cascade of
cold water. Well, that was certainly one way to wake himself up!

He rubbed a hand over his face as he stood, naked and shivering, heart still pounding from the shock of the cold.

Heavy footsteps thundered down the hall, then Dean was banging on the door and yelling his name gruffly. "Cas? Dude, what's wrong?"

"Nothing," Cas snapped, embarrassed about making such a scene over a bit of cold water.

"You screamed like a girl," Dean teased from the other side of the door.

Cas frowned. "I did not scream like a girl."

"You did. You screamed like a girl," Dean repeated, sounding like he was grinning. "Everything okay in there?"

"Fine," Cas told him.

There was a moment of silence outside the door before Dean murmured, "Look, I'm coming in."

Castiel's eyes instantly widened and he scrambled out of the shower, internally cursing Dean for the lack of a shower curtain. "No, don't! Dean, don't. Dean!" He reached for the towel but it slipped out of his hands just as the door swung open.

The moment Dean laid eyes on Cas, he realised that he was naked. Of course he'd be naked, he was taking a shower! What was he thinking?! His traitorous eyes did a quick subconscious sweep of Castiel's body, catching a brief glimpse of far too much before Dean forced himself to turn around, face now burning. "Dude!" he exclaimed, as if it was Cas's fault that Dean had seen him naked.

Cas reached down, grabbing the towel again and wrapping it around his waist. "You're the one who barged in!" he accused. Dean had been putting off installing a new lock on the door since the first time he'd barged in on Cas, under entirely different circumstances. "We really need to fix the lock on that door," he complained, before getting tired of talking to Dean's back. "You can turn around now," he told him, speaking more softly this time.

"Why'd you scream?" Dean asked as he turned around, suddenly remembering why he'd barged in on Castiel in the first place. He tried not to think about the fact that Castiel was naked and dripping wet.

"The water was cold," Cas sighed, arms folded across his chest as he shivered a little.

Dean gave him a look, one eyebrow raised. "Is that all?"

"Dean, it was freezing."

Sighing, Dean leaned past him to turn the knob. Castiel just stood there, not moving out of Dean's way, with no sense of Dean's personal space. He was almost pressed right up against him as he adjusted the temperature dial. He hoped Cas couldn't feel his heartbeat hammering in his chest right now.

"It just caught me by surprise," Cas continued. "You didn't have to come barging in on me."

"You scream, I come running. Son of a bitch," Dean grumbled as he checked the water with his hand.
"What?"

"The water heater's gone again." Dean stepped back from Cas, eyes flicking down, tongue darting out to wet his suddenly dry lips.

Noticing the way Dean's eyes slid over his body, Castiel straightened slightly. He could feel himself getting aroused under Dean's gaze so, in what he hoped was a subtle movement, he moved a hand in an attempt to hide the growing tent in his towel.

Dean smirked a little as Castiel's shoulders and chest flushed at his attention, then cleared his throat and turned to leave. "I'll try and fix it this afternoon. We'll just have to boil some water and get washed in the sink for now." He went to leave, but turned back when Cas called his name. "Yeah?"

"Shouldn't it be the building manager's responsibility to arrange repairs, instead of you?"

"Well, technically, yeah, but you want it to get fixed some time this month, right? Time gets away from Mr Shurley. That was a mistake I only needed to make once, before I learned to just deal with stuff myself." He was lucky that none of his unauthorised repairs had caused any problems, but Mr Shurley didn't seem to pay any attention to his tenants. In fact, as he thought about it, he realised that Mr Shurley was pretty useless. Cas had been living with him for months, and the guy hadn't bothered to remind Dean that his lease agreement was only for one tenant. Maybe he should do something about that...

He cleared his throat. "Anyway, I'll leave you to, uh..."

"I need to boil some water," Cas reminded him.

"Yeah."

They stared at each other for a long moment, neither moving.

"Right, well I'll just..." Dean trailed off as he backed awkwardly out of the room, hitting his shoulder on the doorframe on his way out.

So much for things not having to be weird, Cas thought to himself.

---

"We got that internet thingy set up last week," Bobby told him after lunch. "So you can do whatever it is that you're going to do with it. But before you get stuck into that, I've got a job for you.

Slightly confused, Castiel followed him round the side of the building where he saw Andy scrubbing at the wall.

"Some kids decided to spray graffiti last night, and if I catch them there'll be hell to pay. Andy, Cas'll take over. You get back in the garage."

"Aye-aye, boss!" Andy grinned, offering a mocking salute to Bobby's retreating back. "Ugh, my arms are killing me."

"Has this happened before?" Cas asked, taking the sponge from Andy.

"Yeah. Not to us, but others in the neighbourhood. Graffiti, broken windows. It's escalating, though - another gang's moved in, so now they're fighting over whose turf this is."

"That's absurd."

"Oh, I know," Andy agreed. "It's just kids with nothing better to do. Vandalism's just inconvenient,
but how long before these kids start fighting and carrying guns?"

Castiel squeezed the sponge as his stomach turned at the thought of kids shooting at each other, water splashing across his feet.

"Anyway, good luck trying to get this off. I've been at it for over an hour, and it hasn't even faded."

As Andy walked back over to the workshop, Castiel lightly sniffed the bucket of water he'd been using. It smelled faintly of soap. Surely there had to be something stronger that could rid the garage of the graffiti?

He'd look it up in online.

Walking back towards the office, he glanced over his shoulder at the offending artwork.

*Leviathan.*

It sounded ominous.

As he waited for the computer to boot up, he looked through the bucket of cleaning materials that was kept in the cupboard. It was mainly a variety of cloths and sponges, polishes, and glass cleaners. Entering his password, he clicked on the Internet Explorer icon and stared in horror as around thirty toolbars loaded. At a glance most of them were search bars, but there were some for smilies and cursors and screensavers.

Shaking his head, Castiel ignored them all for now and searched *how to remove graffiti.* Clicking on the first link for a brick wall, he took a note of the recommended graffiti remover as Dean came in.

"Have you got that wall clean already?"

"No. I don't think soap is going to get it off," Cas told him, leaning in to give him a peck on the cheek.

Dean yelped and practically jumped away from him. "What are you doing?"

"Well, I was..." Castiel trailed off and clenched his jaw at the realisation that Dean wanted to keep their relationship *secret.* "Nothing."

"Look, just not *here,* okay?" Dean whispered, glancing out into the yard like someone out of a bad spy movie.

"My apologies," Cas murmured, trying to ignore the tightening in his chest as he stepped away.

"Cas—"

Castiel opened the petty cash tin. "I need to go to the hardware store. I'll ask Bobby if he needs me to get anything."

****

A little over an hour later, Cas was blasting the wall with a powerhose. The graffiti remover he'd picked up seemed to have done the trick. Although it was still visible, it was noticeably fainter. Hopefully after a second application it would be gone.

"Looks good," Bobby said, coming up behind him.
"I know," Cas agreed. "But I don't understand why anyone would do this in the first place."

"'Cause they're idjits," Bobby told him gruffly. "Are you going to be much longer?"

"I'll put another application of this on the paint and head back into the office again while it gets to work," Cas told him. "Unless you needed me for something else?"

"No, no. I'll see you in there."

Wondering if he'd done something wrong, Castiel hurriedly applied the graffiti remover and headed back to the office.

"So that's all the stuff from last week," Bobby told him, pointing to a pile of paperwork on top of the filing cabinets. "I didn't want to mess up any system you had going on."

"I thought the 'in' and 'out' trays would have made it obvious," he said lightly. When Bobby didn't say anything, he looked more seriously at his boss. "Have I done something wrong?"

"What? No," Bobby scratched at his beard. "I don't like butting in where I'm not wanted, but... Dean seemed kind of off last week."

From what Castiel had seen, 'off' was an understatement. He'd been a completely different person.

"Is everything okay with him?"

Cas thought carefully before answering. As much as he believed Bobby would be supportive, he had to respect Dean's desire to keep their relationship private - something that Cas hoped would not be for long. "Dean and I, we had a... misunderstanding," he settled for. Which was somewhat close to the truth, in a roundabout way.

"Must've been serious."

"He thought it was," Cas said. He really didn't like lying to Bobby like this.

"Well he seems in a better mood today, so I take it you sorted things out?"

"Oh, yes," Cas replied, a little too enthusiastically now that he could tell the truth. Bobby nodded. "Good. Because I don't want everyone getting caught in the middle of your domestic dramas."

"Of course not."

"Hmph. Well, get on with it, then."

Cas sat down at the desk, ignoring the paperwork for now and setting about uninstalling the hundreds of toolbars Bobby - he assumed - must have unknowingly installed. He was pretty sure that when Charlie showed him how to update the website she'd freak out over them.

* * *

That night, as Castiel defrosted some mince from the freezer for their dinner, Dean phoned Sam.

"How's things?"

"Things are good," Sam replied. "But experience tells me they won't be good for you."
"No," Dean admitted.

"Save your breath, Dean. Jess and I have talked about this. The answer's no."

"We don't get paid for another three weeks!"

"Then maybe you shouldn't have blown your wages so quickly! What was it this time - drinking, gambling, or women?"

Dean bristled. "I don't need to pay for sex!" he growled, warmth spreading across the back of his neck as he wondered what Sam would say about his recent lack of female companionship.

"Dean, you drink too much. You gamble when you can't afford to lose!" Sam paused, taking a moment before he lost it at his brother. "I know that Dad put a lot of responsibility onto you when we were growing up, and he shouldn't have done that, but that doesn't mean you get to waive your responsibilities now. I can't keep bailing you out if you never learn from your mistakes."

"Sam, we need to eat."

"You can't depend on me for the rest of your life. What happens if Jess and I start a family, and I can't afford to help you out any more?"

Dean glowered at the wall, knowing his brother was right but knowing it didn't help his current predicament. "I'd had a shitty week, okay? I was drunk!"

"That's no excuse! Grow up, accept responsibility for—"

"I gave up my whole freaking childhood for you!" Dean yelled, anger and bitter and jealous that he'd given up everything and gotten nothing in return. "Don't talk to me about growing up!" Sam had the job, and the house, and the girl, while Dean had a borderline drinking problem a shitty little apartment that wasn't big enough for two.

On the other end of the phone, Sam sighed. "I'm not going to argue with you, Dean. I've never denied how much you've done for me. Goodbye."

Dean stomped through to the kitchen and grabbed a bottle of beer from the fridge.

"We'll manage," Cas told him having heard Dean's side of the conversation, wrapping his arms around his waist. "We always do."

Dean took another sullen gulp of his drink.

"There's food in the freezer, which will do us a week or so. We're not going to starve."

"Not until next week," Dean said bitterly.

"Hey," Cas soothed, stroking a hand through his hair. "We'll be fine."

"Some of the stuff Sam said..."

"I'm sure neither of you meant anything you said in anger," Cas assured him diplomatically. "Why don't you go shower, and dinner will be ready by the time you're out?"

As Dean did as he was asked, he wondered how it was that Cas always had a way of making him feel better. Whenever he let things get on top of him, Cas was always there to remind him that it would get better - and he did it in a way that wasn't patronising. They wouldn't starve. They
probably *could* stretch things to last them another week, but it wouldn't be enough.

* * *

Once they'd eaten, they sat their dishes on the table as they waited for the movie to end, a good several inches of space between them.

Castiel thought back to how they usually watched movies close together, where he could enjoy the warmth of Dean's body beside his. Slowly he inched closer, closing the space between them until he could rest his head on Dean's shoulder.

Dean never took his eyes off the screen.

He wanted this to be easy; wanted to be able to do what felt natural without second-guessing himself. As the characters drew their guns on each other yet again Castiel tilted his chin up to look at Dean, who was too busy watching the film to notice. Dean's pulse was twitching in his neck, and Castiel longed to press his lips against it. Mentally he berated himself. It was *Dean* who'd made the call to move beyond friendship, so why should he hold himself back? Especially when there was no-one around to see. He kissed Dean's neck, stubble scratched his lips, and he hummed contentedly.

"You're not watching - this is the best part," Dean objected, a little breathily because that was a sensitive spot; being touched there - whether it was fingers, lips, or tongue - always got him a little flustered.

Castiel rolled his eyes because Dean had said that at least five times throughout the movie, and he had a feeling he'd say it at least twice more before the credits rolled.

Castiel's weight was comfortable pressed up against his side, and Dean felt kind of bad that he'd sat down with so much space between them when they'd put the film on. He just wanted to make sure that they had boundaries, and that he wouldn't give Cas the wrong idea. If Cas was a girl, he was sure they'd have spent most of the time making out instead of watching the screen. He knew it wasn't fair on Cas to pull away from him like this, but he just couldn't make himself forget that Cas was a *guy*.

Best part of the film or not, Dean's attention was now firmly on Castiel - even if he hadn't taken his eyes off the screen.

Small steps. Cas wasn't a one night stand, right? So they could take it slow. He didn't have to rush into anything he wasn't yet comfortable with. Shifting slightly, he lifted his arm and draped it along the back of the sofa, behind Cas.

A few seconds later, Cas's head rested on his shoulder once again.

*Well, the apocalypse hadn't started,* he thought to himself wryly. He needed to stop overthinking things. He'd never been anything but 100% into chicks, because Rhonda Hurley and her pink satin panties didn't mean anything - right? But, other than his gender, Cas was exactly the same as every other person he'd ever dated. Apart from the fact they'd started out as friends. And that their relationship hadn't started with sex. Hell, Cas probably knew more about him than anyone who wasn't his brother...

Okay, so Cas was special. In more ways than one. And he deserved better than someone like Dean.

"Well, that was a surprisingly sentimental ending," Cas observed once the credits started to roll. "I almost expected them to forget about the boy."
"Well, I suppose it kind of bookends the movie, so to speak," Dean pondered. "I mean it started out with them losing a son."

"You're right," Cas agreed. "I simply meant that for an action movie with such a bizarre premise, it showed a little more thought than I anticipated."

"I'm turning you into quite the little movie buff, aren't I?"

"You are," Cas smiled, pulling away a little as Dean reached for the remote to stop the video. Something Jo had said to him a few weeks ago came to mind - that he and Dean watched too many movies. "But do you think we should go out more?"

Dean frowned, as if preparing to point out their lack of funds.

"No, don't look at me like that," he chastised. Dean opened his mouth to say something, but Castiel quickly interrupted with, "And I don't mean to Ellen's."

Dean stuck his tongue in his cheek as he considered what Cas had said. "So what do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"You can't just say we should go out more without having an idea for something to do!"

Castiel stared at him. "I just did."

"Yeah, I know, but... Never mind."

Dean got up to take the video out of the machine, and Cas found himself shamelessly eyeing the curve of his ass as he crouched down in front of the machine before sliding it back into place on the shelf.

"It's just difficult to suggest outings that don't cost money," he said, somewhat huffily.

"Then we'll come up with some ideas of things we'd like to do, and then look at ways of making them cheaper, okay?" Dean suggested.

"Okay," Cas agreed, reaching for his crossword book and flipping to a blank page at the back before Dean had even sat down again. Things might finally been starting to look up for them.

* * *

Balthazar came round the following morning when Dean was at work, bringing Castiel's belongings and an apology. Of sorts.

"I still think you're making a mistake, but you're my friend so I should support you regardless."

"Why can't you just be happy for me?" Castiel complained, as he took the bags from his friend. "I love him, and he... He wants to be with me."

"Because when he inevitably needs to reaffirm his heterosexuality and breaks your heart, I'll be the one picking up the pieces."

"He won't," Castiel insisted, unsure if he even believed it himself.

"You're delusional, Castiel. This isn't a fairy tale - you don't get your happy ending."
"This can't all be from today," Cas said, shaking his head as he flipped through the bundle of envelopes he'd just collected. "Did you forget to check the mail yesterday?"

"Uhh..." Dean tried to think back to when he'd last checked the mail. It had definitely been before Cas left. "Maybe more like all of last week?"

Castiel's face fell, and he cupped Dean's face with one gentle hand. "You really were lost without me, weren't you?"

"I don't know about lost, but..." Dean trailed off. What was the point in lying? "Yeah," he admitted. *Fuck, just which one of them was the girl in this relationship?*

Castiel kissed his head. "There's only a couple of things for me in here. The rest is yours."

Dean took the bundle of envelopes from him and started sifting through them. He tossed junk mail over his shoulder - causing Cas to tut disapprovingly - and put anything resembling a bill in a pile to his right. He was left with a couple of plain envelopes that, judging from the postmarks, were most likely from Sam and Lisa.

Moodily, he ripped them open and pulled out the contents - birthday cards. They'd probably arrived on time, but Dean hadn't bothered to check. Lisa's was a typical man's card, with cars on the front and a simple message on the inside. Ben had written a short note as well. For a second, Dean felt his heart wrench in his chest. He missed the boy a lot more than he'd ever admit. Sam's was a comedic one, but Dean refused to let himself chuckle at it. Instead, he ripped it in half and threw it down on the table.

"Acting like he fucking cares," Dean mumbled. "If he cares so much, why won't he help us out?"

"He has helped both of us out several times since I moved in," Cas reminded him. "I think that is a sign he does care."

"Hmph."

Cas picked up the two halves of the birthday card and held them together, reading the message written inside. "Love, Sam," he read aloud. He took Dean's hand and placed the pieces in his palm. "He cares about you," Cas said firmly. "However strained your relationship is, he still cares about you. It's more than my father does."

"Sam is nothing like your father!" Dean spat, face scrunched up in disgust at the comparison.

"I'm not saying he is, just that—"

"Don't talk about things you don't understand!"

"I'm just trying to make you feel better."

"I don't need to 'feel better'!"

"You are insufferable!" Cas agonised, dropping into the seat next to Dean. "You deserve only the nicest things, but you only accept the worst. *Stop pushing Sam away.*"

"I'm not the one pushing him away," Dean argued. "He's made it perfectly clear he wants nothing to
do with me."

"That's not true," Cas said forcefully. "He cares about you. He loves you. And whether you agree or not, you deserve his love - even when you are being a... a... a pain in the ass."

Dean chanced a glance at Cas out of the corner of his eye, relieve to see that he didn't look angry - just defeated. "I know I can be a pain in the ass," he said quietly. "I don't know how you stand being stuck with me all day, every day. I mean, I drive too fast. I listen to the same five albums over and over and over again, and I sing along - badly! I'm annoying, I know that. And I drink too much, because if I don't..." Dean trailed off, stopping himself before he had to think about why he drank as much as he did. This kind of self-analysing crap was one of the reasons he'd never committed to his counselling sessions. "I'm... I'm a mess. I am 90% crap, Cas. You and Sam deserve better."

Cas took his nearest hand, holding it between both of his own. "You've been dealt a pretty crap hand in life. I'm not going to argue with you over that. But I believe that you have the strength to face any obstacles in your path."

Dean pulled a face. "That sounds suspiciously like that thing people say about God not challenging you more than you can handle, or some shit like that."

"I might have pinched something from one of Father Reynold's sermons." Castiel's eyes softened. "You deserve happiness, Dean. I want to help you find it."

Dean stared at the card from Lisa and Ben.

"So what does Ben say?" Cas asked, moving away from talking about Sam.

Dean shrugged. "Happy birthday. That he was happy to hear from me at Christmas." He tapped the card off the table. "Just goes to show I'm a shitty parent. Barely keep in touch, just like my old man when he was on the road."

Castiel's eyes rolled so far back they hurt, but he wasn't going to start another argument. "Why don't you ask Lisa if you can see him?" he suggested.

"They live too far away, Cas. It's not like I can just stop by their house. I'd have to take a week off work, and even then I'd spend more time on the road than with him. Either that, or..." He paused, shuddering. "I'd have to fly."

Cas thought for a moment. "What if... What if he came here?"

Dean frowned at him. "What?"

"Do you think Lisa would let him come here?"

"It's a long way for a kid to fly on his own."

"Not really. I'm sure children whose parents are no longer together do it all the time. And it's not like he'd get off at the wrong stop."

Dean sighed. "I don't know..."

"Then ask. The worst that can happen is she says no. You still have phone calls, and letters."

"Hang on a sec - so one minute you're mad at me, and the next you're helping me?"

"I wasn't mad at you - not really. More... annoyed at you. But I'll never be too mad at you to help
you, especially if it means repairing your relationship with Ben."

Dean stared at Cas in wonder for a long moment, before saying, "You're too fucking good for me, you know that?"

"You keep telling me that, but I'm never going to believe it," Cas told him, raising Dean's hand to his mouth and kissing it.

Dean snorted. Then he turned thoughtful. "Easter break is coming up."

"Then you should probably call her sooner rather than later."

Before he knew it, he had the phone in his hand and it was ringing. "Am I really doing this?" he asked. However, before Cas could answer, he waved a silencing hand frantically at him as someone picked up at the other end.

"Hello?"

Dean's mouth went dry.

"Hello?"

His eyes went wide and he shot a panicked look at Cas. What the hell should he say?

"Hello?"

Lisa was getting impatient on the other end now, and he knew she'd be about to hang up.

A warm hand slipped into his and he found his voice. "Lisa?"

There was a long pause and Dean wondered if she had hung up.

"Dean?"

"Hey," he breathed with a smile.

"Are you drunk?"

"What? No!"

"Because in the five years since we broke up, you haven't called me once."

The truth in her words hit him like a punch in the gut. "We didn't break up," he pointed out. "You left me."

"Do you blame me?"

"No," Dean said, wondering how the hell he'd let the conversation get so out of hand. He was supposed to be trying to get on Lisa's good side. "How are you?"

"Ben's fine. He's not here right now, but—"

"How are you?" Dean repeated.

"Oh. I'm... Yeah, I'm good too."

For a long moment, neither of them said anything. Then Lisa broke the silence.
"What do you want, Dean?" she asked tiredly.

"I was wondering if I could see Ben for Easter?" he said quickly, the words coming out in a rush before he started stuttering.

"Oh! Um... Well, I guess that would be okay," she agreed warily.

Dean looked at Cas in shock, because that had been too easy.

"You'd have to stay in a motel because we haven't got room for three - we've had to downsize—"

It had been too easy. "I meant for him to come out here," Dean cut her off.

"And stay with you?" Lisa asked slowly, in her best please-tell-me-I've-misunderstood-you-because-you-can't-actually-be-serious tone.

"Uh, well, yeah," Dean said, quickly losing steam.

"I don't think so."

"You always said that I could see him!"

"Meaning that you were welcome to come stay with us!" Lisa clarified. "But when I said that, we had room for three."

"That's a long drive and you know how I feel about flying."

"Dean..." Lisa sighed. "I'm sorry. You're right, it is far away and I just don't feel comfortable with Ben being so far away from home knowing how much you drink."

"I wouldn't have anything if Ben was here."

"That didn't stop you when we were together."

Dean dragged a hand down his face. She wasn't wrong. "Things are... Well, they're not that bad now."

"'Not that bad'? So they're not better?"

"That's not what I— You're putting words in my mouth!"

"Okay, then answer me this - what if something happened?" she shot back, launching on the defensive.

"I'd be there! I'd look after him. Damn it, you know I can."

"I do know you, and that's the problem! You've got to give me something here. Show me I can trust you with him."

"When have I ever put him in danger? Huh? Never."

Her silence told him she knew he was right.

"I'm getting my life back together... or trying to, at least." Dean took a shaky breath. "You've got to let me see him. 'Cause God knows I don't care what you say, I love him like he's mine."

"I know you do," she said softly. "But all you're giving me is words. You're asking me to trust my
son to a borderline alcoholic that I haven't seen, and have barely heard from, in five years."

Beside him, Castiel squeezed his hand and shot him a small, supportive smile.

"Yeah, well, people change," he said.

"Not always for the better."

Desperate to prove to Lisa just how his life had changed in a positive way, Dean found himself confessing something he hadn't planned to. "I'm... sort of seeing someone." He pulled his hand out of Castiel's grasp and walked away. This was going to be hard enough as it was, without the added pressure that Cas hearing every word added.

"For how long?" Lisa asked.

"Well, I mean, not too long, but..." Get a grip! "I think it's going to be serious. I know he wants it to be."

"I know how long your hook-ups last," she began sternly, "and I don't want Ben getting the idea that it's normal to spend two days with a woman and then disappear for— Wait a minute, did you say he?"

Dean swallowed. "Yeah."

"As in, you're dating a guy?"

"That tends to be what he means" Dean told her through gritted teeth, aware of Cas's eyes burning a hole in the back of his head.

"Wow," she said quietly. "I didn't see that coming."

"Maybe you don't know me as well as you think," Dean told her bitterly.

He could hear the clicking of her nails as she drummed her fingers against the handset.

"I still don't know, Dean..." she said, but she sounded less sure of herself than before.

"I'm begging you, Lisa," he pleaded. "I want to see him. I miss him."

There was a long pause. "He misses you, too, you know." She sighed. "Okay, you really think you can go a week without drinking? Prove it," she told him firmly. "Until the end of the month, no alcohol. Then call me back and maybe I'll think about it."

Dean's shoulders visibly sagged in relief. "Thank you!"

"I said think about it, Dean. No promises."

"I hear you. No drink."

* * *

"The usual?" Ellen asked when they went to the Roadhouse later that night, already placing an empty glass in front of him and reaching for the whisky.

"Uh, no. Just a soda tonight, thanks."
There was a loud smash as the glass Jo was drying shattered at her feet.

"Oh, come on!" Dean exclaimed, looking from one to the other. "It's not *that* much of a shock, is it?"

"Dean, I remember the last time you came in here and ordered a soft drink clear as day - it was the day a flock of *pigs* flew past the window!"

Dean cringed at the bluntness of Ellen's tone. "Yeah, well. New Year, new leaf and all that," he muttered.

"New Year was near five weeks ago."

There was a disbelieving tone to her voice that made Castiel feel protective of Dean. "There's nothing to say that you have to start your resolutions on the first," he told her smoothly.

"I think we'll take a booth instead. The last thing I need is another interrogation," Dean said, pushing himself off the bar as he got off his stool. "You can bring our drinks over."

"I'll have a soda, too," Cas said with a smile, moving to follow Dean over to a booth. Sliding into the seat across from him, he nudged Dean's ankle with his own. "So does this mean we're on a date?" he teased, trying to lighten the mood.

"Huh?"

"I remember Jo saying that you only sat in a booth when you were on a date."

Dean stared at Cas for a long moment, then chuckled awkwardly. "Cas, I... I know that we're... Look, don't take this the wrong way, but right now we're just two guys hanging out."

Castiel tried not to look too hurt.

"I need this, okay?"

"I understand, Dean."

Dean looked at the carefully controlled expression on Castiel's face. "Do you?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

"Yes," Cas reiterated, keeping his voice down so as not to attract unwanted attention. "I might want to hold your hand and let our friends know how much we care about each other, but the world is not perfect and I remember what it's like not to feel secure in your own feelings. I'm not saying it doesn't hurt to have to hide my feelings, having worked so hard to learn to love myself for who I am, but so long as you can promise me that it's not forever then I can wait a little longer."

"Of course it's not forever!" Dean hastened to promise him, not knowing if it was a promise he'd be able to keep but desperately wanting it to be. "You've had a lot longer to come to terms with this than me."

"That's exactly what I'm saying," Cas told him. "If you're committed to this - to *us*," he emphasised, reaching for Dean's hand and giving it a brief squeeze, "then I can be patient."

"So, you guys have stowed your crap, huh?" Jo asked, placing a soda in front of each of them.

Dean looked up at her, confused. "What?"

Castiel frowned and tilted his head in uncertainty.
"Don't 'what' me, Winchester," she told him, perching one hand on a slim hip. "You were a mess last week. *Boo hoo, Cas left me!* she cried, rubbing away an imaginary tear.

"That's a dick move," he complained, looking at his drink.

She looked between them, seeing the awkward flush on Dean's neck and noticing the way Castiel avoided her gaze as he tried to discreetly pull his outstretched hand away from Dean. "Oh, shit."

They both looked up at her like children caught with their hands in the cookie jar.

She pointed between them, and Dean could almost see the wheels turning in her head. "You two... You..."

"No," he told her, desperately shaking his head.

"Yes. Oh my God!"

Castiel cut off her shocked but delighted screech with a shushing gesture. "We're not... That is, we are, but..."

"Cas!" Dean growled through gritted teeth.

"She knows how I feel about you."

"That doesn't mean you have to *tell* her! What did I just say?"

Jo clipped his ear. "Why wouldn't he tell me? We're all friends."

"Yeah, well, some things should remain private."

"Oh, so relationships should be kept private but you can showcase your casual hook-ups all over town?" She noticed Castiel's discomfort at discussing Dean's sexual history. "Sorry, Cas."

"That's quite alright," he said stiffly. "But perhaps Dean is right. I shouldn't have answered without Dean's consent. I just wanted to ensure you wouldn't say anything to Ellen or Ash." While he understood Dean's need for time, and also valued their privacy, a part of him just wanted to shout from the rooftops that he was in love and he was happy.

"You know we don't care, right? ... I mean, that you're both... well, guys. Mom and Ash'll be cool with it."

"I don't doubt it, but nevertheless Dean needs some time to... adjust."

"I just need some damn privacy," he grumbled. "I'm not a freakin' Kardashian!"

Jo snorted. "Well as long as you don't marry Kanye West, we can still be friends," she laughed, causing Dean to glare at her.

"Who's getting married?" Ellen asked, having moved into earshot.

"No-one," Jo said quickly. "But Dean and Cas have made up."

"Thank God. So... this 'new leaf' wouldn't have anything to do with you drinking yourself silly last week, would it?"

"No, it's got nothing to do with Cas," he said honestly, before giving Jo a look. "Now weren't you
about to leave us?"

She shook her head with a cheeky smirk. "Nope!"

"Joanna Beth, there are thirsty customers dying of dehydration in here!"

"Yes, mom," she said, miming zipping her mouth closed as she followed her mother back over to the bar.

"Thanks," Dean said quietly. "I know you're not happy about keeping... things between us quiet, so... Yeah. Thanks."

"I'll always do my best to support you," Cas promised him.

"Even if it hurts you?"

Castiel exhaled as he thought how best to answer Dean's question. "I love you," he stated simply. He saw it as an answer in itself. Love was the only answer he could give.
"Why don't we go out?" Cas asked Dean as he finished his coffee. It was a nice day and they'd spent the morning washing the car - with Dean scrutinising Castiel's every action, of course.

"Cas, in case you've forgotten, we have no money."

"It doesn't mean we can't go out."

"What, do you just want to walk around like teenagers who have free periods and nothing better to do?"

"You were a teenager, once," Cas reminded him.

"Yeah, and I had better things to do than 'walk around'."

"Oh? I didn't think you would have been studying in the library."

A dirty chuckle burst past Dean's lips. "'Studying'. Yeah, that's what we called it. Except it wasn't in the library..."

Castiel rolled his eyes. "It's a nice day," he said, getting back on topic.

"Yeah, a nice day to do nothing."

Castiel cast him a withering look. "What do you have against exercise? Or spending time with me?"

"I spend time with you! In fact, I'm suggesting we hang out here. Together."

Standing up, Castiel said, "Well *I'm* going for a walk whilst it's still sunny. You can either stay here alone or come out with me."

Dean stared up at him. "When did you get so bossy?"

"It's not 'bossy' - it's assertive. Are you coming?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming," Dean told him, heaving himself off the sofa. "Where are we going?"

At this, Castiel's determination faltered. "I hadn't thought that far ahead. Perhaps we could go to the beach again?"

"Too far," Dean said immediately. "Can't afford the fuel."

"Oh, okay. Well, what if we simply had a look around the shops?"

"And look at stuff we can't afford to buy, you mean."

"Then you decide!" Castiel growled icily.

"Shops it is," Dean said hastily. "No need to start a fight about it."

They got ready to leave in silence, but just as they were about to walk out the door Dean stopped Castiel with a hand on his shoulder. "Sorry for being such a misery guts today."

"Just today?" Cas asked, only half teasing. Then he turned more serious. "I know you feel guilty for
losing all your money, and rightfully so because it was stupid of you, but don't take it out on me."

"You think I'm stupid?" Dean asked, in a way implying he thought the answer was an obvious yes.

"No, Dean. I think you're very clever, actually. You just do stupid things."

"Same difference, isn't it?"

"No, it's not." When Dean looked like he was about to disagree, Castiel didn't let him get a word out.

"I have done stupid things - do you think I'm stupid?"

"Of course not, but—"

"Don't you dare 'but' me! If I'm not stupid, then neither are you. I mean it," he added, when Dean said nothing.

"I know you do," Dean told him. "That's why I think... Never mind."

"That's why you think what?" Cas pressed, knowing that he needed to nip whatever negative feelings Dean had about himself in the bud, before they blossomed into an unhealthy cross between self-hatred and self-blame.

Dean took a breath. "That if you knew Sam, you'd realise what a dumbass I am."

Castiel kissed him. "Stop putting yourself down."

"I'm serious! I'm... I'm a high school drop-out, Cas. You and Sam are both university educated."

"I dropped out," Cas pointed out.

"Not by choice. And I bet you'd go back in a heartbeat if you could." 

"I can honestly say that I've never thought about it," Cas told him. "Besides, you're a skilled mechanic. I couldn't fix a car. And I bet Sam can't, either."

"He could if he learned."

"And you could practice law if you learned. You are both intelligent men, who are clever at different things. You can't possibly compare yourself to him."

"Fixing a car is easier than law," Dean muttered.

"Dean Winchester, you are the most frustrating man I have ever met," Castiel sighed, wanting to argue until he made Dean see how wonderful he was, but not knowing what else he could possibly say.

"Sorry."

"Don't apologise - just try to see yourself the way I see you."

"What - frustrating?" Dean quipped, belittling himself.

"That isn't—" Cas started, cutting himself off when he saw Dean's teasing smirk. "Funny," he finished with a huff. "I just want you to be happy."

"I am," Dean lied easily, with a wide grin. "Now are we going?"
An hour later they sauntered along at a leisurely pace, browsing shop windows and munching on some free samples that were being handed out.

"Any spare change?" a scruffy man, who looked older than his years, croaked. A disposable coffee cup was held up to them, with only a few pennies in it.

Castiel felt a pang of pity for the man, reminded of his own experiences. He dug into his pocket and dropped a quarter in the man's cup. "I'm sorry, that's all I have."

"Thank you," the man smiled gratefully.

As they walked away, Dean turned to Cas. "Dude, you can't go giving your money away when we've got next to nothing ourselves!"

Castiel frowned, and took a breath before responding. "We have a roof over our heads, Dean, which is a lot more than he has," he pointed out sharply.

"I'm just saying—"

"I know what it feels like, to be the one asking for help, only to be treated with disdain. As if I ended up where I was by choice. To find a glimmer of hope that you can get your life back on track, only to have it snatched away from you because you look at someone the wrong way."

Dean licked his lips, feeling like a scolded child. "At least the day hasn't been a total waste," he said, brushing flakes of pastry away from the corner of his mouth.

"It's nice to know where your priorities lie," Cas quipped, allowing Dean to change the subject. "Food, then me. I'll remember that."

"Well, I'd die without food, so..." Dean trailed off with a smirk, nudging Cas playfully in the ribs.

Castiel chuckled in amusement as they came to a stop at the railing, looking down at the disused, overgrown train tracks below. "I've slept under that bridge," he stated casually, taking a long look at the last bite of food in his fingers before placing it onto his tongue.

Dean looked down at the tramps huddled among the boxes and trash discarded down below. "Wait, what?" he said, once Castiel's words had sunk in.

"Mmm," Castiel affirmed before swallowing. "Two nights spent wondering if I'd be murdered in my sleep for the change of clothes I had in my bag."

Dean looked back down at the dirty, unkempt men and women beneath them and draped an arm over Castiel's shoulders. "I promise I won't kill you for your clothes," he murmured into his ear.

"Ever the romantic," Cas sighed, staring sadly down at the unlucky people, knowing exactly how they were feeling. "At least it was drier down there than on the embankment under the river bridge. I slept there, too."

"Is there anywhere you didn't sleep?" Dean asked rhetorically.

"Store fronts," Cas replied immediately. "The doorways could offer a little shelter from the wind or rain, but shop owners preferred us to sleep out of sight so the cops were always quick to move us along. We made the street look 'untidy'," he added bitterly.
"You didn't deserve that," Dean muttered, angry at the way Castiel had been forced to live.

"And they do?"

"You know what I mean." Talking about the river made Dean think about the night he pulled Cas out of it. If he hadn't been there, and if Cas hadn't gotten caught up in any overhanging undergrowth, the river might have carried his body right through town. It had been raining all week, and the river had been deeper than usual. He wouldn't have stood a chance. "What were you thinking, sleeping beside the river?"

"The bridge kept us dry from the rain—"

"You could have gotten swept away and drowned!"

Cas stared at him, trying to work out where Dean's sudden, protective outburst had come from.

"All these little events... Change one, and I might never have met you."

"But you did," he said simply. He saw no use in thinking about what might have happened, when those possible events hadn't come to pass. Suddenly, Dean was kissing him and he stiffened in surprise. Just as he started to relax into the embrace, however, Dean quickly pulled away.

"Shit! Sorry." Dean crossed his arms and leaned over the railing. "What am I doing? What am I doing, Cas?" he asked, though it sounded more like he was talking to himself. He ran his hands through his hair, still looking down at the tramps below. Seemingly unable to keep still, he turned back to him, gesturing wildly. "I'm not gay!" he exclaimed, keeping his voice down in case anyone overheard. "I like... I like women, but then there's you, and... If I'm gay then what about all the women I've been with? And if I'm straight, then what are you?"

Castiel stared at him for a long moment, before Dean realised how much his words must have hurt him.

He was about to try and take it back, but then Cas said quietly, "Maybe it's not about being gay, or straight. Maybe it's just about falling in love."

For a moment, Dean just stood there staring at Cas, opening and closing his mouth as he tried to find the right response to that. "Cas, I... I'm no good with the whole love and... love... thing."

Castiel's gaze dropped to his feet.

"I can't say I love you," Dean breathed, finding it a little easier to say these things when Cas wasn't looking at him with pained understanding in his eyes. "I'm not saying I don't, but I can't say I do."

Castiel looked at him. "Do you want to be with me?" he asked, his voice catching in his throat.

"Yeah," Dean answered almost immediately, before taking a breath. "Yes, I do."

Cas smiled. "Then that's enough."

They crossed over to the other side of the street and began walking back the way they'd come, looking in the other shop windows and getting more free samples.

"If people keep giving us free food, we won't need dinner tonight!" Cas laughed, accepting something pink from a woman outside a sweet shop. It tasted faintly of strawberry, or possibly raspberry, and left a fine pink dust on his fingers.
"Speak for yourself," Dean told him. "I'm starving."

"Where do you put it all?" Cas laughed.

Dean's grin faded a little. So he didn't have to answer, he made a point of swiping his tongue along his teeth as if trying to dislodge a piece of food.

"Help an old man out?" a voice asked.

Several people ignored the man and kept on walking, but Cas stopped.

"I'm sorry, I haven't got any change."

"That's alright, son. God bless you."

"And you," Cas replied kindly.

"Here," Dean said, pressing a couple of coins into his hand.

"Thank you," the man said, tucking the coins into his pocket.

As they continued on their way, Cas nudged Dean slightly. "That was very kind of you," he said, once he had Dean's attention. "Thank you."

Dean shrugged off Castiel's praise. "It's nothing."

A loving smile lit up Castiel's face. He knew it wasn't nothing, because they had next to nothing themselves. Dean had helped that man for him; because he had been unable to.

* * *

They managed for ten days, living off of frozen leftovers and tinned food, before Castiel was desperate for something fresher.

"What I wouldn't give for a banana," he commented in between mouthfuls of baked beans - the third time that week they'd served them on toast for dinner. "Or a fried egg."

"Beer," Dean chimed in.

Castiel stared at him. "That has no relation to our lack of money."

"No, but a beer with my dinner would be nice."

"You don't crave something better than this?"

Dean smirked, his fork halfway to his mouth. "Cas, you've spoiled me since you moved in. This is pretty much how I ate - tins of food and ready meals."

"And alcohol."

"And alcohol," Dean agreed.

"I suppose I've been spoiling myself, too. I'd have thought this a feast when I was homeless. Now I'm bored of it."

"Well, this is the third time we've had it."
"Have you tried asking Bobby for an advance?"

"He's never done it before. He's not going to start now." Dean sighed sadly. "I can't even fill Baby up."

Castiel fell silent, the wheels in his head turning as he finished his meal. After they'd washed up, Dean went to the bathroom. As soon as Castiel heard the shower run, he picked up the telephone and dialled. He knew that Dean wouldn't be happy with what he was about to do, but he told himself it was for the greater good. It rang several times, before it was answered with a weary sigh.

"What is it, Dean?"

"Sam?"

There was a long silence before Sam spoke again. "Castiel? Is that you?"

"Yes."

The tone of Sam's voice changed. "Is something wrong with my brother?"

"Yes. Well, no, I..." He took a deep breath before he could back out, then he started to ramble. "Sam, I know you refused Dean's request for money and I can't say I blame you because it's a regular occurrence and I also realise that I have no right to ask, but I swear if you could send us even $20 so we don't starve I'd repay you next week—"

"Whoa, take a breath. You don't have to pay me back," Sam interrupted assuringly. "It's not like Dean does."

But that was different. Dean was family. "I'm not Dean," Cas pointed out.

"I know."

"But... Dean said you'd cut him off. That you weren't going to help him any more."

"Of course I'm not going to cut him off." Sam sighed. "I just said that stuff because I don't know how else to get through to him."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, Dean... he doesn't really think."

"Dean is very thoughtful," Cas disagreed.

"When it comes to people, yeah, he can be. But not when it comes to other things - like money, or self-control. He's a loose cannon. He doesn't think, he just acts. The consequences come later."

Castiel thought about Dean's gambling, and the bar fight on his birthday. "So I've noticed."

"He needs... someone. A friend. I've tried to be that person, but I don't think I can be. I think he needs something else. Something I'm not."

"Perhaps you are too close?" Castiel suggested. When Sam said nothing, he pressed on. "I once asked him how you could have become so estranged when it was obvious that you both cared deeply for each other. He speculated that perhaps you had each done too much for the other. I didn't fully understand what he meant at the time, but now I think I do. When you give someone so much of yourself, and feel like you get nothing in return, you can start to feel a little resentful."
"You sound like you're talking from experience."

Castiel thought back on the last few weeks with Dean. "Maybe I am," he acknowledged, though he wasn't quite sure resentful was the right word for what he was feeling. Frustrated, perhaps? And a little angry, if he was being honest, even if he was sympathetic to Dean's internal struggle.

"Thank you. For being there for him."

Castiel tightened his grip on the phone.

"He's in a bad place. Has been ever since Dad died." Sam seemed to hesitate. "Did he... Has he told you about that?"

"Yes," Cas revealed. "He told me everything."

"Every— " Realisation filled Sam's voice. "Oh."

Even hundreds of miles away, Cas could feel Sam's embarrassment. "He loves you very much," he told him, to try and ease his discomfort. And, because it was the truth.

"Thank you, Cas."

Something in the tone of Sam's voice told Cas that he'd needed to hear that. A silence that was neither comfortable nor uncomfortable hung between them for a long minute.

Sam cleared his throat at the same moment Cas heard the bathroom door open.

"I'm sorry, but I have to go."

"Who's that?" Dean asked.

"Oh, um..." Castiel looked at the phone. "Balthazar."

"Huh," Dean grunted. "Are you going out?"

"No."

That seemed to appease Dean somewhat. "Well, I'll let you finish up."

"I'll just be another minute."

Castiel returned the phone to his ear as Dean left the room.

"Dean doesn't know you called me, does he?"

"I don't think he'd have let me if I told him I was thinking about it."

"I'm glad you did."

"I am, too."

"I'll send something your way tomorrow."

"Thank you. But that's not the only reason I'm glad I called."

Sam laughed gently. "I know."
"I hope that one day we'll talk in person. I'd like to meet you."

"You, too, Cas."

"Goodbye, Sam."

"Take care of Dean for me."

"I will."

"Bye."
This will probably be the last update for the year as work will start to get busy in the run-up to Christmas.

Dean stopped in at the grocery store on the way home from work to pick up some toothpaste. He eyed the latest edition of *Busty Asian Beauties* on the newsstand longingly as he stood at the checkout.

"That's three dollars sixty-seven."

Out of habit, Dean handed his card over.

"Sign at the bottom, please."

Dean took the pen and hovered over the signature line. "Shit, I'm sorry. I don't think I even have any money in that account," he said, scrawling his name on the line anyway. He knew he didn't have any money in that account - at least not enough to buy the toothpaste - so he dug into his pocket for some change.

"Well, it's gone through," the operator told him.

He stared at her, confused. "It has?"

"Yes. Here's your receipt."

Dean took it and looked at it disbelievingly. Sam had definitely said no, and there had very definitely been next to nothing in his account the other day.

"Thanks."

He gave the cashier a vague wave and headed for the ATM outside. Punching his PIN into the machine and selecting the option to display balance, he frowned at the screen when he saw that two hundred dollars had mysteriously appeared in his account. Retrieving his card from the machine, he walked back into the shop to buy *Busty Asian Beauties* before walking back out again and over to his car, still dwelling over the money.

Sam had absolutely, positively, said no - he was getting no more money - and neither he nor Cas got paid until the following week. Not that Cas would be sneaking money into his account anyway. He was still mulling it over as he pulled up in front of his apartment building.

"Balthazar, huh?" he asked, finding Cas in the living room.

Castiel started, for he hadn't heard Dean come in. "I'm sorry?"

"I find it strange that after you talk to 'Balthazar' on the landline, instead of your cell like you usually do, Sam happens to send me money."
"Oh?" Castiel said innocently. "Well, that's good. You'll be able to refuel the car, and we can do a little grocery shopping."

"Cut the crap, Cas. You had no right to call him."

Castiel threw his book down and stood to face Dean. "I had every right! We're a couple, now - but nothing has changed."

Dean all but flinched at the word 'couple'. "You're the one who said it didn't have to change."

"Yes, but I thought you might least touch me!"

Dean's lips twitched like he wanted to say something but was holding back. "Fuck you!" he spat eventually. "Fuck you for almost dying. Fuck you for making me feel like this. Fuck you for coming into my life and making everything good again!" He grabbed Cas suddenly and pulled him into a rough kiss. "How's that for touching you?" he asked, before charging into the kitchen and returning a moment later with a bottle of beer.

"It's the middle of the day. And you're not supposed to be drinking."

"Fuck off."

"What about Ben?" Cas reminded him.

Dean paused, the bottle halfway to his mouth. "Fucking... Fuck!" He stormed back into the kitchen, tipping the bottle upside down over the drain. When it didn't empty fast enough for him, he smashed it into the sink. "What a waste," he muttered to himself.

A little afraid of Dean's volatile temper, but determined to be there to comfort him, Castiel came up behind him and gently rubbed his shoulders. Dean stiffened at his touch and instinctively tried to jerk his shoulder away, but Castiel just massaged his shoulders more firmly until Dean started to relax, his head dropping forward as Castiel eased the tension out of his shoulders.

"Sorry," Dean mumbled, his voice breaking over the word.

Cas realised that he was crying or, at the very least, holding tears back. He slid his arms around Dean's waist, stepping closer and nestling his head between his shoulder blades. "For the record, I think you're both clever people who do stupid things," he murmured.

Dean let out a huff of disagreement. "I don't think Sam can beat my level of stupid," he said, turning round in Cas's arms. "I mean, I manage to pick fights with my... you, over nothing. Hell, it's been five years since I last tried this whole... relationship shit."

"Well, I'm pretty easy to please," Cas told him with a smile. "All I ask is that you're faithful, and that you try to let me in."

"And change everything I thought I knew about myself," Dean added, toying with the fingers on Castiel's hand as he wondered, not for first time, how he'd gotten to this point. "I'm sorry," he said, when Cas said nothing. "That wasn't fair."

"No, it wasn't. I didn't ask you to develop feelings for me - it happened naturally. I just asked that you decided whether or not you wanted to act on them."

"It's just... This is so freaking hard, dude. It goes against everything I've ever been! Or ever thought I was... Or something."
Castiel raised Dean's hand to his mouth and kissed it. "It's not like I expect you to sweep me off my feet on Valentine's Day." He chuckled as Dean rolled his eyes. "Yes, I am aware of it. Balthazar seemed to think you should treat me to an expensive dinner and fine wine."

Dean's face fell. That was the shit Castiel deserved, though, wasn't it? Someone who could treat him, and make him feel special. What could Dean offer him? Cold beer and emotional baggage. Castiel's hand squeezing his brought him out of his thoughts.

"But I told him that if I wanted that, I'd be dating him," he hastened to assure Dean. "All I want is you - because it's you that I fell in love with. I don't want you to change, just to accept yourself for who you are. The rest will fall into place."

"It's that easy, huh?" Dean asked disbelievingly.

"I never said it would be easy," Cas replied. "I mean, look at me - you think I've got myself all sorted out but I still need to see Pam."

"What do you..." Dean licked his lips. "What sort of shit do you talk about? If I'm allowed to ask?"

"The people in my life. We discuss any problems that I'm having. And, um..." Cas smiled, as if trying to hold back laughter. "My feelings."

Dean rolled his eyes and Castiel laughed.

"You should try it some time."

"I'm a man, Cas. I don't talk about my feelings."

Castiel scowled. "I'm a man. I like other men and I talk about my feelings - does that make me less of a man than you?"

"I— What? No, that's not... Stop putting words in my mouth!"

"I wasn't," Cas said pointedly, standing up and moving towards the kitchen.

Dean followed him through. "So, you talk about me?"

"Did I say that?"

"You said 'the people in your life'. I'm in your life."

"Mmm," Cas agreed noncommittally.

"You don't say... bad things about me, do you?"

"I tell her the truth."

"Fuck, you tell her bad things about me," he said resignedly.

Castiel couldn't help but chuckle at how paranoid Dean sounded. Cupping his face in his hands, he assured him, "I tell her the good things, too."

"What good things?"

"The times that you stand up for me. How you saved Christmas for the children at the church." Cas smiled to himself. "And I told her about the little stockings you gave me for Christmas."
"Seriously? The church pays her three figures an hour and you tell her about the stockings?"

Castiel frowned at Dean's skepticism. "They meant a lot to me."

"I... Yeah... But..."

"I tell her the good things, too," Cas repeated. "No matter how small."

* * *

Over the next couple of days, Dean found himself dwelling over what Cas had said: "I tell her the good things, too." Okay, so he told Pam good things about him. But he also told her bad things. Like what? That he drank too much? That was pretty much a given. But what else did he say? Dean wasn't the easiest guy to get along with, he knew that.

The more Dean second-guessed him, the more he beat himself up. Cas—Cas loved him. Or, at least, he thought he did. But then Cas had never been in love before, so what did he know? It made him start to wonder what the hell Cas saw in him that was worth sticking around for.

If he hadn't been so preoccupied wondering what Cas saw in him, he might have spent his time worrying about what expectations Castiel had of Valentine's Day. As it was, he forgot all about it until his colleagues started discussing their plans for the occasion.

"Hey, Andy. What are you doing for Valentine's Day?"

"What do you care?" he asked Benny. "You asking me out?"

Benny let out a deep chuckle. "Let me live vicariously through you."

Dean discreetly moved around to the other side of the car so he could eavesdrop. The one Valentine's Day he and Lisa had shared was spent looking after Ben who'd caught a stomach bug and thrown up for three days. Now he had Cas, and though Valentine's Day wasn't really Dean's thing, he kind of wondered if maybe he should make a bit of an effort for Cas considering he'd never had a chance to celebrate it before.

"A date's a date. What do you do when you take a girl out?"

"Brother, it's Valentine's Day."

"I want to sweep her off her feet. Make it more... special. Do a little bit more than I normally would. Spend a little bit more, you know?"

Sweep her off her feet. Isn't that what Balthazar had said to Cas?

"Like..?" Benny pressed.

"Jeez, you want to come along and watch? I'm taking Tracey for dinner at a fancy restaurant."

Dean swallowed as he listened, no longer working on the car. He and Cas couldn't afford to eat out, and it wasn't like you could make takeout or frozen leftovers romantic.

"Somewhere where the portions are smaller and the courses have ingredients you've never heard of, and where they put candles on the tables."

Candles were doable, except fires always made him think about his mom.
"Then when we get home we’ll have a long, relaxing bubble bath together..." He trailed off, clearly picturing his girlfriend.

As much as he cared about Cas, Dean had a hard time picturing them two of them naked together. He didn't even want to think about it! Deep down he knew that it would have to happen eventually, but not any time soon. Not until he was ready for that.

"Maybe put some nice music on, and open a bottle of wine," Andy continued. "Then we've got some fancy oils and we're going to give each other a full body massage to get us in the mood—"

"Yeah, okay, we get it," Dean cut him off. He didn't need to know every tiny detail about Andy's sex life, and neither did Benny. "Expensive and fancy. Kind of glad I've never had to shell out for that crap."

"What about you, Dean? Got any Valentine's plans?"

Guiltily Dean jerked upright, so quickly he hit his head off the hood. "I— Agh!" he exclaimed, rubbing his head as he grimaced. "What?"

"Valentine's Day plans," Benny repeated.

"I'm..." He stopped himself before he could say single. "I don't have a girlfriend," he said honestly.

"So? There's a lot of lonely singles out there," Benny said suggestively.

Dean shrugged. "I'm not feeling it."

Benny frowned at the idea Dean might not be up for an easy lay, then understanding softened his expression. "I get it. You're starting to feel like you want to settle down, right? Yeah, I kind of miss what I had with Andrea," he said wistfully.

Dean opened and closed his mouth. That wasn't what he meant, but maybe it was kind of true. Ever since Christmas, he'd found himself missing... not Lisa, but certainly what they'd had. And Ben, of course.

"Yeah, maybe that's it," he said noncommittally.

"And flowers!" Andy exclaimed, half to himself. "I can't forget flowers. She likes roses."

"Don't all women?" Benny asked. "Expensive flowers, expensive chocolates..."

"Do I pay you to gossip or fix cars?" Bobby asked as he entered the garage. "Because you boys do so much of both I can't remember which it is."

"We're working, we're working," Benny told him, getting back to work.

* * *

Dean didn't mean to take any of Andy's nonsense seriously, because none of it was really him. But when he noticed his fuel gauge reading almost empty on the way home he stopped at the Gas 'n' Sip, and several bunches of flowers outside caught his eye.

"Nope. Not doing it," he muttered to himself as he pumped gas into the Impala's tank.

Stupidly he glanced at the prices on the way in, hoping to be given reason to stick to his guns, but they were only three bucks. Several had a few broken stems, but he found himself picking up a half-
"Treating someone special?" the woman behind the counter asked with a smile.

'Special'. Without being too much of a sap about it, Cas certainly was special. "Yeah," he agreed. "She's a lucky girl," she commented, looking Dean up and down appreciatively.

He grinned, but bit back a flirty remark.

"But these bouquets aren't very big - how about I ring this through twice and you pick up another on the way out?"

Dean shoved his hands in his pockets, trying to work out how much loose change he had. "Oh, uh, I don't really— Yeah, okay, maybe you're right," he said, hastily changing his mind as he met her forceful glare.

"Fantastic!" she smiled. "I'm sure these'll make her really happy."

He, Dean corrected her in his head. He managed to scrape together six bucks in change, and handed over his card to pay for the fuel.

"Remember and take the price off them!" she called after him as he left.

He looked again at the flowers he'd bought. They were yellow things, and he stared at the other ones that came in varying shades of pinks and purples, oranges and reds. He almost picked up a red bunch, but at the last second noticed an orange bunch that had yellow accents on the petals. They'd go a bit better with yellow, right? Or would that be too much yellow? Did Cas even like yellow? Benny was right; women were easy - give them red roses and they'd be putty in your hands. Grabbing the two-toned bunch, he stomped back to his car, already regretting wasting good drinking money on flowers that were probably going to be dead by the end of the week. He chucked them on the passenger seat, where their stems started to leave a little damp patch.

Valentine's Day was a waste of money. If you loved someone, you showed them you loved them all year round - not just for one day.

Before he opened the apartment door he yanked the price stickers off the cellophane wrappers, leaving torn pieces behind.

"Here," he said, thrusting the flowers at Cas as soon as he was in the door.

"Why do you have flowers?" Castiel asked, confused.

Dean hesitated before speaking. Cas's forehead was scrunched up in that way it always was when he didn't understand something, and it was kind of endearing. "They're for you. Happy Valentine's, and all that," he said gruffly.

Then Castiel fucking beamed. "Oh, Dean, they're beautiful!" he exclaimed. "Thank you!" He kissed Dean briefly on the jaw, then again on his lips. Suddenly his face fell. "I didn't get anything for you. I mean, I thought about it, but then I assumed that you wouldn't want me to make a big deal out of because you didn't seem that keen on the idea."

Dean shook his head. "That's okay. You didn't have to get me anything. If I'm being honest, I wasn't planning on getting you flowers or anything. They were just there."
Cas bit his lip. Did it make them less special if they were a spur of the moment buy? No - he refused to think like that. The flowers were beautiful, and it was the thought that counted - even if not much thought went into them. "Do you have a vase?" he asked.

Shit. How could he fuck up Valentine's Day? He was the type of person who'd take a date with a peanut allergy to a baseball game! "Do I look like the type of guy who owns a vase?" he grumbled.

"Hmm." Castiel looked thoughtful for a minute, then his face lit up. "I know."

He hurried into the kitchen and Dean followed curiously, albeit at a slower pace.

"Drink this."

"I'm not thirsty," Dean said, not taking the glass of soda that was being offered to him.

"I need the bottle."

"Wha—"

Dean took the glass as Castiel practically pushed it at him, then watched as he rinsed out the now-empty plastic bottle and haphazardly cut the top off with a pair of scissors. Then Castiel started cutting half an inch from each stem and placing them in the bottle.

Dean took a sip of the soda, screwing his face up because the bottle had been open a week and the fizz was long gone.

Finally, Castiel filled the bottle with water.

"That... is fucking genius," Dean declared.

"It'll do," Cas said modestly. "They're beautiful."

"You said that already."

Castiel clutched the makeshift vase to his chest and smiled. "Thank you."

"You said that already, too," Dean grinned. Maybe Valentine's Day wasn't so ridiculous, if he could make Cas smile like that.
So I'm not 100% happy with this chapter, but if I stare at it any longer it's never going to get uploaded. It's not that it's terrible - there's just something non-specific that's annoying me about it, like my brain's saying "this could be better".

"So how are things with Balthazar?" Pamela asked.

"Good. We're going out tonight, actually, but ... I've moved back in with Dean."

Her brow creased minutely, and if Castiel hadn't been watching her reaction closely he would have missed it. "Why?"

"He asked me to."

"Castiel," she started, preparing to remind him why he'd left in the first place.

"He's decided he wants to try. I believe I owe myself and Dean a second chance."

"And how does that fit with your pros and cons? Did you try to write a list as I suggested?"

"Of course I did."

"And..?"

"It was mostly negative," Cas admitted.

"So what prompted the change of heart?"

"Mine or Dean's?"

"Either. Both." She shrugged.

"I missed him. And, I guess, he missed me."

"Was it at least a sweeping romantic gesture?" she asked wistfully, her tone playful. "Did he hold a boombox outside your window, or climb a fire escape with a dozen red roses, or ditch his heels and run barefoot to catch you in the subway station?"

"I don't understand any of those references," Cas told her. "And I'm sure Dean doesn't wear heels."

"I thought you said he was introducing you to classic and iconic movies?"

"He is. But there is very little romance in any of the movies Dean recommends. Though I did make him watch The Holiday."

"So what was the last movie you watched?"
Dean slipped *Face/Off* back into his box of video tapes. After dropping Cas off at Pamela's, he'd gone home with the intention of cleaning the living room since it was Cas's bedroom and Dean had made a right mess of it when Cas had left. If Ben's room had ever gotten into this state, there was no way he and Lisa would've let him go outside to play until it was tidy.

There was a large black bag in the middle of the room that he'd been throwing crap into for the past twenty minutes. It had stopped raining so, unless it started again, he wouldn't have to pick Cas up. Cas liked walking home after his sessions with Pamela, because it gave him time to 'process' as he put it. Dean gathered more food wrappers from down the side of the chair and tossed them in the bag. It was a wonder the chair didn't rustle when he sat in it, the amount he'd shoved down the side. It was a terrible habit he'd gotten into as he sat, watching the TV, and stuffed his face. A part of him wondered what the hell Cas had to *process* anyway. Dean thought he was okay with his sexuality now, so why was he still going? Maybe he should ask. Or maybe it wasn't any of his business. He grabbed the stack of newspapers and puzzle books that had accumulated beside Castiel's side of the sofa. Jeez, they had *sides*. He supposed he could ask, and Cas always had the option of not telling him. As he flicked through to find out which ones Castiel had finished the crosswords in - because heaven forbid he threw out one of his incomplete crosswords! - a sheet of paper fluttered out. Dean wouldn't have read it, but he caught his name on it. Several times, in fact, as he looked closer.

It was a list. Two lists, actually - pros and cons. He frowned as he read it, the lines on his forehead deepening as he neared the end. Phrases like 'financial instability', 'emotional dependency', and 'stable accommodation' were vague enough, but then there were the personal ones: *Dean cares about my well-being*, *Dean makes me happy*, *Dean's drinking habits concern me*, *Dean frustrates me*. *Dean has helped me become more comfortable with my own sexuality BUT Dean's own internalised homophobia makes me feel less confident in myself.*

What the hell? Dean wasn't homophobic! He supported Cas, he'd taken the guy to a damn gay bar... Hell, he was fucking *dating* the guy! Well, 'dating' was a strong word. They were *together*. Had been for over two weeks, and they still hadn't been on a date. Sure, they'd gone out, but they hadn't been on a *date*. And all because Dean was... insecure. Nervous, a little scared, and... fuck, okay, maybe a little - *just a little!* - homophobic, but only about himself.

He folded the list up again and slipped it back between the pages of the book.

* * *

When Castiel walked back into the apartment later that afternoon, he greeted Dean with a hug. "This place smells fresh," he commented. The smell of polish had hit him as soon as he'd walked in the door, and the living room was practically gleaming.

"Damn it, I *just* cleaned in here!" Dean complained when Cas discarded his coat onto the chair and kicked his shoes under the table. "This place was a mess."

"And who's fault is that?" Cas asked pointedly.

"Um," Dean said mock-thoughtfully. "Yours."

"It was *not* mine!" Cas argued.

"Uh huh," Dean insisted playfully. "*You* decided to leave."

*You* couldn't give me a reason to stay," Cas reminded him.
Dean placed a hand on Castiel's shoulder and looked him straight in the eye. "Don't ever leave," he asked him seriously.

Cas stepped closer, palms against Dean's chest. "Why would I ever leave," he asked, as Dean's hand ghosted down his back to rest on his lower back, just above the curve of his ass, "when everything I want is right here?"

* * *

Cas had left Dean lounging in front of the TV later on that night when he headed out to meet Balthazar and Zeke.

He'd only meant to spend a couple of hours with them and then go home but it was karaoke night and Balthazar insisted he endure several hours of off-key singing, before forcing him to get up and sing himself. Thankfully most people were drunk by that point, so his out of tune rendition of Believe It Or Not - a song he'd never heard before that Balthazar had picked out for him - was applauded wholeheartedly.

In the end it was well after 1am when he'd finally collapsed onto his bed, which Dean had kindly set up for him while he was out before going to his own. He let out a contented sigh as he settled under the covers, glad that tomorrow was the weekend and he could sleep a little later. Considering the number of rounds Balthazar had bought, he had a feeling he might need it.

He felt like he'd barely closed his eyes when Dean's voice was dragging him reluctantly from his slumber. "Wakey, wakey, rise and shine!"

When Dean pulled the curtains open so vigorously that the hooks rattled, Castiel groaned and covered his head with his pillow. Dean was rarely awake before him but, when he was, he was never this energetic. I must have slept in, he reasoned. Except, when he opened his eyes and peeked out, the sun still wasn't up. "What time is it?" he grumbled.

"Half six."

"Why?" he despaired from under his pillow, his head pounding. He'd been looking forward to sleeping off any lingering aftereffects of his drinking the night before.

"Places to go, things to see," Dean responded vaguely.

"What places? What things?"

"You'll see. Now get a move on. I thought you were supposed to be an early bird?" Dean teased.

"I am - if I've actually slept," Cas groaned in protest, allowing Dean to usher him in the direction of the bathroom.

"Well whose fault's that for staying out until after midnight?" Dean teased him playfully.

Blue eyes narrowed at him, unamused, before the door slammed in his face.

One hot shower and two cups of coffee later, Castiel was awake. Sort of. "You still haven't told me where we're going," he muttered, following Dean outside. The streetlights gave their street an eerie feel and he pulled his coat tighter around him, glad that he'd allowed Dean to pay for a warmer one. The scarf and gloves really helped, too.
"I got tickets for a thing."

How could Dean pay for tickets to something when they had very little to squander? And why hadn't he said anything about it sooner? "What 'thing'?" he asked again. Conversations with Dean about money never went well.

"It's a surprise."

"It had better be a good one," he grumbled, getting into the car. It was no warmer in the car than it was outside. "Heat?" he griped, and Dean obediently turned a dial. Immediately cold air blasted out of the air vents causing Cas to gasp a little.

"Shit!" Dean hastily turned another dial until the air blew hotter. "Sorry."

"Hmph." Castiel reached onto the back seat for the blanket.

"Dude, that's filthy!"

"Then maybe you should bring it inside once in a while so that I can wash it. In fact, why don't you wash it?" he pointed out as he rolled it up into a makeshift pillow.

"What are you doing?"

"Sleeping," he replied, tucking the blanket between his head and the window and closing his eyes.

"But what about music?"

Castiel just folded his arms and snuggled down in his seat.

"Fine, I guess we're riding in silence," Dean complained.

* * *

"Cas? Cas? Hey, Cas!"

Castiel groaned.

"Are you hungry?"

Castiel sniffed. He could smell oil and gas and... fat. Greasy fat. "Where are we?" he asked, peeking out of one eye. At least the sun was out, now.

"Filling station. There's a diner across the street if you want breakfast."

Castiel craned his neck to look out the rear window. "Mmm."

"Or I can get you something and you can stay here?" Dean smirked.

"Yes."

"What do you want?"

"I don't know."

"Then you're going to have to come with me. Come on, sleepyhead. The fresh air will do you good, and you should stretch your legs."
"Fresh air. What fresh air?" Castiel grumbled to himself as he got out of the car. He'd be surprised if they didn't get high on gas fumes. But, as they crossed the street, he had to admit that the walk felt good. When they walked back less than fifteen minutes later with coffee and poorly wrapped bacon rolls oozing warm grease onto their fingers, Castiel didn't want to get back in. "I hate long car journeys," he decided.

"Dude, you've been asleep this whole time!"

"I'm stiff."

Dean so did not want the mental image his brain offered to accompany that innocent statement. "You complain a lot," he observed.

"Only when I'm tired."

"You've had more sleep than me today."

"It wasn't my idea to get out of bed in the middle of the night!" Castiel complained half-heartedly. Now that he was awake, half-past six that morning felt like a lot longer ago than just a couple of hours.

"Oh, God, shut up and go back to sleep already!"

* * *

"Where are we?" Castiel asked, as Dean pulled off the main road and down a dirt track.

"The middle of nowhere," Dean responded, intentionally vague.

"Well, yes, I can see that," Castiel said, for there was nothing but vacant farmland and trees as far as the eye could see. "But why are we here?"

"See those trees over there?" Dean asked, pointing.

"Yes."

"What we want is behind them."

Castiel stared in that direction curiously as they drew nearer, trying to see through the thick branches but all he caught sight of was glimpses of white. He was no wiser once they'd past the trees. "Tents?"

"Marquees," Dean corrected him.

"There are a lot of cars," Castiel observed.

"That's what you'll find at a car show."

"We drove for over three hours to get to a car show?"

Suddenly Dean was beginning to wonder if bringing Cas had been a good idea. After all, cars weren't really Castiel's thing. He liked Dean's, which was good, but at the garage could only really identify them by colour. "Yeah?" he replied, so hesitantly it was almost a question.

"Will there be coffee?"
Dean laughed as he parked up. "Yeah, Cas. There'll be coffee. And burgers."

Castiel smiled at that. "Good."

They'd barely stepped out of the car when a steward came over to them. "Guys, you're in the wrong area. This is for visitors. Show parking is—"

"No, we're not here to show her off," Dean said, digging their tickets out of his jacket pocket. "We're just here to look."

"Oh." The steward almost looked disappointed. "Well, that's a real nice car. Shame you're not here to show it off. You might even find two or three people keen to make you an offer on it."

Dean grinned. "Thanks, but she's not for sale. Which way do we go?"

"Entry's along the top of the field, past the parking."

"Awesome. Come on, Cas."

They made their way in the direction the steward had sent them, trying to keep to the grass where possible to avoid standing in any large muddy patches.

Cars in all shapes and sizes and colours were arranged in several long lines along the the length of the field, owners standing beside them like proud parents keen to show off their new baby. He followed Dean around in relative boredom, dutifully offering an interested-sounding *hmm* whenever Dean spouted useless trivia about engine sizes and manufacturing histories. As much as Cas enjoyed spending time with Dean, and as nice as it was to see him so happy and relaxed and passionate, a small part of him wished that he hadn't brought him along.

Dean stopped in front of an unusual car with three wheels that seated only two people - but one behind the other.

"I've never seen one of these before," Dean told the owner in awe, before getting swept up in an in depth discussion about the weird-looking vehicle.

Nothing that they said made any sense to Cas - it was like a foreign language - so he took the opportunity to look around them. There was a surprising amount of people attending the event given it was being held so out of the way, but then Cas supposed that there were a lot of car enthusiasts in the world and they did need the space. There were people everywhere, mostly alone or in pairs, but occasionally in small groups. Some parents pushed babies awkwardly around in strollers; others dragged crying toddlers around by the wrist. Younger couples had their arms around each other as they strolled along, with their eyes on one other rather than the cars they'd paid to see.

One such couple kissed, and Castiel couldn't help but stare at them. He longed for what they had, all open smiles and carefree kisses, for it came easily to them. He looked away in embarrassment as the girl caught him staring, and Dean smacked his arm to get his attention.

"What are you staring at? Come on."

"Dean," he started hesitantly, as he followed Dean to the next car in the seemingly endless line of cars. "Is this a date?"

Dean's footsteps faltered. It was kind of a date, but he'd felt a lot more comfortable with the idea when he didn't have to say it out loud. They were kind of together now, even if nothing had changed dramatically, but when he'd planned this little outing it was only because Cas had complained that he
wanted to 'get out more'.

But Castiel took his silence as a negative. "I'm sorry, I shouldn't have—"

"No. I mean yeah, I guess... It is a date," Dean replied, with more confidence than he felt. Rubbing the back of his neck, he added, "Don't apologise."

"Then," Castiel's eyes flicked down, his fingers twitching at his side, "would you object if I held your hand?"

Dean wasn't really in to showy displays of affection, and hadn't even begun to process what being with Cas meant. Gazing into Cas's hopeful eyes he found himself feeling a little braver, so slowly reached out to take his hand with a small, nervous smile.

As Dean's fingers intertwined with his own Castiel felt a little giddy, but also more grounded than he'd felt since they'd embarked on this relationship that was new to both of them. He understood that to hold hands in public, away from the attention of their friends, was a small step for Dean - but it seemed like a much larger step for both of them. His grip was firm and his hand warm - if a little sweaty. He chanced a look at Dean, whose jaw was set in a hard line and who wore an expression that practically screamed, 'Go on. Give me shit for this. I dare you!' Cas could do nothing to ease his insecurities, for the key to resolving them lay inside Dean himself, so he resolved to simply relax and enjoy really being with him.

It all felt so alien and new, walking around with another guy's hand clasped awkwardly in his own. Castiel's hand was a heavy weight, refusing to let him forget he was in a relationship with another man. Dean found himself suddenly overwhelmed with self-consciousness, convinced that everybody they passed was staring at them. Dean had nothing against gay people, so why did he find this so damn difficult? At least they weren't likely to see anyone they knew. He wasn't ready to face their judgements yet.

* * *

"Admit it, you're bored," Dean said when they stopped at a burger van a little after noon. He sounded disappointed, more so in himself than Castiel's boredom.

"Yes," Castiel agreed, taking a large bite of his thin, over-priced lunch. A pathetic piece of wilted lettuce dangled from his lip, which he picked off and stared at with distaste before discarding it onto the grass.

"Why didn't you say something, instead of letting me drag you around all morning?"

"Because it made you happy." It was nice, seeing Dean so engaged with something, even if Cas didn't understand it himself. It was like when Dean chattered to him about the cars he was working on at the garage over lunch - he enjoyed Dean's enthusiasm.

"At the risk of sounding like a chick, I'm not happy if you're not happy."

Castiel snorted in amusement. "And, I suppose, because you planned all this for us, I didn't want to appear ungrateful."

At this, Dean looked rather ashamed. "It's not that big a deal. Bobby got given complimentary tickets but didn't want to come," he admitted.

"You brought me on a terrible date and didn't even pay?" Castiel laughed. Now he didn't feel quite so bad for having a terrible time - though he was a little embarrassed about his irritability that
morning.

"Hey! I bought lunch," Dean protested.

"Is that what you call this?" he teased, poking at his burger. "I've seen more meat on a chicken wing."

Dean burst out laughing. "Yeah, they are pretty pathetic," he agreed.

"I like yours much better."

Castiel's warm praise had him grinning ear to ear. "Look, we'll eat these and then we'll leave."

"But we haven't seen everything."

"You're bored, and I've seen enough. Eat up so we can go," Dean said, taking a huge bite of his burger. It said a lot about the meager size of the burger that it looked like he'd almost eaten a quarter of it in one go.

"Fine," Castiel huffed, picking another brown piece of lettuce out before taking a bite of his own burger. Dean's really were better. "But thank you," he grinned around a mouthful of chewed up food.

* * *

"This is much better," Castiel smiled, as they sat down in front of the TV with a couple of chilled sodas between them.

"You who said we should get out more," Dean grumbled.

"I appreciate the thought, Dean."

"Yeah, yeah, yeah."

"Perhaps, next time, we could plan something together?"

"You mean that we both might like?" Dean asked wryly.

"I didn't say that," Castiel smirked, taking a swig from his can.

"You didn't have to,"
"Answer me truthfully," Jo said, placing a soda down in front of Dean. "Does this whole 'new you' have anything to do with... you and Cas?"

"No," Dean said through gritted teeth "Now can you not mention... us... again?"

"My mom's hearing isn't that good!"

"I can hear a pin drop!" her mother called from across the room.

Dean looked at her pointedly.

"Okay, so I said that a little too loudly. I just don't get it," she said, keeping her voice down. "I mean, I do, but I don't. Cas loves you. It's obvious. You... Well, I'd say you love him, too, but I don't think you're ready to admit that to yourself, so I'll say you care about him. It's the fact that you've acted on it that I don't get. I've never seen you look twice at a guy you haven't tried to take a swing at over something."

Dean glared at his drink. "Your point?" he growled.

"My point," she said, crossing her arms, "is that as much as I want the two of you to be happy, I also don't want you to break his heart."

"We've been together for five minutes and everyone thinks I'm going to break up with him!" Dean hissed quietly, too angry to be self-conscious about his word choice.

"You're so full of macho bullshit, Dean. I always thought it was just who you were, but maybe you're subconsciously overcompensating."

"I'm not gay!" he exclaimed, struggling to keep his voice down.

"And yet you're dating a guy!" Jo shot back. "This is what I mean. If you can't accept that and step out of the closet, you're going to hurt him. And I don't want to see him hurt again. I like him."

"He doesn't swing that way," Dean smirked at her. He yelped as Jo whacked him with a dishcloth. "Hey, Ellen! There's a customer being abused over here!"

"You can take care of yourself," Ellen told him.

Jo hit him again. "That's for trying to change the subject. So, come on - what's behind the no drinking?"

Dean sighed. "I'm not going to get any peace tonight, am I?"

"Nope."

"I'm trying to see my ex's kid," he said, sitting back and spreading his arms openly. "Are you happy?"

She squinted at him. "You actually look like you're telling the truth."

"Maybe 'cause I am."
"So while we're on the topic of truth, where is Cas tonight? You didn't leave him home alone, did you?"

"He's out with friends," Dean said stiffly.

Jo snorted. "Your face says it all. He's out with that guy you don't like."

Dean just stared at her.

"Aw, are you jealous?" she teased, shrieking with laughter as he snatched the dishcloth out of her hands and attacked her with it.

"You'd better not be abusing my staff, now," Ellen said.

"No, ma'am," Dean replied with a grin, dropping back into his seat and tossing the cloth back at Jo.

When Ellen disappeared through the back, Jo started to sing quietly to herself. "Dean and Casiel, sitting in a tree: k-i-s-s-i-n-g."

* * *

When Castiel came home later that night he found Dean sitting in front of the TV, an open bottle of beer in his hand.

"I needed to clear my head," Dean said defensively, when he noticed Castiel's gaze aimed at the bottle.

"You mean cloud it," Cas said reproachfully, taking the beer from Dean. He carried it to the kitchen, where he drained it down the sink. Dean's lack of complaint concerned him slightly, until he returned to the living room.

"Jo said some stuff tonight... about me... hurting you. I think it took a while to sink in."

A tear trickled slowly down Dean's cheek, and it seemed to draw Cas closer to him. As it fell onto Dean's shirt, Cas dropped onto the sofa beside him. Reaching out, he pulled Dean close.

"Ca-as," Dean protested weakly, nevertheless allowing Cas to lie his head in his lap. He closed his eyes and sighed as Castiel's long fingers stroked comfortingly through his hair. "'S nice," he mumbled.

"I love you," Cas told him softly. "And I know that scares you."

An arm hugged Cas's thighs in response.

He wanted to keep talking - to express his niggling doubts that Dean was with him not because he wanted to be with him, but because he didn't want to be without him - but he held his tongue.

"Let's go out for lunch tomorrow," he suggested instead, changing the subject. "You have the morning off, so we have time. And we have the money, now. It would make a nice change from eating here or at the garage."

"Okay," Dean whispered.

They sat like that until whatever crappy movie Dean had been watching, in which women were laying dinosaur eggs and a crazy scientist lady had one burst from her chest in a scene that reminded Castiel of Alien, had ended. Dean was so uncharacteristically quiet that, if it wasn't for the fingers
tracing imaginary patterns onto his thigh, Cas would have thought he had fallen asleep.

Once the credits started to roll Dean disappeared to the kitchen, returning a moment later with another bottle of beer.

"Don't start," he grumbled, when he felt Castiel's eyes on him

"I can't lie to Lisa for you," Cas said, sounding torn. "Ben needs to come first."

Dean's heart clenched, not only at Cas's concern for the boy but also for clenched for breaking his promise to his ex. He never ceased to let others down. It was what he did best, after all. "It's one fucking night."

Cas opened his mouth to respond that he only had to go without for less than a month, but closed it again. He didn't want to fight, especially when Dean was clearly repressing whatever it was that was upsetting him. Instead he adjusted himself in his seat, moving to lean his head on Dean's shoulder as they settled down and waited to see what would come on next.

* * *

Another low-budget movie - this time about a ghost shark - and a few more beers later, Dean tossed his empty beer bottle aside, feeling pleasantly buzzed.

"It's late," Cas told him, glancing to look at the clock but otherwise not moving.

"Hmm," Dean agreed, shifting to look at the man who was snuggled against his side. "Do you know what my favourite bit of you is?" he asked, the question followed by a very un-Dean-like giggle.

"You haven't seen all of me," Castiel pointed out. He'd finally started allowing himself to think of what it might be like - to be with Dean, one day.

Another giggle. "Your eyes," Dean told him. "They're blue."

"I am aware of this," Castiel smiled, wondering where Dean was going with his observation.

"They're nice, like... water."

Was water nice? If one was thirsty, Cas supposed.

"Lagoons," Dean continued. "Somewhere hot, where the sea is clear."

Castiel looked down and away from Dean, a pleased but mildly embarrassed flush tinging his cheeks pink. What was he supposed to say to that? He'd once likened Dean's eyes to a forest canopy in his mind, but he couldn't say that aloud.

Thankfully Dean stood then, and Castiel didn't have to find some way to respond.

"'Night," Dean said, leaning to kiss Castiel's forehead.

And he kept leaning, until he was pushing Castiel into the back of the sofa which wasn't an entirely comfortable position. An irritated thought crossed his mind - that Dean never kissed his mouth. So Cas fisted his hands in Dean's Henley, pushing him away just enough that he could raise his mouth to meet Dean's lips.

Dean froze for a split second, during which Castiel panicked that he'd pushed Dean too far. Just because he'd had months to accept the idea he liked men. Stupid, stupid, stupid! But then Dean's
tongue nudged against his lips and, when they parted, slipped inside. It was warm and wet and a little weird, but excitement thrummed beneath Castiel's skin.

Breathless, they parted. Dean looked at Cas a little oddly, the ghost of a smirk on his lips, before heading to bed.

After a moment, Castiel ran a finger across his bottom lip, remembering the feeling of Dean's against his, and smiled to himself.

* * *

The next morning Dean came through to the kitchen, greeted as usual by the smell of coffee filling the air. "Mmm, I missed this when you were gone," he admitted.

"What? Not having to brew your own coffee?" Cas asked with a laugh.

Dean chuckled as Castiel stood to pour him a mug of the strong, black liquid. "I can pour my own, you know."

"I know," Cas said, smiling as Dean took it from him.

"You look happy this morning."

"I have reason to be," Cas told him. He reached out a hand to touch Dean's elbow, letting his hand ghost down his lightly freckled arm until he reached his hand giving it a squeeze.

As he leaned in to give Dean a kiss, however, Dean turned away to grab the box of cereal. Now behind him, Cas closed his eyes and took a breath, trying desperately not to feel too hurt.

"Do you want some more?" Dean asked, shaking the box, "or will I just put this away?"

"I've had enough," Cas said sharply.

Dean turned to him, eyebrows raised. "No need to bite my head off," he said, clipping the bag and putting the box back in the cupboard. "Unless you weren't talking about the cereal."

He took Castiel's silence to mean that he hadn't been talking about the cereal. With a sigh, he ignored his breakfast and forced Cas to look at him.

"Look, I admit, I messed up last night," he said, aware that he wasn't actually apologising. "but I'm back on track today, and it's not like I was drunk—"

"You were drunk," Cas argued.

"I was... I'd had a few," Dean conceded.

"No, you were drunk," Cas repeated harshly. "I can tell by the way you touched me."

"What the hell's that supposed to mean?"

"Do you think I haven't noticed you have to be drunk to touch me?" Cas snapped bitterly, pulling away.

"What? Cas, come on—"

"No, you 'come on'! After a few beers, you're wonderful, but then in the morning... You're distant.
Physically. You said you wanted to be with me - to give us a chance - but if I disgust you, then—"

"Hey. Hey," Dean said, grabbing Cas's shoulder a little too roughly in his haste to make him listen. Cas stared at him, waiting for him to say whatever it was he was going to say. But Dean didn't know what he was going to say. He knew what he should say, but Cas was right - he did need some Dutch courage to relax fully around him now; a few drinks in him to reduce the voices in his head to a whisper that could be ignored.

"Please don't remind me that this is 'weird' for you," Cas pleaded, his voice breaking. "I don't need to hear that again."

"Okay," Dean murmured.

Eyes wet, his voice shaking, Cas put an end to the conversation. "I don't want to argue with you. Can we just... clean this place up... and have a nice lunch today?"

"Yeah," Dean agreed, hesitantly reaching out to rub a hand up and down Cas's arm. When he didn't pull away again, he counted it as a win.

*I * * *

After they washed up their breakfast dishes, Cas and cleaned the sink and worktops while Dean swept and mopped the floor. While they waited for the floor to dry, Dean watched a rerun of Dr Sexy MD and Cas sat quietly filling in another one of his crosswords.

Having seen the episode twice before, however, Dean found his attention starting to wander. About three feet across the room to where Cas was sitting, to be precise.

Lines creased his brow, furrowed in concentration as he tapped a pencil off the page - perhaps spelling out possible words before he committed to writing them in - as he scrutinised the page with narrowed eyes, seemingly oblivious to Dean's attention. He looked... stronger, now. A better diet and regular meals, plus his habit of jogging in the mornings while Dean was at work, had really improved his figure.

The longer he stared, the more he started to appreciate that Cas was in fact a good-looking guy. Sure, he wasn't oblivious to his own good looks - they'd won him many a woman at the end of a night - but Cas was... well... He'd even venture as far as to call him devastatingly handsome - at least in his mind.

Cas was handsome, compassionate, and highly intelligent in an unassuming way, whereas he was... he was a high school drop-out with 'repressed emotions' and 'bad drinking habits'. Dean scowled at Castiel's puzzle book as if it had personally offended him, suddenly reminded of the list written in Castiel's careful cursive. Cas would be better off without him, he realised painfully. Dean wasn't good for him; would never be good enough for him. Maybe crawling back to him, begging for a second chance, had been a mistake. Maybe Cas would better off if he had stayed away.

"Do you still want to go out for lunch?" Cas asked.

His voice pulled Dean out of his thoughts, but he hadn't registered the words. "Huh?"

"Lunch," he said again. "Do you still want to go?"

"Oh, yeah," Dean replied, immediately turning the TV off and standing up.

"I didn't mean— You can finish the episode."
"I've seen it before," Dean shrugged.

Castiel looked at the clock. "Well, if we leave much later we might be late for work," he supposed.

"Alright then," Dean said, as if that decided it.

A moment passed, during which the two of them just looked at each other, then Cas slipped his pencil into the pages of his book as a marker and closed it.

"Ok, I'll go get ready."

* * *

"I don't trust this place."

"Dean, you've barely set foot in the door."

He looked around at the large number of decorative plants and mismatched furniture that looked like it had been 'recycled' off a junk pile. "It looks like it's run by hippies."

"That's because it is run by hippies," a familiar female voice cut in humorously.

They looked behind them in unison to see Pamela standing behind them. "Hello, Castiel. Day off?" she asked, glancing at Dean. Recognition flitted across her face, but she said nothing.

"Only the morning," Cas told her. "Would you like to join us for lunch?"

"Maybe she's meeting someone else for lunch," Dean pointed out, careful to keep all traces of hope from his voice.

"No, I'm not meeting anyone," she smirked. "I'd love to join you."

Shock crossed Castiel's face. "I'm being rude - Pamela, this is Dean."

"Hi, Dean."

"It's been a long time," Dean said through gritted teeth as he shook Pamela's outstretched hand.

Castiel turned to him with a confused look on his face. "You said you didn't know her."

She glanced between them, obviously aware that they needed a moment to themselves. "Why don't you grab a table while I see if we can't get a pitcher of ice water."

Her heels clicked on the linoleum as she went in search of a waitress.

"I can't believe you know her!" Castiel hissed once she was out of earshot.

Dean ignored him and started looking for an empty table.

"Don't walk away from me, Dean!" he whispered angrily.

"I'm not walking away from you - Pamela wanted us to grab a table," Dean said, sliding into an empty seat and glaring out the window.

Castiel slid in opposite him. "You lied to me," Castiel accused.

"I didn't— Okay, so maybe I did. It's not that big a deal."
"Not that big a deal? Dean, you've told me things you've never told anyone, yet you couldn't admit you knew my counsellor?"

"It was a pretty shit time in my life, okay?" Dean took a breath. "And I didn't lie completely - I told you I had to take drug counselling. I just didn't tell you it was her," he said, cocking his head in her direction.

"You told me you didn't know her!" he growled. "That was a downright lie."

Dean continued glaring out the window, refusing to acknowledge that Cas was right. His eyes focused on the other man's reflection, trying to judge how pissed he was at him.

Cas was tidying the condiments in the little dish that sat on their table and refusing to look at him. When he was done, he looked over at Pamela. "Does she know you lied about them being yours?" he asked.

"No," Dean admitted. "I didn't really talk to her."

"What did you do then?"

Dean shifted in his seat, obviously not wanting to discuss it, but replied, "In group sessions I just listened. In our one-to-one sessions I mostly just glared at her."

"He didn't expect Castiel to start laughing. "What?"

"Why am I not surprised?"

A reluctant grin spread across Dean's face. "She wasn't happy."

"I can't blame her. She doesn't like time-wasters."

Pamela chose that moment to rejoin them and Dean's smile faded.

"Their tomato mozzarella pasta is to die for," she announced, sitting beside Castiel and reaching for a menu. "But I'm supposed to be avoiding carbs..."

Dean and Cas followed her lead and each grabbed menus. As soon as he saw the cheeseburger listed he knew what he would order, but he concentrated on the menu so that he didn't have to talk.

"I come here once a week, which doesn't help my diet," Pamela chatted away. "Have you been here before?"

"No," Castiel replied. "I haven't spent a lot of time in this area of town."

Dean scowled at the menu. There was a whole sub-section of 'light snacks' dedicated to baked potatoes with a variety of fillings, which he suddenly found very interesting.

"Not even when you were, ah, seeking accommodation?"

Beans, cheese, tuna mayonnaise...

"You don't have to put it so politely," Cas smiled at her. "You're allowed to say homeless. But no. Not even then. There were, shall I say, better areas to inhabit."

The text blurred on the laminated page as Dean's focus shifted to eavesdropping on their conversation.
"What do you mean by that?"

"There are no parks with benches to sleep on..."

Dean remembered finding Cas sleeping on a park bench in the cold and his heart ached.

"...and the doorways are too narrow to be sheltered from the rain or wind. And you're less likely to find people kind enough to give you some change and more likely to find cops telling you to 'move along'. If you're sleeping among the trash they don't care so long as you aren't stealing, but they don't want you in a nice neighbourhood like this. You make it look dirty."

Dean stretched one leg out; just enough to touch Cas's and no more. Castiel jerked his back automatically, but then let his leg rest against Dean's. He wouldn't know it was intentional, but hopefully it would be enough to remind him that he had Dean now.

"Are you ready to order?" a plump middle-aged woman with dark hair asked.

"To hell with the diet," Pamela announced. "I'm having the pasta."

"Dean? Do you know what you're having?" Castiel asked quietly, as Pamela gave the waitress her order.

"You know me," he grinned, tucking the menu into the stand and sitting back. "I'll have a cheeseburger, extra cheese, and fries. Oh, and if you do any of that side-salad crap, I don't want it."

"I think I'll have the sun-dried tomato, mozzarella, and pesto panini. It sounds nice. And unlike Dean I would like any side-salad that comes with it," he told her, shooting a playful smile at Dean.

"Do you want some fries with that as well, honey?"

Castiel blushed slightly. "No, thank you."

"So, Cas tells me you're a mechanic," Pam said once their waitress had left.

"Cut the bull, okay?" Dean told her. "Cas knows. You don't have to pretend like we've never laid eyes on each other before."

She stared at him, eyes narrowed, but there was amused sparkle in their green depths that took the edge off her piercing glare. "Alright," she conceded, "but you can't deny there's a lot I don't know about you."

The thinly veiled dig at his reluctance to open up to her did not go unnoticed by Dean. He supposed that she would have to choose her words very carefully over the next hour, and a part of him was tempted not to make it easy on her.

"Yeah, I'm a mechanic," he confirmed.

"He's a very good one," Cas said warmly.

Dean scoffed. "We've all had the same training. We're all good at what we do, otherwise we wouldn't have jobs."

"You shouldn't downplay your skills," Pamela chided softly.

"I'm not, I'm just—"
"Unwilling, or unable, to take a compliment," she finished for him. "Why is it so hard for you to accept it when someone says something positive about you?"

"See, this is why I hated going to see you," Dean told her, leaning back in his seat. She smiled apologetically. "I'm sorry. You can take the therapist out of the office..."

"It's sort of the opposite of what I worked on with Pamela," Cas said. "Instead of accepting compliments without question, I had to learn to reject insults."

"That's a nice way of putting it, Castiel," she smiled.

"Teacher's pet," Dean muttered under his breath.

Cas rolled his eyes.

"One pasta, one panini, and one plate of cholesterol."

Castiel reached over and snatched a few of Dean's fries as soon as their server's back was turned.

"Hey! You said you didn't want fries!"

"I only wanted two or three," Cas grinned.

"Well that's, like..." Dean counted quickly. "Seven!"

"I'd better make it a round ten, then," he said, grabbing a few more.

"Hey!" Dean protested with a disbelieving grin. "This is my lunch!"

Pamela laughed at their exchange. "I'm glad you found someone you feel so comfortable around," she told Cas. "You're a good fit for each other."

"It's very liberating. After Dean found out I was gay, and he accepted me without question, I saw a light at the end of the tunnel for the first time in years."

Dean stared at Cas, letting his words sink in. He hadn't realised - or believed - just how important he was to Castiel. Even if it had been out of selfishness, maybe he hadn't screwed up Castiel's life completely by asking him to stay.

"I'm lucky, now, to be surrounded with so many wonderful people." He looked at his plate. "In fact, I'm thinking about coming out to a few others."

"That's wonderful, Cas," Pamela told him warmly. "I'm very proud of you."

"I think it's the right time to tell my colleagues at the garage."

Dean choked on his burger, tears filling his eyes as he struggled to dislodge the half-chewed mass of meat and bread from his throat. Castiel's hand thumped uselessly across his back as Pamela poured a glass of water and passed it over to him. Spluttering into the glass as he took several awkward gulps, the food softened slightly and slipped uneasily down his throat.

"Yeah, thanks, Cas," Dean said hoarsely, swatting away the hand that was still slapping his back.

"Are you alright?"
"Peachy," Dean croaked. He felt naked under Castiel's analytical gaze. "They don't have to know about us until you're ready," Cas assured him quietly, as if reading his mind.

"Did you two do anything for Valentine's Day?" Pamela asked, changing the subject.

Dean's eyes flicked briefly to her, before dropping back to his food. He was grateful that she'd changed the subject, but wished she'd picked something a bit further away from the topic of their relationship. He took a bite of his burger and chewed it slowly, while Cas gushed about the flowers he'd bought him.

After they'd finished eating, Cas excused himself to go to the toilet.

"Cas might not see the way you shut down when we talk about your relationship - or perhaps he doesn't want to see it, I don't know - but be careful that you don't hurt him."

"I don't see how our— we are any of your business," Dean growled, the word relationship getting stuck in his throat.

"Castiel is my patient. His well-being is my business."

"So, what? You're saying I'm not what's good for him?"


He glared at her. "If I want therapy, I'll come to your office. Until then, stop trying to psycho-analyse me!"

She sat back in her seat. "Okay," she agreed. Then her expression turned thoughtful. "How's this for an offer - if you do want to talk, I'll give you one session free of charge. With no obligation to come back," she added, as Dean's expression turned argumentative.

"Don't hold your breath," he grumbled, wiping the frown off his face as Cas returned to their table. "Ready to go?" he asked.

"Yes," Cas smiled. "I paid our bill while I was passing the counter."

"I'd better settle mine," Pam smiled, sliding smoothly out of her seat.

"This was my treat, Pamela," Cas told her. "I'm sure it's not appropriate, but I just want to say thank you for everything you've done for me. And are still doing."

"You're probably right, but thank you," she smiled. "But it's been good getting reaquainted with Dean. I think this lunch has been beneficial." Her gaze flicked briefly to Dean "To all of us."

Dean rolled his eyes. "I'll see you next week."

The three of them headed towards the door, Dean leading the way - desperate to get away from Pamela. Behind him, he heard her talking in a hushed voice to Cas.

"You know, I can see why you like him. Look at that perky little ass - you could bounce a nickel off that thing!" she joked playfully.
He turned around, intending on telling her to stop objectifying him, but stopped himself when he saw the adorable blush colouring Castiel's cheeks. So, he's been looking. Conflicted emotions churned through him, feeling both flattered and uncomfortable at Cas's attention, so he did what he did best - deflected. "Goes with my perky nipples," he smirked, winking at her.

"Did you have to flirt with my counsellor?" Cas asked once they were seated in the car.

"I wasn't flirting!" Dean exclaimed, crossing his arms petulantly. "If anything she was objectifying me!"

Castiel's eyes raked over Dean's body. "She's right, though - you do have a nice ass."

And, okay, Dean couldn't stay irritated at Cas when he looked at him with such damn sincerity in his eyes.

"Just don't stare at it at work," he told him, putting the car into gear and pulling out onto the road.

* * *

As they watched another rerun of Dr Sexy together later that night, Dean's right hand was getting warm and sweaty. Cas had been holding it, clasped between both of his own as if afraid Dean might leave him, for the better part of an hour. Every now and then his thumb would brush across the back of his hand, which felt kind of nice.

"You're going to need to let go at some point," he joked.

Immediately Cas released him, as suddenly as if he'd been burned.

"No, I didn't mean..." Damn it. Dean had two choices - be glad to have his hand back, feel a lot more comfortable, and make Cas feel awkward, or... His conversation with Pamela earlier that day played through his mind. He didn't think he was good enough for Cas, but he wanted to be. At least, he thought he did. This whole thing was so new and... and... and a little bit scary, if he was being honest. But at the same time, when it was just the two of them, it was oddly freeing. Like all the crap he carried didn't matter, because Cas knew and didn't hold it against him. There was no-one else in their apartment so, before he could change his mind, he grabbed Cas's hand and gave it a squeeze.

Smiling, Cas dropped his head onto Dean's shoulder.

That wasn't so bad. Okay, so his hand was still sweating and his heart was thumping in his chest, but he was fine. He'd told Cas a hundred times that there was nothing wrong with him for liking other dudes, so why was it that he could kiss a girl in public but could barely hold Castiel's hand in private?
"So have you fucked him yet?"

Cas spluttered into his coffee. He'd left Pamela's office with the intention of heading home and putting on a load of washing before Dean came to pick him up for work, but he'd bumped into Balthazar on his way there and, before he knew it, they were standing in line for coffee.

"Because you've waited for him so long I'm surprised your balls haven't shrivelled up and dropped off."

"My sex life is none of your business!" Castiel informed Balthazar hotly, the skin on the back of his neck growing warm despite the cool air.

His friend looked at him in smug amusement, confident that Castiel would answer the question regardless. "Does that mean you have a sex life?"

Castiel held his gaze for a long moment before dropping his gaze to stare at his coffee. "No."

Balthazar let out a resigned sigh and took another sip of his cappuccino. "You wouldn't be the only one to think I had none," Castiel grumbled into his cup. At Balthazar's confusion, he elaborated. "My therapist thinks I 'avoid confrontation'."

"I could have told you that for free."

"Balthazar!"

"I'm sorry, Cassie, but it's the truth - you do things to make other people happy!"

"That's not true. If it was, I'd be married off to some girl from my old church by now."

"That's different. Your father forced you to leave - that wasn't your choice."

Castiel looked dejected. "So what if I want to make people happy? I'm happy."

"Are you?"

Castiel frowned at his friend.

"It's not healthy to wait for someone forever," Balthazar continued.

"I'm not waiting any more," Cas pointed out.

"Aren't you?"

Castiel set his jaw. "There's a difference between waiting for someone and taking it slow."

"Taking it slow implies you're actually going to get laid."

Castiel gestured in defeat, hissing when coffee sloshed out of his cup and onto his hand. "As my friend, would you please let it go?"

"As your friend I can't 'let it go' because I care about you, but if you want to change the subject I won't stop you. Just know that my couch is still empty."
"We've been really lucky with the weather lately," Castiel said pointedly. "Although it's still cold, it's been rather sunny and dry."

Balthazar rolled his eyes, but nevertheless agreed with his friend.

* * *

A short while later, Castiel carried two takeaway burgers to the garage, the bag keeping his hands warm. If he was being honest with himself, he started to regret having coffee with Balthazar. His friend was caring in the most frustrating way, and Castiel was having enough doubts of his own without Balthazar airing his own concerns.

"Cas?" Dean looked at his watch when he saw him approach, thinking he'd lost track of time and forgotten to pick him up. But it was only just time for lunch. "You're early."

"I went for a walk after I saw Pamela. Caught up with Balthazar over coffee, had a look around the shops... Brought lunch," he added, holding up the bag of burgers.

"Awesome!" Dean wiped his hands on his overalls and grabbed a burger out of the bag.

"You should wash your hands first," Cas told him.

Dean ignored him as he bit into his burger. "Mmm," he moaned in satisfaction as he chewed, meat juices dribbling out of the bun and down his jaw. He wiped them away with a drag of his sleeve.

Cas sat in silence, picking at the sesame seeds on top of his bun while Dean ate. "Balthazar and I argued," he announced out of nowhere. "Again."

Dean froze for a second as he digested that small piece of information. Slowly he resumed chewing, then swallowed. "About?"

Cas paused before answering. "You," he admitted.

"What about me?" he asked carefully, not quite succeeding in masking his resentment at Balthazar talking shit about him.

Cas sniffed. "He thinks you're going to have some crisis of sexuality and break my heart," he answered, trying too hard to sound like it was a ridiculous notion. "And that... and that you're never going to sleep with me, and that I'm wasting my time loving you."

Dean looked at him for a long moment, feeling his face grow warmer, though Castiel refused to meet his gaze - instead finding the ground beneath their feet a lot more interesting. Wrapping one arm around Cas's shoulders and giving him a gentle squeeze, he did his best to soothe him. "I'm here, aren't I?"

Finally Cas met his gaze, a small smile tugging at one corner of his mouth. Instead of replying, he simply laid his head on Dean's shoulder. Dean was here, and he was his.

Andy laughed and whistled teasingly at them as he passed.

Immediately Dean snatched his arm back and cleared his throat.

The moment gone, they ate in an uncomfortable silence for a minute before Cas gestured to the car Dean had been working on. "That's a beautiful car."

"She reminds me of you," Dean commented.
For a moment Castiel thought he meant the colour – the rich, deep blue paint matched his eyes – but then he realised Dean would be more technical than that. "In what way?"

"She's got a raspy voice," Dean smirked as he took another large bite, comparing the sound of the engine to Castiel’s gravelly tones.

"Oh? So what's wrong with me, then?" Castiel smiled, as the conversation took a more relaxed turn. He liked their conversations over lunch. He knew nothing about cars, but he liked listening to Dean and had even learned a thing or two – in between their bouts playful banter.

"Oh, you've probably got a blown exhaust," Dean grinned.

"How do you find out for sure?"

"Well," Dean said, reaching into the back and grabbing a handful of fries. He chewed thoughtfully before answering. "First I'd need to take a look at your flexi pipe."

Castiel chuckled. "Okay." There had been a time when he'd have reasoned with himself that if it was a joke it didn't count - that if he didn't mean it he wouldn't go hell - but now he could discuss these things relatively comfortably. Though moreso with Balthazar than with Dean, for he was a lot more comfortable with expressing and talking about his sexuality.

Cas may have understood the innuendo of what Dean had said immediately, but it took a moment to register in Dean's mind. "I mean... Well... It's a... Um... You..." he said, gesturing wildly and spraying half-chewed fries everywhere, but he couldn't for the life of him find a way to take the words back. He tried to swallow and started choking, his face turning red.

Castiel thumped him on the back, not really sure if he was helping or not.

"Damn," Dean breathed, eyes watering as he eventually cleared his airway. "I'm sorry. I have no idea where that came from. I wasn't... I didn't mean..."

Cas shook his head slightly. "No, no, I'm sorry. I know you didn't."

There was a small, almost suffocating pause as Dean took another, smaller bite of his burger and chewed it slowly. It was an uncomfortable silence and he didn't like it. He swallowed.

"You know, you probably blew your exhaust on that curry you had last night," he smirked, not taking his eyes from his burger.

Castiel stared at him in shock, and then burst out laughing. Dean joined in, throwing his head back as he guffawed loudly.

"You... are... disgusting!" Castiel protested in between gasped breaths.

"What are you two idjits laughing about?" Bobby complained as he walked over.

"Nothing, Bobby," Dean grinned.

"Huh. That'll be right. Listen, Walker's bringing his car in. Says it was sluggish getting up to speed after he stopped at a red light."

Dean groaned. Gordon Walker was an asshole who loved to piss Dean off. "There was nothing wrong with her last week when he'd brought her in. "Can't one of the other guys take it?"

"No. Sorry, Dean."
Dean sighed. "Fine," he grumbled. "But what about this one?" He motioned to the one he'd been talking to Cas about.

"That can wait. Walker wants his car fixed by the end of the day."

"Of course he does," Dean spat.

"Dean," Bobby warned.

"Yeah, I know, I know. 'Don't wind him up.'"

"And don't let him wind you up," Bobby added as he walked back over to his office.

"Who's Walker?" Castiel asked.

"A pain in my ass," Dean mumbled.

"Dean?"

"He's just an asshole who's got it in for me. He winds me up and tries to get me into shit with Bobby every time he's here."

"Why?"

"Because he doesn't like it that I call him out on his bullshit."

They pretty much ate in silence after that. When Benny drove the tow truck into the yard, carrying a smashed up, gold-coloured Lincoln, they both waved as he passed. As Dean finished his burger, Gordon's red Camino could be seen indicating to turn off the main road. Cas bagged their rubbish, taking it and the remainder of his own lunch into the office.

"Charlie! I didn't realise you were here," Cas greeted the red-haired woman sitting in his chair.

She grinned at him. "I wanted to get a head start at setting up this website." Then her expression turned to one of horror. "By the way, did you see how many toolbars he has installed on this thing?"

Castiel tried not to laugh. "Not as many as he used to."

She visibly shuddered. "Well I'm not leaving until I've uninstalled the rest. I've defragged this thing for you and installed a different browser. It's so much nicer than Explorer; doesn't crash nearly as often. Oh, and I know you're using a free anti-virus but I changed it for a better one and you might want to see about paying for the full version."

"I'll mention it to Bobby," he responded with a smile. "So, in between all of this did you actually start the website?"

"Oh yeah, I drafted out a version at home. Your boss will need to tell me if he wants any changes or a different layout or something."

"Bobby doesn't know a thing about computers other than 'they have buttons',' Cas told her, moving another chair over to sit beside her. "Why don't you show me?"

"Okay, so you've got the main page here, with links to—"

"I'm sure your boss doesn't pay you to flirt," the driver of the Camino said, storming into the office.
Castiel leaned away from Charlie, opening his mouth to tell the man that he wasn't flirting, but then realised his attention wasn't on him.

"Hey love, get your boss for me."

Castiel cleared his throat to get the man's attention, finally tearing Charlie's focus from the computer screen.

"Excuse me?" she asked.

"Your boss? The one who pays your wage? Go get him."

Irritation boiled under Castiel's skin at the general rudeness and casual sexism the man exuded.

"Walker."

The man turned round to see Bobby standing in the doorway. "Singer."

"Get the paperwork, son," Bobby instructed Cas, before leading Gordon outside.

"Who's the new guy? He doesn't look like a mechanic. You'd better not be letting him anywhere near my car!"

"Cool it, Walker," Bobby said calmly. He motioned at Dean who was walking over, rubbing his hands on his overalls. "Dean's going to take a look at it."

Cas came out with a form to sign, which Gordon scrawled his untidy signature in the boxes Cas had conveniently marked with an 'x'.

"This is one of Dean's friends," Bobby continued. "He's helping me out in the office."

"What kind of man does a woman's job?"

Castiel was ignoring him, but Dean could see his shoulders tense.

"Keys," he snapped. When Bobby glared at him, he added, "Please."

"I know what state my car's in, Winchester – I don't want to see so much as a scratch on her when you're finished!"

Dean rolled his eyes, and once he got the keys off Gordon drove the car around the block to get a feel for it, but he couldn't see what Gordon was complaining about. When he got back to Bobby's he drove her into the garage and popped the hood.

"Come on then, girl. What's Gordon done to you now?" he asked as took a look inside her.

* * *

"There's something not quite right about Bobby's latest little charity case."

Dean could hear Gordon from where he was finishing up on his car and clenched his jaw. Cas was not a charity case. Bobby had agreed to help him, yes, but he'd more than proven his worth.

"What do you mean?" Rufus asked. He was a decent guy, and an old friend of Bobby's passing through town.
"No real man would be an office girl." He lowered his tone conspiratorially. "He's probably a fag"

"And? What's your point?" Rufus asked tiredly.

He knew better than to argue with Gordon - the best way to deal with him was listen to him rant until he ran out of things to say. Unfortunately Dean was too hot-headed to think before he spoke - especially where Gordon was concerned. The man knew just which of Dean's buttons to push.

"He's a friend of Winchester's, right?" Gordon asked suspiciously. "So how do you know Dean's not queer, too?"

Dean was so distracted by Gordon's words that he wasn't paying as much attention as he should have been, and he hissed as a flash of pain shot through his thumb. It was bleeding, and badly, so he'd need to get some gauze and tape from the medical kit. He strode out of the garage, intent on marching straight into the side office, but when Gordon shot him a smug grin he changed direction and had him pressed up against the wall within seconds.

"If you've got something to say about Cas, or me, you say it to my face!" he spat furiously.

"Okay. The only reason Bobby gave your little faggot boyfriend a job was because he felt sorry for him!"

Dean's hand fist without thinking and then Rufus and Bobby were wrestling him away from Gordon.

"You know that's all you were, too?" Gordon taunted him. "A charity case? Singer took you in out of pity!"

"Get out of here, Walker!" Bobby yelled, taking the keys from Dean and tossing them to him. "You – office. Now!" he growled to Dean.

Dean strode into the office, and Castiel mumbled something about going to get a coffee before disappearing. Dean didn't point out that the coffee machine was in the office because he was grateful that Cas wasn't going to hang around and listen to Bobby rip him a new one.

"I'll send you the bill!" he heard Bobby calling to Gordon.

If there was one thing Dean didn't take kindly to, it was taking what he hadn't earned. He'd worked damned hard these past few years to prove Bobby had been right to trust him. Because that's what it had been: trust – a second chance. With his history, it had been hard to get another job.

"We all deserve second chances, boy," he'd said.

And if it had been pity, then...

"Walker's talking out of his ass," Bobby said as he walked in.

"Huh?"

"I can read you like a book, boy, and I'm not a charity. I hired you because you're a damn good mechanic, not because of who your daddy was."

Dean huffed a small smile. "I'm not gay," he said defensively.

"I don't care! But I do care about how you behave when you're at work."
Dean flushed in embarrassment. "I'm sorry, Bobby."

"Good. Take five minutes and calm down. What did you do to your hand?"

"Cut it."

Bobby looked at him suspiciously.

"On Gordon's car, not his face," Dean added.

"Okay. The last thing I want is Gordon charging you with assault. I need you around here, you know."

"Yeah. Sorry."

"I know you are," Bobby sighed.

"Dean?" Castiel said quietly.

Dean looked up to find Cas hovering in the doorway. "Cas."

"Are you... alright?" he asked.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Cas."

"I'll leave the two of you alone. I've got work to do, anyway. So do you, of course, but don't let me stop you taking a swing at my customers and taking five minutes to yourselves every time you feel like it..." Bobby grumbled as he walked away.

Dean just grinned, because he knew Bobby was only pulling his leg. Bobby disliked Gordon as much as Dean did, and knew just how short Dean's temper could be. He was lucky he hadn't gotten to take a proper swing at Gordon, so Bobby could just let it go. He and Cas looked at each other in silence for a moment.

Castiel was the first to speak. "You tried to hit him."

"Yeah."

"You don't even sound sorry," he observed coolly.

"Why should I?" Dean retorted. "The guy's a dick. He was asking for it."

"He asked you to hit him, did he?"

"What? No. Cas, what did I tell you about being so literal—"

"You can't just go around hitting people, Dean!"

"So, what? You're not even going to listen to my side of it?"

"Your side? Dean, I saw you! You walked up to him and punched him in the face! What's to say that one day you won't hit me?" Cas exclaimed in a rush, his confidence wavering as his ears caught up with his mouth.

Dean stared at him. "What?" he asked, despite the fact he'd heard every word, because he was so desperate to have heard him wrong.
Cas looked up at him, suddenly very defensive. "You... you lash out when you get mad, Dean. And when I've done something to upset you you'll punch the walls, or hit the worktop, and sometimes I find myself wondering 'when will it be me?' and I just—"

He froze and fell silent as Dean suddenly wrapped his arms around him.

"I would never, ever hurt you, Cas," he promised. "You're like family to me. And I don't hurt family. I only hurt the people who hurt my family."

Family, Cas thought to himself, closing his eyes as Dean held him. He liked the sound of that. Castiel had always felt as though he never quite belonged anywhere. However, being in Dean's arms? It felt like home.

As those strong arms dropped and he stepped away again, however, Dean burst the happy bubble that had swelled up inside Cas. "Besides, you didn't hear what that guy was saying," Dean told him.

"What?" Cas asked, frowning slightly. "What did he say?"

"He said... He called you my boyfriend."

"He said it like it was a bad thing," he offered weakly.
The look on Castiel's face said, that's not a good enough excuse. "I see."

"So now you know why I— You see?"

"I see now that whatever it is that I thought we had - what it was you told me we had - is an embarrassment to you."

"No, that's not—"

"If I was a woman you wouldn't care what people said about us."

"I..." But Dean had no answer for that because he knew, deep down, it was true..

"I thought you were different from my father, Dean. But if being gay isn't such a bad thing, then why do you take offence at the thought of it?"

"I dunno," Dean sighed, running a hand through his hair. "I just..." He trailed off with a shrug, unable to verbalise his feelings.

Castiel was shaking, through from anger or disappointment, Dean didn't know. "I have to go," he said, and it was whispered so quietly that Dean almost didn't hear him.

"Cas—"

"Tell Bobby that I'm sorry but I don't feel very well. I'll see you at home, Dean."

* * *

Dean tried to keep his head down and give Cas the space he clearly wanted, but a little over an hour later he dug his phone out of his pocket and headed into the yard.
"Now, I know you're not making personal calls on my time," Bobby told him pointedly.

Dean held up five fingers in his direction, the phone already pressed against his ear. "Just give me five minutes, Bobby."

"Hmph. Exactly who's in charge around here, huh?"

Dean ignored his boss's half-hearted complaints as he walked out of earshot. The phone rang and rang in his ear, until the call timed out with a beep. Frowning at it, Dean tried Cas's cell instead. When he got no answer on that, he started to worry. It wasn't like Cas not to answer his phone. Of course, it was rare that Dean did something to make him this mad. He went back to work as he wondered where Cas could be. There weren't many places that he knew of - Pamela's office, Balthazar's house, the church, the Roadhouse... He was sure Cas had said he was going home, and the more he dwelled on why Cas wasn't picking up the more worried he became.

"Bobby, can I take off early tonight?"

"You can leave once you finish that Buick and if you work the time back this weekend," Bobby told him, not looking up from the paperwork Cas had left him with. "Andy's got some doctor's thing so I'm gonna be short for an hour or so."

"Thanks," Dean said, turning to leave.

"And Dean?" he called after him.

Dean turned around to meet his boss's glaring eyes.

"Don't upset the boy any more."

He looked at his feet. "Yeah."

"I mean it. He's the only friend you've got."

"I know."

"And I need him here," Bobby added.

Dean chuckled despite himself.

"I hate paperwork."

* * *

The apartment door was unlocked when Dean got home.

"Cas?!" Dean shouted. "Answer the damn phone!"

Cas looked at the clock. "You're not due back for almost two hours."

"I know, but I called and you weren't answering the phone so—"

"I was ignoring it. I didn't want to talk to you. I thought I'd made that clear at work."

Dean's shoulders slumped a little. "I was worried about you, dude! I didn't know where you were, or what you were doing—"
"I don't want to hurt myself, Dean!" Cas snapped irritably. "Not any more."

"That's not what I—" Dean let out a breath, forcing himself to talk in a less aggressive manner. "Yeah, okay. I know that. I just... Look, answer the damn phone when I call you!" he cried, almost angrily.

"I have a life. I am making a life for myself! I'm getting counselling, I have a job, and a roof over my head. I even have friends, now!" Cas continued in protest but, even as he spoke, his words rang hollow in his ears.

His friends were largely Dean's friends, he lived in Dean's apartment, and as for his job... Dean had helped him get that job. Dean had gotten him that job. Castiel had had nothing to do with it. It had all been Dean.

That was the exact same thing his father had done. His father had got him his job when he thought he was spending too much time at college. His father had tried to force him to spend less time away from home; away from him. And now Dean was doing the exact same thing. He lived with Dean. He worked with Dean. He socialised with Dean.

"Cas?"

Dean was frowning at him in concern. How long had he stood there silently, lost in his own thoughts?

"My father was very controlling," Cas heard himself say. "He'd beat us if we stepped out of line, and would tell us that good little boys wouldn't question their fathers. Good little boys would do what they were told." He swallowed. "I found it... hard... to follow his rules. Blind obedience made life easy, which my brothers appreciated, but I found life tedious. There were times when I just wanted to be like all the other kids, but then I'd feel guilty for being so selfish. What I'm trying to say, Dean, is that I know you're trying to help, but I can't let you take his place."

"Cas, I'm not trying to take his place," Dean told him.

For years Cas had repressed his emotions over his upbringing - anger, jealousy, fear - as he was raised to be a grateful, dutiful son. But now he had a taste of normality, and he wanted to feast on it. "Don't you see, Dean?" he exploded. "You're trying to control my life, the same way my father did!"

Dean's face darkened. "Don't compare me to your dad, Cas," he growled, slamming his fist off the worktop. "I am nothing like him!"

Castiel stared at him wide-eyed, and Dean looked in horror from Cas's fearful expression to his own hand, still fisted on the counter.

"I..." he started, not knowing what he was trying to say. His jaw trembled slightly as it dawned on him how right Cas was to be afraid of him. He'd dismissed his concerns earlier but now, faced with the truth behind his words, Dean wasn't sure he trusted himself. "I'm sorry," he said, staring in shock at his own hands.

He saw Cas move in his peripheral vision, and looked up to see the other man moving past him towards the front door.

"Where are you going?"

"I need to get some air," Cas told him, grabbing his jacket. "Please don't follow me, I can't... I don't want be around you just now."
Dean followed him out into the hallway. "Cas. Hey, Cas. Cas!" Dean leaned over the railing to watch Castiel's descent to the ground floor. "I'm sorry!" he shouted after him, not really sure what he was apologising for but knowing that whatever it was he'd said he wished that he could take it back.

But Castiel just hurried down the stairs, the echo of Dean's shouted apology chasing him out.

* * *

Pamela wouldn't be very happy with him, running away from confrontation again, but he needed to calm down and collect his thoughts.

Despite what he'd said earlier that day, Cas wasn't afraid of Dean - on the contrary, he felt rather safe with him. But in the moments when Dean lashed out he sometimes felt like a little boy again. He didn't ever want to feel that small and vulnerable again. Not when he'd come so far.

When he got to the park, he stopped to take some deep breaths. His hands gripped the cold railings until his knuckles turned white.

He hadn't meant to lose it at Dean like that. He didn't deserve Cas' anger. Not after he'd done so much to try and help him. He felt guilty for throwing it all back in his face.

Castiel had always known that he was... different. That he didn't look at girls the same way his brothers did and, when puberty brought about sexual urges in him, that they didn't look at boys the same way he did. For years he refused to allow himself indulge in his fantasies, focusing on his studies to distract himself from temptation, but he could never force himself to feel anything for any of the women his father had brought home for him. Dean, however... Either he had repressed his feelings towards the same sex over the years, or they were new to him. Castiel's head told him to be patient, and to respect that it would take Dean time, but his heart longed for more; longed for lingering kisses and tender caresses, the touch of skin on skin.

He trailed his fingers along the bare skin of his throat as he imagined Dean's fingers in place of his own, before rubbing his hand more firmly under the open collar of his shirt, warming the skin there. Spring couldn't come soon enough - sunshine, flowers, bees...

He hadn't allowed himself to see just how much his life revolved around Dean. Even Balthazar could see it, but he had refused to listen to his friend's concerns. As frustrating as Dean could be, Cas didn't want to give up on him. Not yet. For as long as Dean wouldn't give up on them, Cas would keep on trying. But he needed something else in his life, something that was his.

In his pocket, his hand curled around his phone. Feeling as conflicted as he felt, he wished he could talk to Pamela. He could call her office, but he didn't want to burden her. Although, she'd likely remind him that that's what she was there for. He couldn't call Balthazar, for his friend wasn't supportive of his relationship. He knew it wasn't supposed to be this complicated, but he had to believe it would get better.

Eventually he decided that he'd keep walking, clear his head, and figure out what he'd say to Dean when he got home.

* * *

Back in their apartment Dean was aggressively slicing and dicing an onion, blinking harshly every time his eyes stung. As tears blurred his vision, he stabbed a packet of mince before dumping the knife in the basin and washing his hands. Grabbing the raw meat he mixed it with the onion, added his secret recipe of seasoning, and divided it into four equal balls. Each of those he rolled together
and shaped firmly into a patty.

Leaving them in the fridge, he started cleaning the kitchen before he cooked them. He swept the floor and wiped down all the work surfaces, cleaned the sink, and took out the trash. As far as he knew Cas hadn't taken his wallet with him, which meant that he had to come back for dinner - right? Unless he'd gone to Balthazar's, or set up a tab at the Roadhouse. Or had actually taken his wallet and Dean just didn't realise it.

Around about the time they usually started cooking dinner, Dean poured a little oil in a frying pan and turned up the heat. As the burgers cooked, he kept telling himself that Cas would walk through the door soon. Any minute now, he'd come home.

As the burgers got darker in colour, Dean started to lose his appetite. Where was Cas? What if he didn't come home? His knees nearly buckled when he heard the front door open, and his eyes turned to the kitchen door as he waited for Cas to walk through.

"Cas! Man, I was beginning to get worried about you. Are you okay?" he asked as soon as he set foot in the room.

"Yes, Dean. I'm fine."

"I made burgers," he smiled hesitantly, as if that would make everything better. "I know we had them for lunch but you like mine so I thought I'd make them seeing as we had the stuff in the fridge but if you don't want them I guess we could try to reheat them tomorrow—"

"Dean."

"Come on, you must be hungry."

Castiel stayed where he was. "Dean."

Dean froze.

"I have something I need to say to you," Castiel said slowly.

"Can't it wait until after you've eaten?"

"No, I... I need to say this now, otherwise I might not say it at all."

Dean nodded, his brow furrowed in concern.

Cas took a deep breath to steady his nerves. He was finally about to follow Pamela's advice. "Are you happy with us? With me?"

Dean stared at him. "What?"

"You seem... distant. It feels like we were closer when we were just friends."

"It's just been a while since I've done the whole relationship thing, you know?" Dean said. "And you're a guy, which is—"

"Weird for you," Cas finished for him flatly. He was getting fed up of hearing that.

Dean rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "I guess I'm sounding like a broken record, huh?"

Cas said nothing.
"I'm sorry, okay?" Dean exclaimed defensively. If Cas had something to say, why couldn't he just say it? "I don't know what else you want me to say! You're crazy if you thought everything would suddenly be perfect!"

"I didn't expect it to be perfect, Dean! I just thought you'd treat me less like a stranger and more like a boyfriend!"

Boyfriend. That was the second time he'd heard that word today. It was like the universe was trying to tell him something.

"Maybe I shouldn't have come back," Cas mused aloud.

"I'm glad you did," Dean told him softly.

"Are you?" Cas asked. "Are you really?"

"Of course I am!"

"Because either we're together, or we're not," Cas said, sounding like he was holding back tears.

Fear churned in the emptiness in his stomach at the thought of losing Cas, and he took four steps forward so he standing right in front of him. "We're together," he said, cupping Cas's face. He studied his friend's - no, his boyfriend's face - as he brushed his thumbs across his cheeks. His heart was hammering in his chest because he'd never been so afraid in his life.

He pressed a kiss to Cas's forehead, but then Cas grabbed his face and kissed his mouth, lips pressing forcefully against his as if trying to make a point. Well, point made loud and clear, Dean conceded. He could do this. Kissing was familiar and easy. He swiped his tongue against Castiel's lips, slipping it inside when they parted. Cas moaned, wrapping his arms around Dean's neck and pulling himself flush against him as he kissed him back. Cas was by no means a great kisser, but he sure as hell made up for it with his eagerness.

He tried not to think to hard about who he was kissing; instead just trying to enjoy the moment. Was he happy with Cas? Yeah, until he thought too hard about it. He suddenly became aware of his hands on Cas's hips, pulling him close, and the undeniable feeling of Cas's cock against his thigh.

He pulled back as quickly as if he'd been burned, and disappointment clouded Castiel's face. "The burger's are burning," he said by way of excuse, which was technically true but it wasn't like he'd been paying attention.

"Okay," Castiel said, accepting it as the truth. "I'll get plates. Are they cooked?"

"Yeah, yeah, they're cooked. Just very well done."

"You mean over done," Cas teased, when he saw the blackened bottom of the burger.

Dean looked at him, surprised and a little pleased to see that Castiel's cheeks was still flushed red from their kissing session. "We'll just need to put a lot of sauce on them."

Cas pecked him on the lips. "I'll get it."

Dean took a breath and exhaled it slowly as Castiel moved to the fridge.

In silence, Castiel cut open rolls and Dean slid the greasy, blackened patties inside them. Slices of cheese, a few rings of sliced onion, and lashings of red sauce topped them before they sat down to
Halfway through their dinner, Castiel set his burger down on his plate and looked at Dean.

"What, you've had enough?" Dean asked. "I didn't think they were that bad."

"Dean..."

At the seriousness of Castiel's tone, Dean put his own half-eaten burger down. "What?"

"I think... that I want to go back to school."

Dean blinked twice. "Okay."

"I'd like to finish my degree."

Dean nodded, almost to himself, as he processed that. "What exactly was it you did?"

"The course covered office management, advanced software skills, and bookkeeping, amongst other things."

Dean snorted. "No wonder you do so well at the garage. I couldn't figure out how a guy raised by a religious cult could work computers."

"I wasn't raised in a cult!" Cas said indignantly. "It was a very small... very religious... otherwise ordinary town. Don't laugh, but I'd never even seen a computer until I was twelve—"

Dean made a strange noise and hurriedly covered his mouth with his hand, but Cas could see the way the corners of his eyes crinkled as he fought to hide his smile.

"... and joined mainstream education," he continued slowly, staring into Dean's eyes as if challenging him to make a smartass comment. "I was fascinated with them. I worked so hard and was really good with them. I even won the school prize for administration."

"Cas, that's amazing!"

He shrugged modestly, but pride pooled in his gut. "It's not much in the grand scheme of things, and it meant nothing to my family, but it meant everything to me." Sadness flicked across his face. "That's one of the reasons I chose my degree. My father didn't like computers but understood that, whether he liked it or not, the world was changing. Even our town was beginning to modernise."

"But you didn't finish," Dean prompted.

Cas poked at his half-eaten burger. "My father agreed to fund my education because he believed me to be sensible and obedient; that I would follow the way of God, as it was taught in our church, and would not be swayed by sinners. I made the mistake before my final year of trying to explain to him why I felt no desire to get married - that I wasn't interested in women - and he stopped paying my college fees."

Dean scowled. "That's controlling. What happened to growing up and being an adult and making your own choices?"

"Like Sam makes his own choices?" Castiel pointed out.

Dean glared at him.
Castiel propped an elbow up on the table and rested his chin in his hand. "You offer some very insightful advice. You should try listening to yourself once in a while."

"Well, we're not talking about me. We're talking about you."

"Will we ever talk about you?" Castiel asked, sitting up. "I feel that you know more about me than I do about you."

"You know the important stuff," Dean told him quietly. The stuff he never told anyone. The stuff he hated to even think about.

He did. "But what about the unimportant stuff?" Castiel pushed. "Like your favourite song?"

Dean grinned. "It's a tie. Between Led Zeppelin's *Ramble On* and *Traveling Riverside Blues*. You happy now?"

"A little." Castiel hummed. "I shall have to listen to those tomorrow."

"Well, you know where to find them." Dean's smile faded as he remembered what they had been discussing. "So, uh, do you just start back in your fourth year, or what?"

"I hope so."

Dean chewed on his lip. "It's gonna be expensive."

"I know," Castiel agreed. "But it's what I want to do."

"Okay."

"I need to do this," Cas pushed, desperate to persuade Dean; to make him understand. "For me."

"Okay!" Dean grinned. "I'm not gonna try and stop you. I say go for it."

"Really?"

"Cas, you don't need to look to me for approval. But I've got your back."

Cas frowned slightly. "Are you expecting me to fail?"

"No, I meant—I'm your friend."

"You're my boyfriend," Cas corrected him, watching him closely.

"I'm your— Yeah. I'm your... boyfriend." Dean licked his lips. "Not gonna lie, that's going to take a lot of getting used to. Anyway, I'll support you in anything you do. 'Cause we're family."

Castiel smiled. "I like your idea of family very much."

Dean rested his arms on the table and looked at him seriously. "My family's a little fucked up," he admitted.

Cas reached out with one of his hands, and rested his over Dean's. "So am I."

Dean stood up and leaned across the table, pressing a gentle kiss against Castiel's lips. Smirking, he rested his forehead against Castiel's for a moment. "I'm sorry I don't do that more often."

"I know I can be impatient and irritable, but I do understand," Cas said, stealing another quick kiss.
"It's going to change, though," Dean said, sitting back down in his seat. "No more excuses."

Cas looked down at his food.

"What?"

"You've done so much for me - given me so much - and I've never asked you for anything," Castiel started carefully.

Dean sat silently, waiting for Cas to finish whatever it was he was struggling to say.

"Please," he asked. "Think - just think - about talking to someone."

Dean scoffed and sat back in his chair. "You want me to talk about my feelings?"

"Pamela helped me! Maybe she can help you, too, if you just gave her a chance." Dean shook his head, but before he could complain Castiel pressed harder. "I want to be with you, but not like this. It's not fair on either of us."

No. Please, no. Don't do this. I can't lose you. I know I'm fucked up, but I'm trying. I need you, Dean pleaded with him silently, his thoughts rushed.

"I'm sure her offer of a free session still stands," Cas reminded Dean quietly when Dean's thoughts failed to manifest themselves as words, and it seemed like such a pathetic way to end his rant.

Dean hated talking about the shit in his head because, the way he saw it, it was nobody's business but his own. But he wasn't blind. He could see the way his actions were affecting Cas, the way he was pushing him away. It was the same with Lisa, except the physical aspect of his relationship with her hadn't suffered.

"Please. I don't see how we can work otherwise."

Clenching his jaw to disguise the slight quiver in his bottom lip, Dean enveloped Cas in a hug. "Okay," he relented. "I'll call her tomorrow."

"You promise?"

"Hey, I said I would, didn't I?"

Cas smiled. "Thank you."
"She won't answer if you don't dial the number," Cas told Dean, running his fingers through the shorter hairs at the back of his neck.

"How do I tell her?" Dean asked helplessly. "How do I tell her that I fucked up, but that I still think she should send her son to stay with me?"

"I don't know," Cas told him, not unsympathetically, "but you only have yourself to blame."

"Gee, thanks for the support," he huffed, turning the handset face down on the table.

"I will always support you," Cas frowned. "But you have to admit; you do have a history of making poor decisions.

"Maybe you could talk to her," Dean suggested desperately. "Tell her... tell her... Shit, I don't know."

"I will talk to her, if you think it would help. But as I said before, I won't lie for you."

With a heavy sigh, Dean picked up the phone again and dialled Lisa's number.

"Hello?"

"Hi, Lisa."

"How are you?"

"Good. What about you and Ben?"

"We're good. Ben's at a friend's."

"Oh. Well, that's good."

"How is... um... your boyfriend?"

"Cas? Cas is, uh... Cas is good."

Out of the corner of his eye, Dean could see him covering his face with his hand at the awkwardness of the conversation.

"I don't really know how to ask this nicely. About what we discussed last time we spoke..."

"You mean, did I drink?"

"Yes," she agreed quietly.
Dean was silent for a long moment. "Once," he admitted. Bracing for her attack, he mounted his defence. "Look, I know it's not what we agreed, but—"

"No, it's not. I said no alcohol, Dean. None."

"It was one night, Lisa!"

"And that's one too many, Dean. I'm sorry, I really do want you to be a part of Ben's life, but until I can trust you with him I can't—"

"You want to talk about trust?" Dean snapped.

"Dean," Cas breathed, his voice barely audible as he shook his head in warning: don't start a fight.

"Doesn't the fact I'm serious about Cas count for something?"

"Of course it does, but I know nothing about... Cas," she said, stumbling over his name. "I mean, who is he? What does he do? Will he set a good example for Ben? Will he see Ben?"

"He lives with me," Dean told her sharply, "so yeah, he'll see him." Movement caught his attention, and he glanced up to see Cas beckoning for the phone. "In fact he's here now, and he wants to speak to you. Interrogate away."

Before Lisa could say anything else, he thrust the phone in Cas's direction. Covering the mouthpiece, Cas berated him quietly. "If you want to see Ben, I suggest calming down before you upset his mother."

Dean glared at him.

"Hello, Lisa. ... I expect you'll want to know a little something about me. ... Very well. I'm a Christian, and I attend church every Sunday. I'm employed part-time at the same garage Dean works at. ... No, I'm not a mechanic. I work in the office."

As Dean's irritation faded, Castiel smirked at the curious frown that lined his face.

"I'm hoping to return to university to finish my degree." Cas's expression grew slightly pinched. "Personal issues. Family ones. ... Thank you," he said warmly, his face softening once again. "How did we meet?" At this, he met Dean's gaze. "He gave me a lift home one night."

Again, he covered the handset and whispered at Dean. "It's not a lie!"

Dean sniggered. "It's not the truth, either!" he whispered back.

"May I say something? ... I've known Dean for a few months, now. His has been a supportive friend, and a loving partner. I was raised in a somewhat close-minded community, but have come to realise that being a good person does not equal being religious - and Dean is one of the best men I've ever known. He may drink more than is healthy, but if Dean really had a drinking problem, he'd would have been drinking on more than one occasion this past month. And it's unlikely he would be so honest about it. ... I understand. ... You, too. Shall I pass you back to Dean? ... Okay, goodbye."

Dean held out his hand, but let it drop when Cas ended the call.

"Dude, what the hell?"

"She's going to think about it some more, perhaps talk to Ben about it, and then she'll call you back sometime."
"When?"
"In a few days."
"A few days?"
"Yes," Cas replied. Then he held the phone out to Dean.
"You put it back. Or leave it on the table, I don't care," Dean told him, slumping in his seat and crossing his arms.
"Do you want to phone Pamela's office now, as well?"
"I did that already," Dean told him.
"You did?" Cas asked, surprised and a little pleased.
"Yeah, I did!"
"Oh. Well, good."
"Do you want to check the call log?" Dean asked defensively, projecting his frustration with Lisa onto Cas.
"No, I believe you."
Dean stared sullenly at him.
"I'm proud of you, Dean."
"Hmph."
"When are you seeing her?"
"End of the week. It wasn't going to be until nearly the end of the month, but I got a call back almost straight away, offering me something this week."
Cas smiled, and moved to sit beside him. "That will be one of her emergency appointments."
"Why do I need one of them?"
Chuckling, Castiel teased him, "Probably so you've got less time to change your mind!" He stroked his fingers through Dean's hair, waiting until Dean's defensiveness had faded. "Be nice to her." When Dean turned to stare at him he pleaded, "For me?"
Dean sighed, closing his eyes and letting his head fall back against the sofa, basking in Cas's soothing touch. When it was just the two of them, like this, the fact that Cas was a guy almost didn't bother him.

* * *

The next morning Castiel went to the library, hoping to use one of their computers to look into reapplying for university. As he browsed through the website he kept seeing social events advertised, and he felt a bitterness brewing within him. He'd missed out on so much when he was enrolled; spending his time in class, in the library, at work, or at home. Raised to work hard, he understood now that it had been at the expense of his own happiness. Briefly, he wondered if his life might have
turned out differently if he'd joined the LGBT and Friends Society. Maybe he'd have pulled away from his father's controlling influence. Perhaps he'd have had somewhere to go when his father had kicked him out. In all likeliness, he'd have never met Dean.

Glancing at his watch, he realised it was time for him to leave if he wanted to meet Dean at home for lunch. He gathered his things together and hurried out, giving his thanks to the librarian as he left.

The Impala pulled up outside their apartment building just as Castiel reached the entrance. Pausing outside the door so that he and Dean could walk up together, he smiled as his boyfriend stepped out of the car.

"Hi."

"Hey." Dean nodded at the bundle of papers Cas was clutching. "What have you got there?"

"A few, um... Prospectuses? Prospecti?" he answered with a confused smile, suddenly realising he didn't know the word.

"Uni stuff, right?" Dean asked, walking past Cas and opening the door.

"Yes," Cas nodded, following him through. As Dean let the door go, it slammed shut behind them. "Though it would make sense to try to finish my degree at the same university, I wondered if perhaps I didn't have to. It's not like I was close to any of my classmates, and even if I was they'd have graduated by now. If the courses were similar and my course credits could be transferred, there's nothing tying me to the same university."

"How far away were you thinking?"

With Dean's back to him as they walked up the stairs - because the damn elevator had broken again - Castiel couldn't see Dean's face as he spoke. "Sorry?"

"If you go to a different university, how far away were you thinking about going?"

Castiel stopped just short of the landing, wanting to see Dean's face as he turned up the next flight of stairs. "I'm not leaving," he said firmly, seeing the forced look of detachment that Dean wore like a mask.

Dean paused, and Cas waited until he made eye contact with him before moving again.

"If I was able to attend another university, it would be local. Somewhere I could travel to every day. The only reason I can even contemplate finishing my education is because I have a stable life here."

As they came to a stop outside their door and Dean dug in his pocket for his key, Cas rested a hand on his shoulder.

"You're thinking of Sam, aren't you?" he realised aloud.

Dean dropped his forehead against the door. "Am I that obvious?"

"No," Cas assured him. "I just know you."

Dean let out a shaky breath as he opened the door.

"I'm not leaving," Cas told him again.

"Okay."
As soon as the door had closed, Castiel drew Dean into a hug. Holding him tightly, his fingers clutched at the worn leather as he willed Dean to believe that he had no intention of walking out of his life.

After a long moment, Dean clapped him on the back. "Come on, I'm starving."

"Always thinking with your stomach," Cas teased, before regretting his words immediately. Not trusting himself to say anything else, he set about making his lunch in silence.

A tin of chickpeas, a spoonful of peanut butter, and a dash of oil and lemon juice went into the blender and he blitzed it into a thick puree. He did his best to spoon the mixture into a small ramekin, cursing as the amount that stubbornly clung to the blades. Eventually accepting defeat, he filled it with hot water and left it to soak as he sliced some carrot, pepper, and celery on a large plate, arranging it around the bowl. Finally he popped a couple of pitta bread into the toaster.

As he waited for the toaster to pop, Dean had already made and eaten half his turkey sandwich.

"What the hell is that?" he asked Cas.

"You know perfectly well that it's houmous," he replied. "Would you like some?"

"I think I'll pass."

"It's very nice."

"I'll believe you," Dean said, sounding highly sceptical.

Playfulness brightening Castiel's face, he scooped some onto a stick of celery and held it in front of Dean.

"Dude, if you're gonna tell me to open the tunnel for the train, I swear to God—"

"Just try some," Cas pleaded.

Dean quirked an eyebrow but, with a sigh, conceded and bit a piece off with a crunch. He chewed slowly, his expression wary, as he considered the new flavour in his mouth.

"Well it's not awful," he said. Taking the other half of the celery from Cas, he double dipped in the houmous to try some more.

"Should I cut some more salad?" Cas asked, trying to hold back the smug smile that would no doubt irritate Dean.

"If you want."

Dean finished his sandwich as Cas warmed some more pitta and cut some more food sticks, then the two of them sat down together and shared Castiel's lunch.

"You know, that's alright," Dean said, as he wiped a pitta around the bowl to catch any last remainder of the houmous.

"How many times have you told me it was disgusting without actually trying it?" Cas asked.

"It looked disgusting."

"Looks can be deceiving."
Dean hummed in agreement, his face glazing over as his mind focused on something elsewhere.

Leaning forward and putting the plate on the table, he turned and threw one leg over Dean.

"What..?" Dean asked, forced to uncross his legs as Castiel settled his weight in his lap.

As one of Cas's hands moved to caress the back of his neck, Dean swallowed thickly. This was a hell of a lot more... intimate... than he'd been expecting from Cas any time soon. A warm hand cupped his jaw, the thumb brushing softly across his cheek.

"Cas," Dean breathed, the word almost getting caught behind the lump in his throat.

Then Castiel's lips were on his, insistent and demanding, and Dean could work with that. His hands found Cas's thighs, stroking up and down. A firm touch on soft denim, his thumb dragged across the creases in the fabric on each downward motion. The scratch of stubble around his mouth as Cas kissed him was a new sensation, but not unpleasant. As Castiel pulled away, Dean chased it with his own, capturing his bottom lip between his teeth. A light scrape elicited a small groan from the depths of Cas's throat as he kissed Dean back with a renewed hunger. A swipe of tongue, a knock of teeth, an intake of breath.

What Cas lacked in experience he made up for with his eagerness and, to Dean's surprise, there was also an unexpected eagerness rising between his legs.

Wrong.

His hands came to a rest on Castiel's waist, still kissing him even as he mentally retreated into himself.

Wrong, wrong, wrong!

His heart beat frantically in his ribcage, and he swallowed thickly. He didn't miss the flash of disappointment that crossed Castiel's features when he realised that Dean was putting a stop to their little makeout session.

"That was... unexpected," he breathed, trying to force himself to relax. This was Cas.

"I wanted to kiss you," Cas stated, his tone making it sound like a cross between an explanation and an apology.

As his body recovered from whatever fight-or-flight freak out it had had, Dean raised a hand to cup Castiel's face, seeking to reassure him that he'd done nothing wrong. He was a little surprised - but pleased - when Cas leaned into his touch. Narrowing his eyes as he took in Castiel's satisfied expression, he thought to himself that it had been a long time since he'd made anyone look that satisfied. Sexually, sure, but not emotionally. A sudden pang in his chest made him yearn for more. So, surprising himself, he leaned forward and kissed Cas again.

The kiss Cas returned it with was chaste and unsure.

"I'm trying here, okay?" Dean promised him.

Cas looked a little sad, and Dean thought he maybe wanted to say something, but he smiled and ran his fingers through the hair behind Dean's ears. "I know."

* * *

Cas stared out of the window as Dean drove them to work. The bitter part of his mind protested that Dean shouldn't have to try to love him, but he knew logically that it wasn't as simple as that.
Accepting yourself could be hard. But Dean wasn't religious, nor was he homophobic. He'd helped Castiel return to the church, and had openly expressed his belief that there was nothing wrong with him. So then why did Dean find it so hard to be close to him?

"What..." his unfinished question trailed off as they pulled into the yard, staring at the broken office window.

"Oh, yeah. That was like that when we came in this morning. Some asshole decided to throw a brick through it."

"Why?"

Dean shrugged. "Why do these idiots do any of the things they do?"

Dry-mouthed, Castiel stepped out of the car and surveyed the damage. Only one pane was broken, and when he stepped into the office he could see that the glass had been swept up.

"We think we got it all," Andy told him, startling him. "Just, uh, don't walk around without shoes on and you'll be fine."

"I have no intention of walking around barefoot," Cas assured him. A flash of colour on the floor caught his eye, and he bent down to pick up whatever it was. Turning it over, a knot twisted in his stomach as he realised what it was - part of the rainbow sticker that had been stuck to the window pane. The pane that had been smashed. "Is that the brick?" he asked, noticing the stone block in a plastic bag.

"Yeah. Bobby put it in that in case there was any evidence on it."

"The police haven't been yet?"

"Nah. Bobby's got a friend in the department - said she'd come round after lunch."

They both turned as a car pulled into the yard, and Cas pocketed the remains of the sticker.

"That'll be her, now."

Curiosity getting the better of them, they both stepped out of the office again to greet the woman stepping out of the car.

"Sheriff Mills!" Cas exclaimed, recognising her instantly.

"Well, hey there! That friend of yours keeping his nose clean, I hope?"

Aware of Andy's questioning gaze, Cas glanced over her shoulder to where Dean was pulling an exaggerated expression, a cross between disbelief and despair. "I believe so."

"Jody!"

Before she could speak, Bobby stormed out of the garage and across the yard. He waved a hand at his window. "I told you it was all smashed up."

"I believed you when you called," she told him, leaning back slightly as she put all her weight on her back foot.

"Hmph."
"Any witnesses?"

"How the hell should I know? I wasn't here. None of us were."

"Where were you?"

"In bed! Where the hell am I going to be in the middle of the night?"

Jody remained unfazed by Bobby's bluster as she pulled out a camera and took a few photos. "You touch anything?"

"Swept up the glass. Health and safety, and all."

"Mmhmm."

"Brick's in the office. Had one of the lads put it in a bag. I made sure they wore gloves!" Bobby added irritably, as she opened her mouth to speak.

"I thought Bobby said they were friends," Andy whispered.

Cas had noticed that Bobby's posture and body language didn't match his grumpy tone and shook his head. "He's all bark. She knows that."

Jody swapped her camera for a notepad and pencil, which she pointed at one of the cameras mounted on the outer wall. "I'm going to need your security footage."

"Oh, those things haven't worked in months," Bobby told her.

Cas resisted the urge to roll his eyes.

"They're mainly just for show."

"Show?"

"Yeah. A deterrent, you know?"

"Well, they're doing a bang-up job of deterring crime," Jody said sarcastically. "Get them up and running."

"They aren't cheap."

She eyed him with an icy glare. "Drink less. I want them in working order when I come round next week to check."

"You can't come in here and—"

"Listen to me, Singer," she said, and Cas recognised her mom voice from her run-in with Dean several months ago. "This crap started with graffiti. Now it's damaged property. A garage on the west side had over a thousand dollars worth of tools stolen last week. This shit is escalating and my guys are working on it, but we've got fuck all to go on. I want to nail their asses to the wall, but I need evidence." She punctuated the last word with a sharp poke to his chest.

Bobby glowered at her for a long moment. "Fine!" he spat.

Immediately Jody's demeanor changed. "Good," she smiled. "Now I'll take that brick off your hands and you can board that window up."
Andy and Cas stepped aside to let her into the office.

"By the way, did I thank you for what you did for my boy?" Bobby asked her quietly.

Castiel couldn't help but concentrate on what they were saying.

"No, you didn't."

"Well. Thanks."

"Better than than never, I suppose. I should have thrown the book at him, you know that?"

"Eh, he's a good kid. Makes some dumbass decisions, but—"

Grabbing Andy's arm, Castiel led him over to the garage. "Is that car still here?" he asked, not wanting Andy to overhear them talking about Dean's run-in with the law.

The mechanic chuckled. "You're going to have to be more specific than that."

His cheeks flushing slightly, Cas strived to be more specific. "The gold one Benny towed in the other day."

"That beat-up thing? Yeah."

"I want to duck in and have a look at it."

"Why? It's a wreck."

Cas shrugged. "It caught my eye, that's all."

"You could probably pick one up cheap enough. Nobody wants a thing like that," Andy told him, leading him away from the garage to where the Lincoln was parked. "Hell, that was taken for a joyride by some jacked-up teenager, but no-one's cared about it enough to come forward and claim it. If no owner comes forward, it's just going to get scrapped."

"But it's beautiful," Cas said sadly, trailing his fingers over the hood.

"Are you looking at that Mustang?" Dean's voice came from around the corner.

Seeing Castiel's confused face, Andy pointed at the blue car.

"Ah," Cas nodded in recognition. It was nice, and definitely looked like something that Dean would admire.

"Nineteen sixty-five. Yeah, she's a beauty," Dean continued. "Wouldn't swap the Impala for her, though."

"No, I'm not looking at that car," Cas called back.

Footsteps could be heard coming closer and Andy snickered.

"I'm looking at this one," Cas told Dean when he came into view.

Dean looked from Cas, to the Lincoln, to Andy. He looked like he was waiting for them to tell him they were joking. "Oh," he said, realising they were serious. "I guess... if you're into that kind of thing... I mean there are worse cars out there."
Castiel crossed his arms. "Well I like it."

Dean held his palms up in a placating gesture. "Hey, I'm saying nothing."

"You're implying I have poor taste."

"Well, you do," Dean admitted with a shrug that seemed to say, You can't deny it.

Cas let out a frustrated, yet defeated, sigh. It was clearly a topic they were not going to agree on and, though he thought Dean could be a little more accepting of his views, he knew he wasn't going to win the argument. Dean would argue the car's flaws based on performance, whereas Cas simply found its aesthetic attractive.

"What exactly am I paying you all for?" Bobby's gruff voice could be heard from the front of the buildings.

Immediately the three of them started moving towards the garage and, in Castiel's case, the office.

"Not so fast, you three. Four," Jody amended, as Benny sauntered out of the garage.

Quickening his pace, Benny hastened over to the sheriff's side until they all ended up in a rough circle.

"Have any of you seen anyone suspicious hanging around here?"

There were several shakes of heads.

"No-one hanging around after closing, no cars crawling by and driving off, no nuisance calls?" She looked at Castiel at that last one.

"No," Cas said seriously. "Just the usual cold callers; pestering us about accidents we haven't had, or urging us to take advantage of suspicious-sounding 'investment opportunities'."

"Idjits," Bobby complained with a shake of his head. "You'd think they'd learn we're a business and stop calling."

"It's most likely gang-related, but I wouldn't be doing my job if I didn't ask: does anyone know of any reason they might be a target, in case this turns out to be unrelated?"

Everyone shook their heads again, but Cas stopped as the window caught his eye. Fingering the piece of sticker in his pocket, an awful thought occurred to him.

"Cas?" Jody asked, noticing his momentary distraction.

"I..." He cleared his throat. "I, um..." His eyes flicked over to Dean, who held his gaze. "It's probably nothing," he said, finding his voice. "But I have been targeted before."

"The incident in the bar?"

He nodded, and Benny's narrowed eyes widened in realisation. Cas took a breath. It wasn't like he hadn't been planning on this, but this wasn't how he'd imagined, or wanted, to do it. "I'm gay," he said, clenching his teeth together as his bottom jaw trembled slightly. Would he ever be able to tell someone without feeling afraid?

Dean gave him a small nod of support as a contemplative silence fell among them.
"Congratulations?" Andy offered eventually. "Sorry, I don't know what you're supposed to say when you come out. It's not like you're getting married, or having a baby, or something."

Everyone laughed, dissolving the tension. Andy shot Cas an embarrassed grin, who returned it with a grateful smile. Benny reached over and clapped him on the shoulder.

Bobby just grunted. "If you think you're to blame for this, you're a fool."

Cas could feel a renewed confidence growing within him at the warmth in his boss's eyes.

"People have done a lot more over something we might see as less of an issue," Jody cut in. "But I'm sure he's right, Cas. You're not to blame."

"But if—"

"If it's a hate crime, it's their fault. Not yours."

The three mechanics murmured in agreement.

"Right, well, now that's settled, I have to get back to the office and fill out a report."

As the men moved to get back to work, Bobby took a couple of steps to follow Jody.

"I don't need you to walk me to my car," she said, her sharp gaze enough to stop him in his tracks. But she smiled as she settled into the driver's seat with a, "See you around."

Andy whistled as Jody drove away. "Damn."

"What?" Cas asked.

"I've never seen anyone talk to Bobby like that before."

Dean snorted. "Bobby probably wouldn't let anyone else talk to him like that. You think they, uh..."

He finished his question with a sexual gesture.

"That's none of our business," Castiel said pointedly, leaving them standing at the garage entrance as he continued on into the office.

"What do you think?" Dean asked Andy and Benny. "Yes? No?"

A hand clipped him around the ear. "I think you'd better earn your wage, boy."

* * *

As much as Bobby liked to complain that his staff did no work, they worked their asses off and he knew it. So, when Saturday came round, Dean was looking forward to doing as little as possible. Until, that was, Cas reminded him about his appointment with Pamela. Immediately his good mood soured. The drive across town did little to improve it, what with roadworks coming hand-in-hand with temporary one-way streets and diversions.

He stormed up the steps to Pamela's office and growled at the receptionist. "Dean Winchester."

Slamming himself into seat, he allowed himself a calming breath.

The receptionist was eyeing him warily, and straight away Dean felt guilty. She was pretty - young and blonde - and definitely the type of girl he'd have tried it on with in the past, eager to work his way into her bed. His actions could be perceived as a little sleazy, he knew, but he believed he made
up for it the bedroom. He had two rules when it came to women and sex: make sure they get off, and don't come first. Well, three if you included 'treat them with respect', but he viewed that as common decency.

Aware that he was staring, he grabbed the first magazine from the table and made himself look busy reading it. Too late, he realised it was a women's health magazine. Well, that was awkward. Trying to look casual, he flicked through the pages until he came to a spread on fat-busting workouts. The corner of his mouth turned up in a pleased smirk as he eyed the curves of the women pictured in their close-fitting gym gear.

He didn't notice the door open until Pamela called his name, startling him.

"Yeah. Yes, hi," he greeted her, his hand raised in a half-hearted wave before he was even aware of making the gesture.

"If you'd like to come through."

He really didn't. He wanted to leave and never come back. Briefly he considered running out the door, but that would be letting Cas down. Dean had promised him he'd give this talking about his feelings crap a shot.

"Actually, I'm really into this article, on, uh..." He glanced at the front of the magazine - Fitness Now - and said the first word that leapt out at him. "Mammograms." He raised the magazine as if to prove it. "So, if somebody else wants to go..." A glance around the waiting area told him that, apart from the receptionist, he was alone. "Oh."

Pamela retreated into her office, leaving the door open for him to follow.

"Right. Yes, okay, let's do this," he said, mostly to himself when he realised she wasn't going to let him delay his session.

As he tossed the magazine aside, it crossed his mind that at least he wasn't a kid any more. Looking at the women in the magazine, twenty years ago he'd have had zero control over his responses to the pictures. It'd be up, it'd be down, it'd be up for no reason...

Of course, in another twenty he'd have a hard job getting it up. (He resolutely refused to acknowledge that time in the back of his car - that had been embarrassing.) He nodded at the receptionist, who still watched him cautiously, as he walked past her to Pamela's office.

"How are you, Dean?" Pamela asked with a welcoming smile as he stepped into the room.

"Fine."

"Just 'fine'?"

"I'm freaking fantastic!" he said sarcastically.

"I thought you might be a little apprehensive. I must say, I'm surprised to see you," Pamela told him.

"Take a seat."

Reluctantly Dean threw himself down on the sofa, fidgeting until he was comfortable.

"Now you might be aware of some of this already, but it's important that I run through it with you and that you understand it. Everything you tell me is confidential and will remain between us, unless you lead me to believe that either you or someone else is in danger. If that's the case, then I'm legally
obliged to inform the relevant authorities. Do you understand?"

"Whatever I say is private unless someone is in danger," Dean summarised. "Got it."

"Okay. Now the next thing is, do you mind if I record this?"

"Why?"

"I like to record my sessions with my clients."

"Yes, I mind," he said gruffly, expecting her to argue with him.

But she simply made a point of putting her dictaphone away in her drawer before moving a chair to sit closer to him. "So why the change of heart about coming to see me?"

"Cas asked me to. I'm here for him, not me."

"Then I'll be honest, it probably won't be very productive," she said, but as Dean moved to stand she added, "However, this hour's free. So why not stick it out? You're here anyway, after all. How are things with Cas?" she asked, once he lay down again.

"He's fine. More than fine, even."

"I meant between the two of you. How do you think you are?"

"Huh? Oh." Dean shrugged.

"I need you to try and give me verbal responses, Dean," she explained to him encouragingly.

"They're alright, I guess."

"You guess?"

"Jeez, are you like this with Cas?" he grumbled, crossing his arms across his chest. "It's a wonder he comes back, getting interrogated like this every week."

"I can't really talk about Cas, or what he says or does while he's here. That works both ways - I can't tell him anything about my time with you, either. But some people are more open, while others require a little nudging to open up."

"So, uh, what am I supposed to talk about?"

"Anything you want. Whatever's on your mind - or isn't."

Dean looked at a loss for words.

"Why don't we start with you telling me what you think happens here?"

"I pour my heart and soul out to you, you tell me how fucked up I am, then tell me how to make it better?"

Pamela clasped her hands in front of her and pursed her lips thoughtfully. "I do want you to share with me, Dean - but only that which you are comfortable sharing. At least at first. If I were seeing you on a regular basis then, over time, I might push you to think about things you don't want to discuss. Ideally, we talk through your problems - whether they lie in the past or the present - we work together to find a way in which you can solve those problems. Why are you frowning at me?"
Immediately Dean forced his face into a more neutral expression. "If I'm the one fixing shit, why do I need you?"

She smiled. "Because I'm here to help guide you. It's much more difficult when you're struggling alone."

Dean rolled his eyes, stared at the ceiling, and sighed. Pamela didn't say anything - just sat there in silence, watching him. In the silence of the room, the ticking of the clock became deafening as neither spoke. He wondered briefly whether they'd spend the whole session like this, if he said nothing. *Just like old times,* he thought to himself. Closing his eyes, he took a breath. Except this time his sessions weren't court mandated. Not so much like old times, then. He doubted that he could bullshit his way through some worksheets to tick off his hours of counselling instead of actually *talking.* He licked his lips, considering how bad it could be if he tried to actually make this work.

An image of his brother flashed through his mind, and he clamped his jaw shut again. *Nope.* He didn't want to reopen old wounds and dredge up old feelings long buried. Dean's thoughts turned to Cas. Cas who, thanks to his many hours with Pamela, had made noticeable improvements to his life and mental health in the past months. And who also had, for the most part, stood by Dean. People changed and relationships adapted or started to crack, until suddenly you came home one morning to find your partner packing her bags and getting into a cab with your her son, and you're hit with the cold realisation that the relationship broke down while you were out getting drunk.

"We could be better," he said honestly, almost not realising he'd made the decision to speak.

"In what way?"

He glared at her. "I could be better," he admitted angrily; angry at himself for not being good enough for Cas.

She pursed her lips. "How?"

He set his jaw, the muscle in it twitching as he stared resolutely at the door.

"Okay," she said after another long silence, "what about the things that you don't think can be better? What's going right between the two of you?"

Dean's mouth moved silently as he contemplated her question. He cleared his throat. "Well, Cas hasn't left me."

"Do you think he would?"

Dean laughed bitterly, folding his arms beneath his head. "Everyone does." It took him a second to realise he'd said too much, and his arms immediately came down in front of his body again.

Maybe Pamela could see his mental defences fortifying, because she turned over to another page in her notebook and suggested playing a game.

"A game?" he echoed, unsurely.

"A word association game."

Dean gave her an uncomfortable look. "I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, I know that. I'm not good with words."

"It's not difficult," she assured him. "I'll say a word, and all you have to do is tell me the first word
that comes to mind in response to that word. So if I say 'hot', you might say..?

"Cold?" he asked.

"If that's the first word that you think of, then yes."

"Huh."

"Do you want to give it a shot?"

Narrowing his eyes slightly, Dean tried to see where this could be a trap. There had to be some reason for this, but he couldn't see what it might be. Deciding that this 'game', as Pamela called it, would be better than having her prying into his innermost thoughts, he agreed.

"Long," she started.

"Short."

"Big."

"Small."

"Head."

"Shoulders, knees, and toes," Dean joked. When Pamela frowned at him over her clipboard Dean was reminded of what Cas had told him; 'She doesn't like time-wasters.' "Sorry," he apologised, feeling like he was back in high school and trying to avoid a detention.

"Head."

He smirked. "Blowjob."

"Truth."

"Lie."

"Sleep."

"Nightmares," he responded, his lip twitching as he spoke.

And so it went on, Pamela reciting a seemingly never-ending list of words and Dean responding in kind. There was no pattern that he could determine, and he found himself wondering if she'd done this with Cas.

"Pray."

"Hunter. Or faith, I guess. Depends which 'prey'."

"The faith kind," she told him with a reassuring smile. "Money."

"Debt."

"Magazine."

"Porn."

"Car."
"Baby. My car," he explained when, despite her best poker face, she looked a trifle confused. "Not the..." he cradled his arms and made a rocking gesture "... kind."

Pamela nodded to herself. "Pretty."

"Woman." He cleared his throat, "Not that I've seen it."

"Woman."

"Sex."

"Man."

Dean's mind went blank.

"Dean? Did you hear me?"

Man. Man, man, man... "Cas," he responded, the only thing that made sense to him in that moment.

"Proud."

*Something his father never was of him.* "Disappointed," he answered, voice cracking a little.

A subtle quirk of her eyebrow was the only acknowledgement he got that this was the first answer he'd given that was obviously personal. "Death."

"Fire," Dean replied stony-faced. After the way his mother had died, he couldn't believe that John had wanted to be *cremated*. It had felt like a sick joke at the time.

"Ink."

"Tattoo," he said, unconsciously rubbing a hand across his chest.

"Needle."

*A flash of phantom pain, forever ingrained in his memory, stabbed at his pec.* "Pain."

"Swim."

*Cas. Flailing. The current dragging him under.* "Drown."

"Happiness."

*Lisa. Ben. For a long time, he'd defined his own happiness through theirs.* "Lost."

"Question."

"What am I doing here?" he quipped. The words were starting to hit too close to home, now - he needed a moment of levity to *breathe."

"That's not a word, Dean," she chastised him.

"Fine. Answer," he snapped.

She scribbled something down on her notepad. "Fall."

*Cas just out of reach, falling further and further away from his outstretched hand.* He clenched his
teeth. "Winter."

"Salt."

*Sam. High and hallucinating.* Dean hesitated. He could reply with *pepper*, but he was supposed to be honest. She wouldn't know, though.

"Dean?"

*Circles. Demons. Eyes.*

"Dean?"

"Sorry, I, uh..."

*Pepper.*

*He wasn't there for Sam.*

*Say pepper.*

*He let him down.*

*Come on.*

*He always let him down.*

*Just say pepper!*

"Failure," he croaked weakly.

"Let's stop there," she said, putting down her notes. "Would you like a drink of water?"

"I'd kill for something stronger," he smirked half-heartedly.

"Well, unfortunately this isn't a bar. The best I can offer is flavoured water - but I *can* serve it chilled," she smiled.

"Sure. Whatever you've got."

Pamela retrieved a jug of water and two glasses from her desk. As she poured them each a glass, he eyed the slices of lemon and lime floating between the ice cubes with distaste. However, when he took a sip, it wasn't as unpleasant as he'd anticipated.

"Do you want to leave it there, or keep going?"

"You mean you've got more words?"

"Oh, yes," she smiled. "I have a whole list."

Dean groaned. Then his expression turned hopeful. "So if I say I want to stop, does that mean I can leave?" he smirked, sounding like a teenager hoping to finish class early.

She chuckled. "I'm not going to stop you from walking out the door, but if you don't want to do any more word association then we can do something else."

"Like what?"
"We could just chat."

"Great," Dean complained, expecting another round of interrogation.

"A few of your answers seemed to strike a nerve, and I don't want you to leave here feeling emotionally raw," she told him. "So what kind of sports do you watch?"

"I like wrestling. I watch baseball sometimes. Cas doesn't really get it, though. He's more of a movie guy, which is fine. I like movies."

"What's your favourite?"

Dean blew out a puff of air as he thought about it. "Star Wars. And Die Hard. Or is that cheating?"

She smiled at him. "No. You can have as many favourite movies as you have room on your DVD shelf, I think. Die Hard's a classic."

Dean grinned. "Yeah. Yippee-ki-yay, mother—"

*A * * *

A little over an hour later, Dean walked up the stairs to their apartment feeling surprisingly... not like crap. He'd gone into his session with Pamela feeling tense and irritable, expecting to come out feeling moreso.

"I'm back!" he shouted. He'd be surprised if Cas wasn't back from work, yet.

"Shh," Cas said, coming through to meet him as he hung his jacket up.

"What? Wh— Achoo!" Sniffing and wiping his nose on his sleeve, he said, "Funny. That usually only happens around cats."

Cas immediately looked guilty.

"You brought a cat into my apartment?" he growled.

"Our apartment," Cas corrected him. "And yes. I'm sorry, I didn't know you had allergies."

"It has to go."

"It can't," he said quietly.

"What do you mean 'it can't'? Just open the door and let it go."

"I can't," Cas told him more firmly, walking into the kitchen.

"Don't walk away from me!" Dean protested, following him through.

Cas crouched beside a cardboard box, and Dean could see a little bundle of ginger fur nestled in an old blanket. Stepping closer, he met the gaze of two bright blue eyes.

*Shit,* he thought to himself, the vulnerability of the small creature already chipping away at his resolve not to have it in the apartment. "It's so small!" he whispered, a tickling sensation building in his nose.

"I know. The vet said—"
"Vet?" Dean echoed, sudden visions of extra bills piling into their mailbox.

"She was very nice. I explained that I found him and had no money, but couldn't just let him die on the street. She agreed to give him a free check-up, providing I promised to take care of him."

Dean sneezed. "He still can't stay."

"How about a compromise?" Cas suggested. "I'll find someone else to take him, but he stays until then?"

Dean sneezed again. "Fine. But you're paying for my allergy tablets."

"Deal," Cas grinned.

"So how is he?" Dean asked.

Castiel looked a little less happy. "He's underweight and needs his shots, but otherwise he's fine."

"Cas, we can't afford to feed a cat, let alone vaccinate the thing."

"I know," Cas snapped, thinking that it was unfair the kitten should suffer because of their poor finances. "But he was cold and alone and hungry - I couldn't do nothing!"

Dean stared at him, seeing his helplessness written all over his face, and sensing the urgency with which he wanted to do something for the small creature.

"How much are the vaccines?"

"Eighty-five dollars," Cas said immediately, his shoulders slumping. "We can't afford it."

Dean sighed, resigning himself to the fact that, for the time being, they'd adopted a cat. Digging his wallet out of his pocket, he thrust ten bucks at Cas. "Go buy some cat food. I'll call Sam."

"Do you think he'll help? It's not like it's for us."

"He's a sucker for animals - you should have seen him that time he hit a dog. Got hair all over the back seat of my car," Dean complained.

Castiel kissed him. "I love you."

"I know." A faint blush coloured Dean's cheeks, a flattered smile tugging at his lips. Cas was so caring and full of heart, and used the l-word so freely, that sometimes he didn't know how to react.

Cas frowned teasingly. "Did you just Han Solo me?"

"Finally, he gets a reference!" Dean laughed. "Come on, go - before the thing dies of hunger and we have to sneak into the cemetery in the dead of night to bury it."

"Don't be silly - people don't bury animals there."

"Haven't you ever read Pet Sematary?" Dean quipped.

Castiel hadn't, but recognised the title from Dean's bookshelf. As Dean went to get the phone, Cas pulled the vet's card out of his wallet and gave it to him. "In case Sam wants to pay them directly," he explained.
Dean looked at the name on the card - *Amelia Richardson*. "Okay. Now get out of here," Dean told him, pushing him towards the door, "before the shops shut and we have to feed it scraps off our plates."

"He's a 'him', not an 'it'!" Cas protested, before he closed the door on his way out.

Chapter End Notes

*Yippee-ki did that first omg i started gesturing at my screen when Dean said that in the finale!*

Also shout out to [canonspngifs](#) because I wanted to incorporate a scene from the show and neither I nor my beta could find it until I remembered their blog then I found it in a flash because they tag *everything*. 
Chapter 48

Dean's nose itched, and he sniffed loudly as he tried to resist the urge to sneeze. Grumbling as he popped an allergy tablet out of the packet Cas had brought home - along with a bag full of kitten food, cat milk, and a couple of toys - he popped it in his mouth and swallowed it with a mouthful of coffee.

"Ahh!" he exclaimed, as the hot brew burned his throat on the way down.

"You should probably take that with water instead," Cas said from where he knelt on the floor, playing with the temporary addition to their strange little family.

Every bit as stubborn as his brother had always said he was, Dean took another mouthful of coffee and tried not to wince.

"Ow!" Cas exclaimed, snatching his hand back from the kitten's grasp suddenly. Several fine red lines marked the skin on his hand.

Dean snorted. "I don't think he likes you."

As if to prove Dean wrong the kitten leapt onto Cas's thigh, claws digging through his jeans and into flesh, and rubbed his head against his shirt.

"He's just playing," Cas argued. "He doesn't know better."

"I don't want to ask because it will sound like we're keeping him - which we're not - but have you thought about naming him? I mean, we can't just call him 'the kitten' or 'the cat'."

"It's a boy, so... Tom?"

Dean looked unimpressed.

Cas snatched his hand away before the kitten could pounce on it again. "Well, then, what about socks?" he suggested next, eyeing the kitten's little white paws warily.

"Dude. Cliché."

"Fine. Macavity?"

"Mac-what?" It sounded like something you'd have to see a dentist about after too many desserts at McDonalds.

"Macavity. He's a ginger cat from a poem. 'Macavity's a ginger cat, he's very tall and thin; You would know him if you saw him, for his eyes are sunken in. His brow is deeply lined with thought, his head is highly domed; His coat is dusty from neglect, his whiskers are uncombed.'"

"Yeah, okay, I get the idea," Dean said, looking at the kitten.

It stared back at him, unblinking.

"Only, his eyes aren't exactly 'sunken in', are they? And his coat isn't always going to look neglected."

"Well what would you suggest?"
Dean thought about it for a second. "Fred?"

"Fred?"

"Yeah, like Fred and Ginger, you know?"

"No."

Dean wasn't sure if that was 'no' to the name or 'no' to knowing Hollywood's golden dance couple. "Okay."

As he tried to think of another suggestion, Dean watched the kitten's attention fall on a small patch of light. It was moving, and he glanced out of the window but couldn't work out what was reflecting onto their floor. He chuckled as the young cat tried to pounce on it, only to discover he had failed to catch it. He grew more determined the more he failed, until the sun disappeared behind a cloud and the reflection vanished. The kitten's tail swished as it looked around predatorily, its senses heightened for the chase.

"Chuck," Dean said.

"You want to name him after the building manager?"

"No!" Dean laughed. "Chuck Norris. Actor, martial artist... ginger."

"No."

"Yes!"

"You didn't even want him," Cas said, scooping him up and cuddling him. "You are not calling him Chuck Norris."

"Hey, Chuck," Dean cooed, crouching down beside Cas. "Do me a favour and shed a little less, yeah?"

Chuck stared at him, and Dean's nose started to itch again.

"Oh, no..." he said, then sneezed once, twice, three times in quick succession.

An irritated paw swiped at his nose.

"Oh, yeah," Dean said. "Definitely a 'Chuck'."

"We are not calling him Chuck," Cas pouted, but if he didn't come up with another suggestion soon he had a feeling it was going to stick.

* * *

Leaving Cas to play with the cat in the kitchen, Dean made his escape from the creature and, hopefully, all the hair irritating his sinuses. He'd made it clear to Cas that the cat had to stay in the kitchen, as he wasn't getting cat hair all over the apartment. He was pretty sure they weren't even supposed to have pets in the apartment, anyway.

As he started thinking about the terms of his lease, he realised that he probably wasn't supposed to have Cas living with him, either.

Cas...
He was never supposed to start *dating* the guy when he'd pulled over to stop him jumping off the bridge. It seemed like forever ago. He brought a hand to his mouth as he found himself thinking about their relationship.

Dean definitely wanted to share his life with Cas; to be there for him, and have Cas there for him. He enjoyed spending time with him, and when Cas was out with other friends Dean missed him even though he knew he'd be home after a while. When they sat together - talking or silent, touching or apart - he felt... it was corny, but he kind of felt at peace with himself. Like he was in a happy place, and life was good. Spending time with Cas was pleasurable, and satisfying.

But the idea of taking their relationship out of that comfortable zone had Dean's heart rate quickening, and not in a good way. He felt anxious; not nervous, but almost scared - which was ridiculous. Dean had had sex before. Many times. It was just that the parts would be slightly different with Cas - more of some, and none of others. Logically he thought it should be less complicated, because didn't they say that it was easier for guys to climax? But there was something... *there...* niggling at the back of his mind, telling him that it was wrong.

Which was total bullshit. It didn't matter who you fell in love with, so long as they were of legal age and you treated them with respect. Age differences, genders - none of that mattered. So why did it?

"*You're not wrong,*" another voice echoed through his mind.

He thought back to what that gay couple he'd met - Jesse and Cesar, he remembered - had said to him:

"*Love isn't complicated unless you make it that way.*"

"*Whatever it is - and I'm not saying it's love - I don't know how to uncomplicate it,*" Dean admitted after a moment's pause.

"*Do you want to?*" Cesar asked.

"*Yes. No... Maybe.*"

"*Start by figuring out which it is,*" he advised. "*Don't mess him around, whoever he is. Whoever he is, he deserves better than that.*"

"*Yeah,*" Dean agreed. "*He does.*"

He rubbed his eyes with the heels of his hands. Cas had written a list, one time. Pros and cons. It had pissed him off a little, but now he wondered if he might have been onto something.

Determination coursing through his veins, he stood up and went raking through a drawer until he found an old pen and a notepad. Sitting down again and folding a page in half, he wrote the heading *pros* on one side, and *cons* on another.

Then he exhaled harshly. That had been the easy part. Now he didn't know what to write. Raising the pen to his mouth, he chewed on the end as he considered what the hell he was doing. This kind of self-reflection was exactly why he hadn't wanted to go and see Pamela - and why he didn't want to go back. She'd offered him a deal - discounted sessions at the church rate, as a favour to Cas - but, given he'd have to pay them out of his own pocket as he wasn't a member of the congregation, he still couldn't afford to continue even if he wanted to.

*I like spending time with Cas,* he wrote under the 'pros' column. There. That was easy. Except he'd already thought up that one earlier. Shrugging to himself, he wrote *I'd miss him if he wasn't here.*
Then he added *it's complicated* under the 'cons'. Reading what he'd written, he nodded to himself. Then he scored out *it's complicated*. It wasn't complicated. It *shouldn't be* complicated. He sighed. What was it that made it complicated? *That* was what he needed to write down. Except he didn't think 'weird feeling in the back of my mind' counted.

*It scares me.*

He'd never cared about a guy the way he'd cared about Lisa, or Cassie. At thirty-two years old, you'd think he'd have his life sorted out by now - that he'd know who he was, and what he wanted.

Truth be told, jealousy burned under his skin at the thought of someone *else* being with Cas. He didn't think he could class that as either a pro or a con, however.

*Everyone will make a big deal out of it.*

It shouldn't be something he'd consider, but he was trying to be *honest*, so...

*He loves me.* That one went under the 'pro' column and was closely followed by, *he makes me happy*. A moment later *I trust him* was added.

As the next one came into his head his breath hitched, and he briefly considered not writing it down.

Moving his pen to the 'cons' column, he slowly wrote, *I don't know if I could have sex with him.*

It wasn't fair to ask Cas to live a sexless life with Dean just because he had issues with physical intimacy. With him. What the hell was his problem? The difference wasn't *that* great. In theory, he should have a better understanding of what Cas would enjoy given the fact that he wasn't exactly unfamiliar with his own genitals. He rubbed a hand across his jaw, realising that his brain was going around in circles.

Reading over what he'd written, he ripped the page out of the notebook and scrunched it up into a ball. *Stupid idea.* It took a few moments, but his flash of irritation faded and he flattened the paper out again.

"What are you doing?" Cas asked from behind him.

Dean jumped in his seat, and immediately moved to hide his writings. But when he turned to look at Cas, however, it was clear from the pain written across his face that he'd already seen it.

"What? You think you're the only one who gets to write lists?" he snapped, slamming the notebook down on the arm of the chair. Getting defensive was only going to make things worse, but this was exactly what Cas had done when he'd had doubts about *him*.

Cas looked like he was about to question Dean, but then realisation flickered across his face.

"Yeah, I saw it," Dean growled. "I frustrate you, isn't that right?"

Cas was very clearly trying to keep his feelings under control. "That was *private,*" he hissed.

"It's not like I went snooping," Dean retorted, getting to his feet. "I didn't want to throw out one of your damned uncompleted crosswords. Why the hell can't you just finish one before you move onto the next, anyway? Instead of starting ten or more at a time and then leaving them lying around."

"You're a fine one to talk about leaving things lying around," Cas replied harshly. "This place was a *mess* before I moved in, and it would be again if I moved out! Write *that* under your damned 'pros!'"
Dean barely registered the tears in Castiel's eyes before he turned to leave.

"Wait!" he cried, leaping over the back of the sofa and grabbing Cas's arm to stop him from leaving. "Just... wait."

"Why? So you can criticise the methods I use to deal with my problems? At least I'm dealing with mine!"

Resignation flooded through Dean and he released his grip on Castiel's arm. "I'm just another problem for you to deal with, aren't I?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"It's what you said!"

"But it's not what I meant!" Cas argued weakly. A tear fell down his face, then another and another. "I don't want to fight with you, Dean."

"I don't want to fight with you, either."

"The things you wrote," Cas said, gesturing at the discarded notepad. "I'm just trying to... I don't know... process shit," Dean attempted to explain. "It looked like you were trying to find a reason to stay with me."

"Isn't that exactly what you did?"

Castiel's tongue darted out, wetting his lips. "Yes," he admitted quietly. Then, as a gesture of peace, he added, "It looked like you had more pros than cons."

Dean looked down at the notebook. "I'd barely started, but, yeah."

"If you think it's something that will help you, I'll go for a walk and leave you to it," he offered.

"No, Cas," Dean said, desperate not to leave things strained between them. "Don't go. Stay."

Cas looked doubtful.

"Come here," Dean said, grabbing his hand and leading him over to the sofa.

He pulled Cas down beside him, but he looked like he wasn't sure that he wanted to be there. Lifting his feet and shifting slightly, he lay down and rested his head in Castiel's lap. For a moment it felt awkward, but then he felt Cas's hand running through his hair. He closed his eyes and sighed, letting himself get lost in the feeling of Cas's fingers across his scalp.

"I want to give this a real shot, Cas, but sometimes I just get this feeling like it's wrong, even though I know it's not and I don't want it to be," he offered, after a few minutes had passed. "Do you understand?"

Castiel swallowed. "I didn't want to get my heart broken," he said carefully, explaining his own reasons for writing his list. "I loved you—I love you, but I didn't know where I stood. I still don't, sometimes."

"Sometimes I'm okay with this. But sometimes that feeling's there, and I'm..." He swallowed, then moved to sit up so that he was looking at Cas. "I'm sorry if it makes you feel like crap."
"Thank you," Cas sniffed. Then he put a hand on Dean's knee, and looked him in the eye. "Talking about your feelings isn't all bad," he added, a twinkle in his eye.

Dean let out an exasperated chuckle, and shook his head in mock annoyance. Looking up at Cas out of the corner of his eye, he reached out and cupped his face in his hands. With a swipe of his thumbs, he dried Cas' tears. Castiel's lips parted at his touch, and a soft gasp of nervous anticipation blew past them.

Leaning forward and half-closing his eyes, Dean kissed him tenderly.

Stiffly, as if not wanting to push him too far, Cas kissed him back. His touch was very controlled as he reached a hand out to Dean, obviously holding back from touching him as much as he wanted to.

Breaking away, Dean offered, "I can give you a lift to church later, if you want."

But Cas shook his head. "I don't think I'm going to go today."

"Is He going to be okay with that?"

"I don't have to go every week," Castiel explained. "I choose to. But I think that, today, I need to be here. With you and..." He sighed, conceding defeat. "... Chuck Norris."

Dean grinned.

Taking one of Dean's hands in his own, Cas added, "I believe He will understand."

* * *

Later that afternoon, as Cas was cleaning up Chuck Norris's 'accident' in the kitchen, Dean called his brother.

"Hey, Sam."

"Hey, Dean."

Dean was silent for a long moment. He hated this, always calling his brother for help. But while his confrontation with Cas earlier had helped him make his decision, he now needed Sam's help to act upon it. "This isn't a social call," he admitted.

On the other end of the phone Sam sighed. "How much do you need?"

"Two hundred. A month."

"What?" Sam asked warily. "Are you in some kind of trouble?"

"What? No, I... I'm seeing someone."

"You mean like a hooker? Since when did you have to pay to get laid?"

"No! Look, it doesn't matter. Forget it."

He hung up and tossed the phone onto the other seat, but even as he crossed his arms and lifted his feet onto the table it started to ring. He hesitated, then retrieved the phone.

"Dean—"
"I'm seeing a counsellor, okay?" he admitted gruffly, throwing himself back down onto the sofa. The loose page Dean had been writing on slid off the notebook and drifted to the floor.

"Oh," Sam said. Then, "Can you even afford that?"

"No, asshat, that's why I'm calling you." Dean leaned down to retrieve the fallen page. Instead of sliding it into the notebook he toyed with the piece of paper, folding and unfolding one corner restlessly. "She even offered me a reduced rate, but I still can't afford it. Not all of it, anyway. It doesn't help that Cas wants to go back to university, now. Money's probably going to get tight around here soon."

_He loves me._

"So, two hundred a month? How many sessions is that?"

_It scares me._

"Two. That's about all the 'talking about my feelings' crap I can handle."

_He makes me happy._ That was the only thing that should matter, wasn't it?

"Can I ask what..?"

Dean took a breath, tearing his eyes away from the list. He knew what his brother was trying to ask. "A few things. Like Dad... Mom," he added thickly. He hated to use his parents as an excuse, but he had no doubt they would come up at some point - he knew he had a lot of unresolved issues with their deaths.

"Have the dreams come back?" Sam asked, concerned.

"They never left," Dean admitted honestly.

"But I thought they'd stopped?"

"No, I just stopped talking about them. 'A man shouldn't get upset over a dream',' he said, in an imitation of their father.

"Yeah, Dad gave some pretty shitty advice," Sam agreed. "He tried his best, though."

"Most of the time."

They were both silent for a long moment.

"I'll transfer the money," he told him, his tone compassionate. "And if you decide that you need to see this person more often, just let me know and I'll give you more, okay?"

"Thanks, Sam."

"And Dean? I'm glad you're dealing with things."

"Whatever, bitch."

"Shut up, jerk."

Dean's breath caught in his throat at his brother's reply. Once so familiar, it now felt strange to hear. Good, but strange. Was it a sign that things might start to improve between them, again?
Sam seemed to have the same realisation, because he coughed awkwardly on the other end of the line. "I'll, uh... Bye, Dean."

"Bye, Sammy. And, uh, say hi to Jess for me, will you?"

"Sure thing."

There was a click and the line went dead. The electronic tone telling him the call was over repeated itself insistently, but Dean didn't hang up. He just stared at the handset for the longest time, wondering if that conversation had really just happened or if he'd imagined it.

When it finally sunk in that he and Sam had just had their first healthy, supportive conversation for the first time in years, Dean allowed himself a smile. He'd begun to think that repairing his relationship with his brother was impossible, but it seemed that there was hope for them yet.

There may be hope for Dean and Sam as brothers, but was there hope for Dean as an individual? If he'd been expecting a great weight to lift off his shoulders at the promise of regular therapy he'd have been disappointed. Instead he just felt a nervous churning in his gut at the prospect of opening up about things he'd ignored for so long.

But if he wanted to pursue a future with Cas - which he was pretty sure he did, even if it freaked him out a little - he'd need to commit to Pamela's sessions this time around. Besides, if it had worked for Castiel then it could work for him, right? As long as he didn't back out. Especially as, if he didn't confront whatever was lurking in the recess of his mind, he would inevitably hurt Cas in the long run. He'd messed Cas around enough these past few weeks. Dean needed to man the fuck up and grab his fear by the balls.

He could almost hear his father's voice in his head, telling him that a man shouldn't be afraid of the thoughts in his head. Then again, John Winchester would probably have disapproved of his son getting therapy, as well.

Dean stared at the phone in his hand. Maybe Sam was more right than Dean would like to let on. It felt like a betrayal to think it, but a part of him started to wonder if his father hadn't always been the great man he'd believed him to be as a child. It wasn't a bad thing to raise your kids to be strong and independent, but wasn't asking for help supposed to be a sign of strength?

Running a hand through his hair as he stood up, he realised that Pamela was right. Trying to sort through this stuff on your own wasn't easy. In fact, it was starting to give him a headache.

He replaced the phone in the cradle and wandered back through to the kitchen, wondering if he could take painkillers with allergy tablets.

"Who was that on the phone?" Cas asked, attention still solely on the kitten.

"Sam," Dean replied honestly. There was no need to lie about it. But then, Cas didn't need to know all the details of the call, either.

"How is he?"

"Yeah, he's good."

"And Jess?"

Dean swallowed. "Yeah, she's probably good, too."
At this, Cas finally looked at Dean with an exasperated and mildly disapproving look on his face. "She's his girlfriend."

"I know, I know!" Dean sulked. "But she doesn't like me."

"That's because she doesn't know you."

"And how do you know that? Have you been calling her when I'm not around?"

"Don't be silly," Cas chided him. Leaving the kitten alone for the moment, he stood up and stepped closer to Dean. "If she knew you," he told him, cupping Dean's face in his hands, "she'd like you. I believe that because I know you. And I know how much you love your brother. That's at least one thing the two of you have in common."

As always, Castiel's logic made sense and Dean couldn't help but smile as he was greeted with a reassuring kiss. Dean kissed him back, then pulled him into a hug. As he held him, he watched Chuck Norris over his shoulder. The tiny animal narrowed its eyes at them, cocking his head in a way that reminded Dean of Castiel.

As Cas moved his head to press a kiss to Dean's neck, over the spot that sent tingles down his spine, that familiar unease reared its ugly head. In response, he hugged Cas even tighter. He'd decided to give therapy a chance so that he and Cas could have a future together, but if he couldn't get over these issues then he and Cas wouldn't have a future.
Because Benny had a dentist appointment on Thursday, Bobby had switched his and Dean's half days around. This meant that he and Cas were working opposite shifts, with Dean in at work the morning and Cas working in the afternoon. It worked out for the best, with one of them being at home to look after the kitten.

At the start of the week, there had been some concern when they realised that Chuck Norris would be left home alone for several hours a day. However they soon discovered that - providing they covered the floor with newspaper as best they could - he was perfectly fine. There were no wiring for him to chew, and he was too small to jump onto the counter. The table was another story, so they made sure the chairs were all tucked under the table in the hopes that he wasn't able to climb up on them.

Dean drummed his fingers off the steering wheel as he pulled into the yard at the end of the day. Hoping to surprise Cas, he practically skipped into the office - which was empty.

He stepped out of the office again at the same time Bobby walked out of the garage. "Where's Cas?"

"Where'd you think? Went to 'stretch his legs'."

Dean shook his head. Every other day, Cas would take a walk into the back yard to gaze longingly at the Lincoln. "What's the story with that hunk of junk?"

"The damned insurance company is dragging its heels. They need to hurry up and pay out so I can get it out of my yard!"

"Let me know what happens with it, yeah?"

"What do you care?"

Dean shrugged. "Call it curiosity."

"Hmph. That's what killed the cat."

The phrase caused Dean's thoughts to turn to Chuck Norris. The little guy played havoc with his sinuses but, as much as he pretended to dislike the creature, he had to admit it was a little endearing. Especially the way he'd tried to stop him leaving the apartment by playing with his shoe laces.

"Hey, uh, is anyone off in April?"

Bobby stared at him for a long moment. "You realise I don't know the holiday schedule off by heart, right?"

"Yeah. Sorry."

Bobby moved past Dean into the office, pulling pages out of a filing cabinet.

"April, April, April... Andy's off the last week."
"Can I take the second week?"

Bobby frowned at Dean. "Since when did you ask for your holidays?"

"Since I made plans."

Bobby made an approving noise and marked it down. "Will Cas be needing it as well?"

"Oh. Uh, yeah. Probably."

Bobby made a slightly less approving noise. "Fine."

"Thanks, Bobby."

Dean left the office again and jogged around the buildings to find Cas, as expected, staring at the smashed up car.

"Are you finished?"

Cas turned to him. "You didn't need to pick me up. I could have walked. Or ridden the bus."

Dean shrugged. "I wanted to get you," he said, unable to keep the grin off his face. "So, are you coming?"

Picking up on Dean's obvious excitement and anticipation, Cas leaned back on the Lincoln and studied him. "Did you win the lottery or something?" he asked.

"Even better," Dean grinned, unable to keep it to himself any longer. "She said yes."

"Who said yes?"

"Lisa."

It took half a second for what Dean was saying to sink in before Cas catapulted himself into his arms.

"That's amazing!" he gushed. "I prayed every night that you could have a second chance with him."

"Well, you know I don't really believe in the man upstairs, but thanks," Dean told him. He pressed a chaste kiss to Castiel's mouth, then dropped his forehead against his. "This is all because of you," he said. "Thank you, Cas."

"I didn't do anything."

Dean pulled away. "You pushed me to write to him. To ask Lisa if I could see him. If it wasn't for you... I wouldn't have thought I deserved to."

Footsteps around the side of the building reminded Dean where they were and he instinctively stepped backwards, visibly putting space between himself and Castiel.

Frowning, Castiel reached out to him; his firm hand hand on Dean's shoulder stopping him in his tracks. "You may not have made the best decisions in the past, but you think of Ben as your son and care for him as such. You deserve to be in his life every bit as much as he deserves to have you in his."

Dean stared at Cas, struck dumb by his heartfelt support.
"You are strong, and kind, and loyal, which greatly outweighs your flaws. No-one is perfect, but not everyone is as loving as you."

Dean's eyes were brimming with unshed tears, and he swallowed hard around the lump in his throat as he nodded his acceptance of Castiel's words. He didn't necessarily believe them himself, but he believed that Cas believed them.

Looking down at their hands as he slowly intertwined their fingers, Dean wondered what he'd ever done to deserve Cas. He'd never felt this level of undying support from anyone - not even Sam. He couldn't put into words how grateful he was and, as a single tear fell down his cheek he wished that he could show Cas his gratitude.

Clearing his throat, he remembered the other half of his reason for picking Cas up from work. "I, uh, thought I'd take you out tonight."

"Out?" Cas asked, a tiny ray of hope inside his mind wondering if this was a date.

"Yeah, to celebrate," Dean clarified, as he led him back towards the car.

"And so we should," he agreed, focusing on his happiness for Dean instead of his disappointment. "It's been a long time since we've gone out."

"I mean it's not out out, you know? Nothing fancy. Just dinner at the Roadhouse."

"Even still, it's a treat."

"Yeah."

Dean dropped Castiel's hand as they rounded the front of the building and they got into the car, waving goodbye to Bobby as they left. They drove for a little while in silence before Dean spoke again.

"You know, it's nice having a bit of extra cash to do this." He'd never bothered before about how much he spent on booze. "Go out," he explained.

Cas glanced over at him.

"I'm not an alcoholic, Cas," Dean said, keeping his eyes on the road and away from Castiel's patient gaze. "Not like my dad. I don't need it... most of the time. Sometimes I use it to take the edge off, other times I just don't want to feel like crap."

"I had to hold your head while you threw up in the toilet," Cas reminded him pointedly.

"That's a different kind of crap. I can deal with that. Feeling alone, like I've failed everyone I know... everyone I care about. That's the kind of crap I want to forget."

"You're not alone any more, Dean," Cas promised him, a hand on Dean's knee warming the skin beneath his jeans. "And you haven't failed me."

_Not yet_, a small voice in Dean's head cut in. He bent his neck to one side, causing it to pop.

"I'm here for you. Whatever you need. You're my boyfriend, and my best friend. If you feel alone then _I'm_ failing you."

Dean was silent for a long moment as he let Castiel's word sink in, and he wondered how the conversation had derailed so quickly. "I should probably drink a little less," he conceded, getting it
back on track.

"If that's what you want to do."

"Yeah. It is."

"Then I'm proud of you, Dean. It's not easy to admit when you need to change your behaviours."

Dean side-eyed him. "Are you quoting Pamela again?"

Castiel opened and closed his mouth. "Paraphrasing, perhaps," he acknowledged.

Dean shook his head as he indicated left. "At this rate, I'm going to have two counsellors for the price of one."

Cas chuckled. "Sorry."

"Nah. It's okay. I somehow don't mind it coming from you."

They drove the rest of the way in silence, Castiel's hand still on Dean's knee. For once, he wasn't even tempted to play music - the silence between them and the roar of the engine felt somewhat comforting.

* * *

"Hey, Dean! We haven't seen you in a while," Jo smiled when they walked through the door, Dean holding it open for Cas. "Hi, Cas." She hugged them both.

"Is it just me, or is the service in here getting a lot more personal?" Dean quipped.

Jo smacked him around the head with a menu.

"Ow!"

"Don't be such a baby, Winchester," Ellen grinned from where she stood wiping glasses at the bar.

"Table or booth?" Jo asked them. She looked amused, as if thinking she already knew their preference before they answered.

And she did, Castiel realised.

"He only ever takes a booth when he's on a date."

Except that wasn't the case, as her observation had been prompted by the fact the two of them had shared a booth in the past. And who was to say this couldn't be a celebration and a date?

"Booth?" he suggested, looking at Dean for approval.

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Booth."

Jo's look of amusement faded, but her eyes widened slightly. "Okay," she said.

Castiel's paranoia kicked in, because he thought she sounded a little suspicious.

She led them over to the back corner and started removing the extra place settings, but was taken off guard when Dean slid into the same side of the booth as Cas.
"You'll have more room on the other side," she pointed out.

"We're good," Dean told her.

"Okay," she said again when Cas nodded.

And maybe it wasn't his paranoia, because she was looking at them rather oddly.

"So do you guys want your regulars, or do you want to look at the menus?"

"Menus, please Jo," Cas told her. "We're celebrating." A sharp dig in his side stopped him from saying anything more.

Jo beamed. "Celebrating what?" she asked them eagerly.

"Personal stuff," Dean told her.

"Well fine, if you don't feel like sharing with your friends..." she trailed off, pretending to sound hurt.

Dean sighed, because they obviously weren't going to get any peace until he told her. "If you hound all guys like this it's no wonder you're single," he complained jokingly.

She put her hands on her hips, causing her tank top to rise up and expose a sliver of pale skin. "I'll have you know that the reason I'm single is because I haven't found a man worth my time yet," Jo informed him assertively.

Dean laughed at her attitude. Her tomboyish appearance and self-confidence was a breath of fresh air, compared to some women he'd come across who sought male attention. "You remember I told you I was trying to see my ex's kid?"

She nodded.

"She said she's okay with it."

"Oh," she said, as if it wasn't quite what she was expecting. Then as Dean's words sunk in, "Oh! That's amazing!"

"Yeah," Dean said, still unable to believe it himself.

"I'm really happy for you, Dean."

"Thanks."

"I'll let you look at the menu, but what do you guys want to drink?"

"I'll, uh, just have a Coke," Dean said, deliberately avoiding her gaze as he studied the menu.

"Make that two, please, Jo," Cas told her.

"O-kay," she said, and retreated to the bar to get their drinks.

Dean followed her with his eyes, and caught Ellen looking over at them curiously while Jo poured their drinks.

"Is it just me or is she behaving a little strangely?" Cas asked quietly.

"Jo's always strange," Dean told him affectionately.
Castiel tutted at him. "More than usual?"

"Yeah," Dean agreed evasively. "What do you want to eat?"

Clearly Dean didn't want to discuss it, so Cas turned his attention to the menu as well. "What are you having?"

"The Harvelle Hamburger looks good."

"How is a burger in any way a treat, when you eat them so regularly?"

"This is the house burger, Cas! Beef, bacon, pulled pork, cheese, chillies, tomato, lettuce, onions..." Cas looked horrified. "You don't need that much meat in one meal."

"No-one does," Dean grinned. "But it's a treat."

Castiel opened his mouth to argue, but Dean had used his own words against him. "Well I'm going to have something different."

They were both studying their menus silently when Jo brought their drinks over, the ice cubes clanking against the glasses as she set them down on the table.

"Have you decided what you want yet?"

"I'm having the Harvelle," Dean said immediately.

"How many times have you drooled over the menu before telling us it's 'too damn expensive'?" she chuckled.

"Well, today I can afford it," he told her.

"What about you, Cas?"

"I think I'll try the potted crab."

Jo scribbled their order down and left them alone again.

Dean pretended to study the desserts for a long moment. It was at times like this that he realised he and Cas were two very different people. While he mostly kept everyone at a distance and had grown more inclined to stay in, Cas had a desire to be more sociable and go out. He ate the same things - or variations of them - whereas Cas was eager to try new food, even if it turned out he didn't like them. They said opposites attracted, but Dean would've thought people needed to share some similarities as well.

It seemed like Cas and Balthazar had a lot in common. From what he saw, anyway. Sure, Balthazar was bolder and more outgoing, but Cas had become more so over the past months. His dislike of Balthazar made his stomach churn strangely, and for the first time he wondered if there was more to his feelings than simply not liking the guy.

"Is that something you like?" Dean asked abruptly. "Crab, I mean? Or..." He trailed off when Cas looked at him.

"It just sounded nice," Cas answered. "And I've never had crab before."

Dean nodded to himself.
"Are you okay?"

"Yeah."

"It's just that for someone who wanted to celebrate you've gone very quiet."

Dean sucked in a breath, and let it out over a long exhale. "Have you ever noticed that we're very different?"

Cas's gaze dropped to the table, perhaps wondering where Dean was going with his question. He wasn't very sure himself.

"Yes."

"Do you think that's a bad thing?" Dean held his breath as he waited for Cas to answer. When Castiel's leg shifted and his knee deliberately touched his, he relaxed slightly.

"I think that we both have flaws," Cas considered, "but I like to think that we can balance each other out. When I met you, you were very alone. Now you're not. You've allowed Ellen and Jo to treat you as a friend, and from what I hear you've become less of a..." He trailed off, briefly rethinking what he was about to say before ploughing ahead anyway. "As one of your colleagues put it, less of a 'pain in the ass' at work."

Dean barked a laugh. "That sounds like Bobby. Or Benny."

"I'm not naming names," Cas told him firmly. "I thought I was broken, until you showed me that there was nothing wrong with me. You taught me to believe in myself, and proved to me that I mattered - that my life meant something."

Dean took a sip of his drink, swallowing it around the lump in his throat.

Cas moved his hand to Dean's. "I wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you," he said sincerely. "And I think, in a way, you wouldn't be either. Your heart might have been beating as you got through each day, but can you honestly tell me that it was living?"

Dean shook his head.

"So yes, I think we're different - but I do not think that's a bad thing."

Dean looked up at Cas, a little intimidated by his unwavering resolve.

Just as quickly as Cas had taken Dean's hand, he let it go again. Was he trying to be discreet, or wary of unnerving Dean?

"What made you ask that?"

"The potted crab," Dean revealed, laughing at the bewildered look on Cas's face. "It was a, uh, line of thought."

"I vowed to be patient and give you the time you need, but I keep worrying that you're having second thoughts," Cas admitted softly.

"I don't want to be without you, Cas."

"You keep saying that, but it's not the same as wanting to be with me."
"Yeah, I guess it's not," Dean agreed quietly. But he moved his hand a few inches to the side, resting just beside Castiel's on the top of the table.

It was a casual, yet intimate gesture, and not one that Cas had expected. He appreciated the effort Dean was making, and as their conversation took a lighter, less serious tone, Dean's hand stayed there - only moving when Ellen brought their food over.

He wondered if she had noticed, because now she was giving them a strange look as well - and he found himself unable to hold her gaze. Ellen - and Jo - had been good friends to them both. Hiding his relationship with Dean from her, and asking Jo to keep their secret, felt too much like lying.

"Do you guys want more drinks?" she asked, still looking at Cas carefully.

Castiel opened his mouth to refuse, as his glass of soda was still half full - as was Dean's - but Dean spoke first.

"Yeah, you could bring us another couple."

"Same again?" she asked.

"Yeah," Dean told her.

"I'll get Jo to bring them over."

Cas nodded his agreement. He supposed that ordering another drink now would save him having to catch her attention later when it might be busier.

"She's looking at us strangely, as well," Cas told him.

"Yeah."

So he wasn't the only one to have noticed.

Dean cleared his throat. "You're, uh, not going to say anything to her? Right?"

"Of course not!" Castiel felt insulted that Dean would even feel the need to ask. "It's not my place to 'out' you, as Balthazar would say."

"I just thought... 'cause she's your friend, too... that you might want to tell her. I mean, you told Jo."

"I do," Cas agreed. "But I won't say anything until you're ready because it's something that doesn't just affect me."

Dean looked a little relieved, and nodded his acceptance. "Okay."

"But you must know it won't change the way they see you?" Cas asked him. "They've been incredibly supportive of me. And Ellen doesn't seem the least bit bothered that Jo has a friend who's a lesbian."

"Yeah. I know."

Castiel put a hand on Dean's arm. "When you're ready, Ellen will accept you. Ash, too."

Dean swallowed thickly and looked down at his burger. "I know I can sometimes put my foot in my mouth," he joked, changing the subject, "but I don't think I can get my mouth around that."
Castiel chuckled.
"I'm going to need a bigger mouth."

"Or you could just use your cutlery."

Dean looked unhappy, but seemed to accept that he was going to have to. As he shoveled a huge forkful of meat into his mouth and chewed, his jaw fell slack in delight.

Castiel was glad he wasn't sitting opposite so he didn't have to see his mouthful of half-chewed food.

Dean tried to say something that came out in an incoherent mumble, but his expression of pleasure was obvious.

"Good?" he asked wryly.

Dean swallowed. "Oh, yeah," he said, immediately attacking his dinner with his cutlery again. "How's your crab?"

"Very nice," Cas told him. A more modest meal than Dean's, his crab came with a side salad and two slices of toasted soda bread.

Jo returned at that moment with their drinks and asked them the same question.

"Lovely, thank you," Cas told her.

Dean had his mouth full again so flashed her a thumbs up, his cheeks bulging as he grinned.

She left them alone again, and they ate their meals in relative silence.

Castiel finished his before Dean, and found himself watching the other man eat for several minutes. He certainly enjoyed eating, if the pleased noises were anything to go by. It was no wonder Dean carried a little extra weight around his waist - barely noticeable when he was clothed. But on the few occasions Dean walked around their small apartment in his underwear, Cas had noticed. And he liked it. Dean played up his tough-guy exterior but, when he shed his clothes, he shed a little bit of his front with them. Cas adored how his underlying softness showed in those moments, both physically and in his actions.

Eventually Dean noticed him staring, and stopped chewing. "You want to try a bit?" he asked around his mouthful of food, pointing at his plate with his fork.

Cas shook his head. "No," he smiled.

"'Cause you're staring."

"I'm just looking at you."

A faint pinkness blossomed across Dean's cheeks as he resumed chewing.

"You're a very beautiful man, Dean," he told him sincerely.

Dean's face hardened slightly, conflicting with the way his blush deepened at Castiel's words.

He'd reacted in a similar way before, Cas remembered then, when he'd been complimented on his looks. He wondered if it had something to do with the way Dean seemed self-conscious about his body, or if there was some other, deeper reason for his reaction to flattery.
As Dean shoved another forkful of food in his mouth, Castiel's admiring gaze fell on his lips. He knew what they felt like against his own, but he found himself wondering what they might feel like on other areas of his body; his chest, his stomach, the inside of his thighs... He glanced away and shifted slightly as his internal thoughts threatened to manifest themselves in external ways, and he slid the menu closer to look at the desserts.

Dean would probably want pie if he had any room left after his burger. There wasn't much eating in ice cream, and after such a light dinner Cas would want something a little more filling. The sticky toffee pudding sounded nice, while spotted dick sounded very strange.

He suddenly found himself wondering if Dean's face and shoulders weren't the only places those freckles were sprinkled...

A warm flush came over him, and he tried to control his thoughts and - thereby - his body.

"I don't think I could eat anything else," Dean said finally, pushing his plate away.

"So you don't want to look at the desserts?"

Dean looked from him to the menu. "No," he said regretfully, dropping his head back against the leather seat and rubbing a hand across his stomach. "Oh, but that was good."

Castiel didn't want to be the only one having dessert, so turned his attention to the drinks menu. He usually just drank beer with Dean, or soda, so he checked out their other options instead.

"They have a whole section of mocktails," Cas informed him.

Dean scoffed.

"I think I'll have a 'Cuddle on the Beach'," he mused aloud.

He'd had one before and been ridiculed by Balthazar for being a lightweight, but then Zeke had spent the night alternating between alcoholic and non-alcoholic drinks as well - and by the time their group of friends left, they were the only two who could walk in a straight line.

"You can have a cuddle in the Roadhouse," Dean laughed, throwing an arm around him in jest.

Castiel chuckled and leaned into Dean ever so slightly.

"Finished?" Jo asked, causing Dean to immediately withdraw his arm from around Cas's shoulders. When they nodded, she started picking up their plates. "Do you guys want anything else?"

"Can I have a 'Cuddle on the Beach', please?"

"Still or sparkling? We can make it both ways."

"Oh, um, sparkling please." It would be a little different to the last time he'd had one.

"Dean?"

"No way. I couldn't eat another thing."

Castiel nudged him and pointed at another mocktail - 'Caramel Apple Pie Mocktail'.

"What the hell?" Dean shot upright in his seat to read the description. "Dude, that is just wrong. I'm having one. There's no way that can be good."
Jo peered at where Cas was pointing and rolled her eyes. "You don't have to eat everything that has 'pie' in it."

"Not everything. When Cas has pie in him, I don't eat him."

Castiel's face grew warm and Jo started laughing.

It took another second for Dean to realise the innuendo in what he'd said and he slowly sank back in his seat. "Shit," he sighed, knowing there was no way he could take it back. That's what he got for trying to be a smartass, he supposed.

"So does that mean you do eat him when he doesn't have pie in him?" Jo teased, still chuckling.

Dean just glared at her, and she howled with laughter all the way back to the bar. Cas patted Dean's knee in solidarity.

"We're supposed to be celebrating," Cas reminded him gently. "Don't let her get to you."

"I'm not," Dean huffed, picking up a beermat and trying to spin it on its corner.

"Mmhmm," Cas hummed, not buying into his denial at all. He shifted sideways in his seat, folding one knee beneath him as he leaned against the wall to look at Dean. "She's just kidding around."

"I know."

Cas sighed softly, wondering how their celebratory dinner had become anything but. "Tell me about Ben," he demanded softly.

When Dean looked at him, the light in his eyes had been rekindled. "Ben? He's awesome. You'll love him, Cas, I just know it. He's a great kid - likes classic rock, loves his mom."

"Like a mini you, then?" Cas smiled.

"Yeah. Only a lot smarter."

"You're smart," Cas told him, refusing to let Dean belittle himself.

"Maybe," Dean conceded. "But he's smarter."

"Don't underestimate yourself, Dean."

"He's got to have grown up a lot," Dean continued as if Cas had never interrupted. "I don't know if he'll still be the same kid he was when Lisa left with him."

"He may have grown up, but he won't have changed beyond recognition," Cas assured him. "Even if he is different to what you remember, the little boy you helped to raise will still be in there somewhere."

"I hope so," Dean said hollowly. Reaching into his pocket, he pulled out his wallet. Tucked inside was a photo he removed to show Castiel. "Growing up with a father - or I guess a father-figure - who's not around enough can leave you feeling like a part of you is missing."

Castiel looked from the photo to Dean, knowing that he was talking from personal experience.

"I don't want to have messed him up by not being around."
"He wrote to you," Cas reminded him. "He kept the lines of communication open. You said Lisa told you that he wants to see you. Stop worrying, and be happy!"

"You're probably right, Cas, but—"

"Stop thinking the worst."

"Hey, guys, sorry about the wait. I had to— Is that him?!" Jo exclaimed, seeing the photo in Dean's hand.

"Yeah," he said, moving it out of the way in case she spilt their drinks over it.

When they had their drinks, he let her see. A squeal left her lips as she snatched it from his grasp. "He's so cute!"

"He's too young for you," Dean teased, carefully taking the picture back from her.

She gave him a punch in the arm for his sass. "He looks like you."

Longing and hope swelled up in Dean's chest. "Nah." He dismissed her observation, though the thought had crossed his mind more than once.

"He does, a little bit," Cas agreed, craning his neck to take a second look.

Dean slipped the photo back into his wallet before they could get him overthinking this again. He'd never thought he'd ever be a dad, and if he and Cas worked out then it would never happen. But, thinking about Ben, he realised that he wanted the opportunity.

Even if there was a chance that Ben was his, he'd missed out on so much with the boy by coming into his life when he was eight years old.

Cas and Jo were still chatting away, but he ignored them and picked up his drink. A tentative sip had a tangy burst of apple flavour exploding across his tongue, accompanied by the sweetness of the caramel syrup. Although it had more of an artificial flavour to it, it was definitely reminiscent of an apple pie and actually had Dean longing for one. He wondered if Cas would bake him one at the weekend if he asked nicely.

"Well, it's not disgusting," Dean said, taking another sip. "But I don't know if I'd have it again."

Cas took a mouthful of his mocktail and smiled.

"Good?" Dean asked him.

"Very."

"So do you guys want your bill, or are you going to hang out here a bit longer?"

Cas looked at Dean. "We should probably head home soon and check on Chuck."

Dean nodded his head in agreement. He needed to see the other Chuck as well when they got home. "Yeah, we'll take the bill now, thanks."

Jo was frowning at them. "Who's Chuck?"

"Just this stray cat Cas picked up."
"Kitten," Castiel corrected him.

"Say, you don't want a cat, do you?" Dean asked her. "Because we can't keep it."

Jo glanced over her shoulder at her mother. "I don't think either of us want an animal that's going to bring us other dead animals," she remarked. "So no. Good luck finding it a home, though."

He took another sip of his mocktail after Jo had left and commented, "You know, I can't decide if I like this or not."

"Can I?" Cas asked, pointing at the drink.

Dean slid his glass over to Cas, who offered Dean his own in return.

"That's... not bad, actually," Dean said, taking a second sip.

Cas, on the other hand, pulled a face. "Oh, no. I don't like that."

Dean laughed and they swapped drinks back.

"So is Lisa still asking that you refrain from drinking?"

"Huh? Oh, no, I just, uh... It's been nice, having a little extra cash this month. And I figured, if we want to take Ben out anywhere when he comes, it'd be good to save up a little more."

"That's very responsible of you," Cas told him.

Dean grinned. "Plus I have a crate of beer at home." His grin turned to laughter as Cas rolled his eyes.

Easter was still a few weeks away, but he couldn't wait for Ben to arrive. He just hoped that he and Cas would get on alright, because he didn't want to have to choose between two of the people that meant the most to him.

* * *

Cas drove them home from the Roadhouse, under Dean's watchful guidance. He'd only been behind the wheel a handful of times since his permit had arrived, but he hadn't crashed yet and Dean could breathe a little easier in the passenger seat with him now.

"Try pulling in here."

Castiel shot him a slightly worried look, and Dean tried not to let his concern over his car show. Usually Cas would get out and he'd slide over to park, but there was plenty of space today for him to make an attempt without needed to do too much steering.

"Okay, just reverse slowly up to that car behind us. You got it?" he checked, as Cas adjusted the gear stick. He shifted in his seat to look out the rear window. "Back up, back up, back up... Stop."

He jolted in his seat as Cas slammed his foot on the brake.

"Dude, I think you just gave me whiplash," he joked, rubbing his neck.

"Sorry," Cas said abashedly as he handed the keys back.

Dean stretched his neck from side to side, a satisfying pop on one side seeming to ease out some of
the stiffness. "That's okay."

Cas looked like he was ready to leave the car, but was just waiting for him to move.

Dean slouched down in his seat slightly. "So, uh, sorry that wasn't really much of a celebration dinner," he said apologetically. He wanted to get it off his chest before they went inside.

"You treated us to a nice dinner," Cas reminded him.

"Yeah, but it was pretty low-key."

"That doesn't matter." Cas put a hand on Dean's thigh, stroking down to his knee. "It's what it meant to us."

Dean glanced over at him. "Yeah, I guess you're right. I kind of feel like maybe I ruined the mood a little, though."

Castiel's head tilted in puzzlement. "Why?"

"For bringing up all my crap with Balthazar again."

Understanding came over Castiel's face. "Is that where all that stuff about us 'being different' came from?"

Dean didn't answer, staring resolutely out the windshield.

"Are you jealous?" Cas pressed, eager to understand and alleviate any concerns Dean had.

Dropping his head back against the headrest, Dean sighed. "I just think you deserve better than me, Cas. Someone who can take you out nice places, and hold your hand."

Castiel took one of Dean's hands in his own. "One day you'll hold my hand walking down the street," he said, his tone leaving no room for doubt. "And I don't care if the places we go to aren't 'nice', as long as it's you who takes me to them."

Dean looked at him. "You really mean that, don't you?"

"Absolutely," Cas promised him.

Dean stared a little longer at him, then nodded eventually. "Okay."

"Can we go in now?"

"Yeah," Dean smiled. "But I've got to stop in and see Mr Shurley on the way up."

"I can wait on you," Cas offered.

But Dean shook his head. "No," he said. "You go up and check on Chuck Norris."

Cas still looked mildly exasperated every time Dean called the kitten by its full name. "Okay. Do you want me to put some coffee on?"

"Oh, yeah," Dean replied with a satisfied noise.

"You're not going to be too long, are you?" Cas asked as Dean knocked on the building manager's door.
"I hope not. If he's even in..."

A second later they could hear the sound of the door unlocking, and Castiel made his way up the stairs alone.

"If this is about the elevator, I've been told it'll be working again by next week," Mr Shurley told him as soon as the door was open.

"Uh, it's not," Dean told him, trying to ignore the fact the other man was wearing a dressing gown.

"The water heater?"

"Nope."

"Oh." The other man looked puzzled. "Then what?"

Dean looked around, aware that anyone walking past could listen into their conversation. "Could we talk inside?"

"Sure."

Dean stepped inside, and followed the man into his living room. There were stacks of paper on just about every flat surface, which seemed to multiply every time Dean had reason to come around, and Dean perched on the edge of the sofa.

"Sit down," Mr Shurley told him, seemingly oblivious to the fact that Dean had already done so.

"What do you need?"

"Uh, so I've had this guy - this friend - staying with me for a little while, now—"

"This would be the one in the trench coat who's been living in your apartment for, what, six months or so?"

Dean cringed. "I know my lease is only for one, which is why I'm here. Him staying was never meant to be permanent, but I - we - would like it to be. So, how do I get his name put on the lease?"

"I need his ID, social security number, proof of employment," Mr Shurley answered, ticking them off on his fingers. "And it's not as easy as just adding him to the lease - you need to sign a new lease."

Dean's stomach churned. He hadn't considered this. "But I've still got a few months left on the old lease - I can't afford to pay that off."

But Mr Shurley waved away his concerns. "That's not necessary, so long as we both agree that you're going to sign a new lease. And usually the monthly rent would increase as the number of occupants has also increased."

"Cas only works part-time," Dean said quickly, "and he's hoping to go back to uni, so I don't know if he's going to be able to keep working and study, 'cause he took some time out and—"

"It's fine," Mr Shurley said.

Dean stared at him. "Seriously?"

"I said the rent would usually go up. You're a good tenant, and I haven't had any problems with this guy since he's been here. Why do you think I haven't bothered saying anything to you about him?"
"That's..." he trailed off, lost for words. He'd assumed Mr Shurley hadn't noticed that Cas was living with Dean - not just visiting him frequently. "Seriously?" he asked again.

The building manager grinned. "Just bring me the paperwork, and I'll get a new lease written up for you both to sign."

Dean left the apartment and walked upstairs in a bit of a daze. He was so used to things in his life going wrong, that the feeling of something going right for a change had his head spinning. As he opened the door and shed his jacket, he opened his mouth to inform Cas he was home. But before any sound could come out, Castiel's panicked voice had him rushing to the kitchen.

"Dean!"

He barged in, belatedly checking that he hadn't smacked Chuck Norris with the door, then looked at Cas. "What's wrong?"

"Chuck's gone."

"Gone? What do you mean gone? There's nowhere for him to go!"

"He's not here!"

Castiel's face was wrought with loss, and Dean was almost tempted to promise to empty the local cat shelter if it'd take that look off his face. Almost, because he knew that no other cat would be able to take Chuck's place in Castiel's heart - after all, Cas had been the one to find him, feed him, vaccinate him, and care for him. Cas had saved the kitten's life just as Dean had saved his, and Dean knew that created an unspoken bond that could never be broken. He tried not to think of how hard it would be for Cas to say goodbye to Chuck Norris - if they managed to find him again.

He moved to Cas and pulled him into a hug. "We'll find him, okay? I promise."

Cas nodded. "Did you definitely close the kitchen door when you left?"

"Yeah. I mean, you opened it when you got in, right?"

Cas closed his eyes and shook his head. "Of course. Yes. Sorry."

"It's okay," Dean said.

"I didn't mean to sound like I was blaming you."

"You didn't," Dean assured him.

Castiel started looking through the cupboards in case Chuck had somehow managed to get inside one. "Chuck? Here, kitty."

Dean checked under the table, on the chairs, and the window ledge. He really couldn't see where else that damn cat could have gone. Searching for the cat wasn't how he'd planned on spending his evening, but nevertheless he joined Castiel on the floor and started searching through the next cupboard.

* * *

It took them almost an hour to check the cupboards, all but emptying each one in their search for Chuck Norris.
"What if he did get out of the room?" Dean asked.

"How?" Cas shot back. "The door was closed."

"I don't know!" Dean exclaimed. "All I know is that he's not here!"

"You never wanted him anyway," Cas pointed out as he put the contents back in the last cupboard.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Dean asked, sniffing. Damn, it must nearly be time for him to take another allergy tablet.

"I don't know. Nothing. Just that you're not exactly going to miss him if we can't find him."

Dean sneezed. "But you are."

Castiel got to his feet with a heavy sigh, his knees cracking as his legs finally straightened out. "It wouldn't hurt to check the rest of the house," he conceded, but he didn't sound optimistic.

Dean didn't know what to say. He'd thought they would have found Chuck by now. He sneezed again, and moved towards the table for a tissue.

"Cas," he said, pointing at the tissue box.

"If we're out, write it on the list," Cas told him, leaning over the counter to try and see down the back of the refrigerator.

"No, look," Dean clarified.

Moving over to the table, Cas smiled in relief when he noticed the little bundle of fur safely tucked up inside the tissue box.

"I guess he can get up on the chairs, after all," Dean realised aloud.

"What are you doing in there?" he cooed, trying to encourage the small creature out. "You scared us, vanishing like that."

Dean heard a mewl of protest as he watched Castiel rip the hole bigger and coax him out.

"Don't do that again," he murmured to the animal, burying his face in its fur.

One paw reached out in Dean's direction, almost like a plea for help.

"Oh, don't look at me like that!" Dean told the kitten. "You're the one who decided to play hide-and-seek for an hour."

Chuck Norris meowed pathetically. When Castiel finally released his grip on him, he scampered off to the opposite side of the room where he began grooming himself.

Like a lost duck that had finally found its mother, Castiel followed Chuck across the room and sat down beside him. When the kitten finished grooming its fur, it clambered into Castiel's lap to be petted.

Warmth filled Dean's heart at the smile which lit up Cas' face now that he was reunited with Chuck Norris. Watching him interact with the ginger furball - with the relaxed happiness that they both exuded - Dean grew envious of how freely Cas loved the kitten, and it loved him back. The familiar churning of jealousy in his gut took him back to every time Cas brought up Balthazar's name, or
Dean compared himself to Castiel's friend. Ignoring that thought, he wished to himself that Cas could be that open with *him*; that he didn't feel the need to hold back his affections just because Dean was uncomfortable.

He thought back to the Castiel who had first moved in with him - helpless and lost, afraid to be himself, feeling like he didn't have a place in the world... It was a far cry from the Cas who was now lying on his stomach while the cat licked his hair.

"Good luck grooming *that*," he joked.

Cas chuckled, and brought a hand to his unruly hair. "Maybe I should try cutting it shorter."

"Don't."

Cas looked up at him and smiled. "Okay."

As Castiel turned his attention back to Chuck Norris, Dean promised himself that he would say whatever Pamela wanted him to, and *do* whatever she wanted him to, because he wanted Cas to be able to be like that with him *all* the time - not just in the little moments when they were alone.

Chapter End Notes

Chuck in the tissue box was inspired by [this tweet](http://example.com/this-tweet).
"Aren't you going to be early for your appointment?" Cas asked as Dean pulled up outside the restaurant he was meeting Balthazar at for lunch.

Dean shrugged. "I can read a magazine, or drive around a bit."

"I really am very proud of you," Castiel told him.

Dean scoffed and turned away before Cas could see the rising heat in his cheeks.

"I mean it," he insisted, reaching for Dean's hand. "This is clearly something very far outside your comfort zone, but you're doing it anyway. It would be easy for you to say you weren't going to do it."

Dean's jaw trembled, imperceptibly, and he swallowed thickly. Without looking at Cas he spoke quietly, almost as if to himself. "If I don't, what chance do we have?"

It was a rhetorical question, but if it hadn't been Castiel couldn't have given him an answer. At least not one he'd have been willing to give. He wondered if Dean had even realised he'd spoken aloud.

"If you want to talk to me afterwards, I'll be there," Cas told him instead. "Or if you don't want to talk any more, I can sit with you. Or, if you want space, all you have to do is tell me."

Castiel's concern was touching, but a heavy feeling was growing in Dean's stomach at the implication of his words. "We're just going to talk," he said, dismissing Castiel's worries.

A frown lined Cas's forehead, and he didn't look at all reassured by Dean's shrugging it off so easily.

Unbuckling his seatbelt as he saw Balthazar walking along the pavement, he gave Dean a quick hug before stepping out of the car. Giving his approaching friend a quick wave of acknowledgement, he turned back to Dean before shutting the car door.

"I'll be there if you need me," he reiterated. "And if you need to call me or text me during lunch, my phone is on."

"Damn it, Cas, I'm not a child!" Dean exclaimed. He glanced at Balthazar, who'd come to a stop at Cas's side. "Go have lunch, enjoy yourself, and I'll see you at home, okay?" he instructed, his tone effectively ending the conversation.

"Alright." Cas sighed in defeat. "I just want you to know that you are not alone." He closed the door and turned to greet Balthazar, who smiled and pulled him into a one-armed embrace as they moved towards the restaurant door.

Dean's stomach somersaulted and he put the car into gear, the engine roaring as he rejoined the flow of traffic.

So he was jealous of Balthazar. Okay - he was man enough to admit it. The guy had a little bit of class - certainly more than Dean had - and more money, too. He could afford to take Cas nice places, whereas Dean took him to free car shows and the beach. Nothing flashy. But then Cas had been keen to assure him that he didn't really mind where Dean took him - just that he went with him.

He fidgeted in his seat as he waited for the light to turn green.
Castiel might mean it, but Dean knew that he deserved better. If he could afford it, he'd take Cas to nice places. He wished he could afford it. But even if he cut back on his drinking permanently, they still wouldn't be hugely better off. He was just a grease monkey, whereas Balthazar was... whatever he was. And if Cas went back to university and graduated this time, well, it should just put him even further out of Dean's league than he already was. All he had was a GED and a guarantee of coming home from work filthy every day.

But Cas loved him, and Cas was loyal. Deep down he knew it was unlikely that he'd leave Dean to be with Balthazar, which kind of took the edge off his jealousy, but it didn't make him dislike him any less.

He turned the radio on, recognising Air Supply immediately despite not having heard the song for years, hoping some music would settle him before he faced Pamela again. He wouldn't admit to being scared, but the more Cas inadvertently built it up like this giant hurdle to be overcome the more apprehensive he got.

*I'm reaching for you, are you feeling it too?*
*Does the feeling seem oh, so right?*

Yeah. And no. Fuck, this whole thing with Cas was complicated. When it was just him and Cas, spending time together, then yeah, it felt right. It felt right in a way that terrified him because it was so different to anything he’d had before - to have a relationship that was built on friendship and... emotions... rather than sex. But then he started overthinking the future or they got closer and it started to feel wrong.

*Please love me or I'll be gone, I'll be gone.*

He didn't want Cas to be gone. Not again. He wanted... What did he want? Damn it, he was overthinking things again. Music was supposed to be clearing his head, not cluttering it with more thoughts.

As the song came into the chorus, he sang along in the hopes of shaking off the thoughts spinning around in his head.

*I'm all out of love, I'm so lost without you*  
*I know you were right, believing for so long*  
*I'm all out of love, what am I without you.*

His throat seized up around the lyrics, catching him by surprise. Without Cas, he wouldn't have to face whatever it was that was holding him back. But without Cas, he'd be alone. He roughly twisted the dial - scanning for the next station, searching for a different song. After a moment of static something classical started playing. Another twist, and something poppy burst out of the speakers.

*Cause the players gonna play, play, play, play*  
*And the haters gonna hate, hate, hate, hate*

He cast a considering glance down at the radio, contemplating whether or not the tune was tolerable, before deciding to let it play on. Only because he couldn't be bothered searching for something better.

Tuning the words out as he drove the rest of the way to Pamela's office, they gradually started to register in his mind when the chorus came around again.

*Heart-breakers gonna break, break, break, break, break*
And the fakers gonna fake, fake, fake, fake, fake

What if his feelings were... fake? If whatever he felt for Cas was nothing more than a deep-seated fear of being alone? What if he was a total fake - a phoney who'd manipulated Cas into falling for him only to turn his back at the last moment? But if it wasn't real, then he surely wouldn't be this conflicted over it.

He turned into the parking lot outside Pamela's office and let the engine idle until the song played out.

When he'd taken Cas in, it had almost been as a replacement for his brother - finding that having someone to care for and look after gave his life purpose, and filled part of the hole in his heart that couldn't be healed with meaningless flings that were over almost as soon as they'd started. He longed for deeper relationships with the people around him, but pushed them away to protect himself from being hurt again. He cared deeply about the people in his life - though he acted otherwise - but emotional attachments caused nothing but heartache in the long run, when the people involved inevitable left. However, as time had passed and Dean had gotten to know him, Castiel had created his own little space in Dean's heart. Cas had grown to love him. Or at least, he said he did - believed he did. Dean really hoped that he wasn't going to break Cas's heart, because he didn't even want to imagine the pain in those blue eyes if he hurt him again.

Dean didn't want to be a fake. He didn't want to break Castiel's heart. He wanted, he realised with sudden clarity, for his feelings to be real. He liked the sense of assurance he got from having Castiel's complete support, of sharing his life with someone, of being loved. He'd never had called himself gay, but there was something about Cas that drew him in and made him want more, made him crave everything he had to offer.

He dropped his forehead against the steering wheel and groaned. This was the kind of crap he should be sharing with Pamela, but he didn't feel comfortable sharing stuff with her that he'd barely begun to process for himself.

I, I, I shake it off. I shake it off,
I, I, I shake it off. I shake it off,
I, I, I shake it off. I shake it off.

Turning the engine off, the radio dying with it, Dean got out of the car. He was going to try to shake off all his doubts and hopefully Pamela could help him be a better man, for himself and Cas.

This time when he walked into Pamela's, he walked up to the woman at the desk. "Dean Winchester," he said blandly, no trace of the irritation he'd felt last time.

Her expression made it clear that she remembered him. "Take a seat," she stated coolly. "Ms Barnes is running late."

Sitting down on the other side of the room, he took in his surroundings. The walls were a soft, soothing green, a few plants were dotted around the waiting area - a tall palm in the corner, a fern on the table, and some kind of cactus thing on the desk - and a large, black and white print of a wave hung on the largest wall. The new office was an upgrade since the last time he'd been forced into sessions with her, and he found that he liked the decor. It gave the room a sense of life. And, he supposed, it was kind of relaxing.

It made him think again about doing something with the living room in their small apartment - maybe Cas would have some suggestions, if he asked? He'd considered movie posters, or maybe some music memorabilia. As he thought more about it, however, he realised it all reflected who he was and
gave no indication that Cas lived there, too. Movies and music were his thing, not Castiel's.

Dean frowned.

What was his thing? Castiel was religious, but he couldn't see him decorating a room with crucifixes and paintings of Jesus. It frustrated him to realise that he didn't really know what Cas liked. He'd always been happy to do whatever Dean did.

No. He had to know Cas better than this. Maybe he was just putting himself on the spot. He racked his brain, trying to think about Cas and what he liked. Reading. Crosswords. Neither of which really made for good decorating ideas.

Fish.

When they'd gone to the beach and visited the small aquarium, Cas had been really into the fish. And the bugs at the museum. See? He did know Cas. So maybe something to do with fish... Not bugs, though. It was bad enough when the real things got into the apartment, never mind having pictures of them on the walls.

Pamela's door opened and a sniffly woman, eyes visibly red and cheeks still damp, walked into the waiting area.

"Same time next week?" the receptionist asked kindly, and Dean nearly stood up and walked out there and then.

He watched Pamela comfort the crying woman, who was very insistent that she leave instead of staying until she'd calmed down.

Maybe his apprehension showed, because when she turned to him she winked and said, "I promise I'll go easy on you."

A strangled laugh died in his throat as he got to his feet and followed her into her office.

"In all seriousness, I'm glad you've come back, Dean."

"Well, that makes one of us," he grumbled as he dutifully took his place on the couch. He'd accepted that counselling was something he needed to try, but that didn't mean that he wanted to be there.

Pamela sat down on the chair beside him and crossed her legs, adjusting her skirt slightly as she did so. He noticed. He couldn't tell before because she usually wore trousers.

"How have you been?"

His eyes snapped up to her face guiltily. "Fine."

"Is there anything you'd like to focus on?"

Dean opened and closed his mouth, his resolve to cooperate already crumbling. Too soon. After all, you don't tell someone that you'd changed the sheets that morning on the first date. "Not really," he said noncommittally.

"Are you being honest with me, Dean?"

He rolled his eyes in response.

"Because this isn't going to work if you're not honest with me."
"You want honesty? Okay, fine - *I don't want to be here.* I don't want to talk to a stranger about the crap in my head. I've spent twenty years burying stuff at the bottom of a bottle, and it's worked out just fine so far," he snapped knowing, even as he spoke, the he wasn't being entirely truthful. "Are you happy now?"

"Yes." She smiled when he looked confused. "I said I wanted honesty - that doesn't mean I have to accept what you say. And if you don't want to be here, well, that just means I have to work harder to convince you this is worth committing to." Taking a sip of her water, she leaned back in her seat. "So, how about we start somewhere easy? How have you been since our last session?"

Looking at Pamela now, Dean found himself thinking back to his court-mandated sessions long ago. She'd sat there observing him as he slouched sullenly in his chair, but had never let his attitude phase her. He figured that if he gave her an inch she'd take a mile, and that because he'd made the *choice* to come here, she'd drag him that inch.

It was irritating. All of it. Her patient smile, her quiet confidence, her calm attitude. Dean had no idea how Cas put up with her. But as much as she got under his skin, he knew how good she'd been for Cas. If anything, the progress Castiel had made during his time with her should be enough for him to trust that she knew what she was doing - even if he didn't trust *her.*

And it was Cas he was here for, anyway - him and Cas. He closed his eyes and thought about Cas and Chuck Norris; laughing, smiling, and carefree.

"We got this cat," he began.

"O-kay," she said slowly, waiting to see where his statement was leading.

"We called him Chuck - *Chuck Norris* - because he's ginger. We can't keep him, 'cause I'm allergic to cats, but he's staying with us until we can find him a home. Cas found him on the street," he explained. Then his tone turned hopeful. "*You don't want a cat, do you?*"

She chuckled. "No. But thanks for the offer. If you ever find the real man, though, give me a call."

Dean couldn't help but laugh at that.

"So why are you telling me about Chuck?" she prompted when Dean didn't say anything more.

"The way Cas is with him... I want him to be like that with me," Dean admitted softly, feeling heat rise in his cheeks.

"You want your ears scratched?" Pamela joked with a smirk.


"You said 'honest' - do you think that Cas is lying to you?"

"No, I mean... like *emotionally.*" A shiver ran up Dean's spine. "He holds back around me." He scratched his jaw, painfully aware of Pamela's eyes boring into him as he willed himself to keep talking despite his discomfort, reminding himself that he was doing this for Cas, because Cas deserved better. "He does it for me. Because I get weird around him." He took a long, shaky breath.

"You're doing great, Dean," Pam praised him warmly.

Dean glanced at her out of the corner of his eye, and looked away again. "You don't need to talk to me like I'm a kid," he told her.
"I'm sorry if you feel that way. It's not my intention to talk down to you."

"Hmph." Dean fiddled with the ring on his finger, twisting it around and around and around.

"So what kind of 'weird' are we talking about?" she pressed gently, before he could completely shut down on her.

Dean opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, then pushed himself up off the couch and began to pace.

"It shouldn't be weird," he argued with himself, not answering her question. "I mean, it's not like I've never been serious about someone before. There was Cassie, and Lisa. Just because they didn't work out doesn't mean I wasn't serious about them."

"That's twice you've stressed that these were serious relationships. Would you describe your relationship with Cas as 'serious'?"

Dean stopped pacing and looked at her. "We don't have a relationship," he told her. "Not really. That's the problem - a problem."

She cocked her head thoughtfully in a way that reminded Dean of Cas.

"Are you together, or aren't you?"

"There's friendship," he explained, holding out his left hand palm up, "and there's being in a relationship." He brought his right hand up to illustrate the difference between the two. "Somewhere in the middle," he gestured vaguely at the space between them with his right hand, "there's a grey area between the two. That's where we are. That grey area. A kind of... purgatory."

"I'm guessing you're not talking about the one in Miami."

He shot her an unimpressed frown, a pair of dimples forming as he pursed his lips in disapproval.

"I'll take that as a 'no', then," she said.

Dean's leg twitched, then he started to move around the room again. She spun around in her chair slowly, watching as he examined the various ornaments and trinkets she had on display. Some he simply ran his fingers over, others he picked up and examined before putting them back down again. One of them was a slender white angel, about six inches high. A gentle touch to its head had it toppling over, and his whole body lurched as he tried desperately to catch it before it fell to the ground.

Once he'd placed it back on the desk, still in one piece, he took an exaggerated step away from the shelf. He was pretty sure his clumsiness hadn't gone unnoticed, and he turned around to see if she looked annoyed with him.

Instead he found her smiling at him in amusement.

"Sorry."

"They're gifts from patients," she told him. "You might be able to guess who gave me that one," she said, pointing to the one Dean had nearly broken.

He moved away from the shelves and over to her desk, watching as she wrote something down. "What are you writing?"
"Just some notes to myself about things you say, or do."

"Why?"

"So I can help you."

"What do you need to write stuff down for? Aren't you supposed to, I don't know, listen to me whine about my bullshit problems?"

"Your problems aren't 'bullshit', Dean. Whatever you feel is valid. Know that."

Dean scoffed. "Whatever." He narrowed his eyes at her suspiciously. "But why do you have to take notes?"

"Because sometimes I make observations about things you say or do that I feel might be important to address in the future, or to help me understand where you're at mentally if you're being uncommunicative. Sometimes people say the most when they say nothing at all."

"So what are you writing about me?"

"Why is it so important to you to know?"

Dean's jaw twitched.

She leaned back in her chair. "I'll make you a deal - you tell me why it's so important that you know what I'm writing, and I'll tell you the last thing I wrote."

Dean leaned against the edge of her desk and crossed his ankles. He said nothing for a long moment, either considering her proposal quietly or wondering how best to answer. It was hard to tell when he tried so hard to internalise what he was feeling.

"I guess I want to know if it's all bad stuff you're writing down. I don't need another person in my life to let down."

"The only person you can let down in this room is yourself," Pamela told him gently.

Dean's guarded expression became one of puzzlement, and the fact he conveyed the emotion so openly told Pam her words had taken him by surprise.

"You're coming here for you, to make your life better," she explained. "I'm just a tool that you can use to help achieve that. I don't want you to hold back for fear that I'm judging you, or that you'll disappoint me. That's not my role, here. As I've already said, the only thing I need from you is honesty so that I can help you to the best of my ability."

She watched Dean closely, unsure if she'd hit a nerve or not. Many expressions crossed his face as he processed her words, and she was sure she could detect a flicker of relief among them. He was so quiet that, in the moments where traffic outside came to a stop to let pedestrians cross, the quiet clock in the room seemed to tick louder than normal.

Eventually he looked up from the spot on the floor at which he'd been staring, and asked, "So what's the last thing you wrote?"

Pamela let the question hang in the air for a second before answering. "I noted that you're pacing and it might be an indication of your inner turmoil."

"My inner what?"
"You're clearly a very conflicted man, Dean. You say you have no issue with homosexual men, you don't come across as intolerant - on the contrary, you've been very supportive of Castiel - and yet you have some latent issue about being perceived as gay."

"I'm not gay," Dean told her defensively, crossing his arms.

"And yet you're trying to commit to a relationship with another man."

"I've dated women."

Pamela spread her hands in an open gesture. "So you have no preference."

Dean opened and closed his mouth. "I like women."

"Do you like Cas?"

Dean's silence was his answer.

"I don't want to scare you with labels, or force an identity on you that you don't feel comfortable with, but there are other sexualities out there. I'll let you take some leaflets home with you that you can read in your own time, when you're ready. And then, when you feel you are able to, we can talk some more about it. Or not," she added, when self-conscious embarrassment clouded his features. "It's entirely up to you."

Quietly Dean moved back to the couch.

"Can we talk some more about your relationship with Cas?"

* * *

"So what's eating Dean? Knowing him, it's probably not you," Balthazar sniggered.

"Must you be so crude?"

Balthazar raised his eyebrows, silently demanding an answer.

"He's fine. Just... stressed."

"About?"

Castiel looked at him across the table. While Dean was attending his first official session with Pamela, Castiel was having lunch with Balthazar - who was using it as another opportunity to voice his negative opinion on his relationship with Dean. "You'll laugh."

"I won't."

"Yes, you will."

"Okay, so I probably will, but I'll try not to. How's that?"

Castiel was silent for a moment, narrowed eyes scrutinising Balthazar's expression. "Dean's seeing Pamela."

"He's dating your therapist?!"

"No!" Cas exclaimed, slamming a hand off the table in irritation. If he wasn't so exasperated at
Balthazar's low expectations of Dean he'd find the assumption amusing. "He's a patient," he explained in a low voice.

"Oh," Balthazar said, sounding surprised. Then he chuckled. "I thought he was the strong, sullen type."

"Only when you're involved," Cas said tiredly.

Balthazar snorted. "I'm flattered."

"He's accepted that he has some issues, and Pamela is trying to help him deal with them."

Balthazar sighed. "You know what I'm going to say."

"Save your breath, Balthazar," Castiel told him, placing his cutlery on his empty plate.

"After everything you've been through, with your family and the church, you shouldn't have to be forced back into the closet. It's not fair on you."

"Dean is a good, kind man—"

"Who doesn't know what he wants," Balthazar finished for him.

"He wants me to be happy. He wants to make me happy."

"But can he?"

"Balthazar, I want this to work." Cas told him adamantly. "And Dean is seeking help. If you can't be happy for me then can you at least stop trying to make me doubt him? He is trying, and I have faith that he means it when he says he want to make it work."

"'It'?" Balthazar echoed.

"Us."

"I'm sorry," his friend sighed. "I just don't want to see you compromise yourself for a man who might not be able to give you what you want."

Much to Balthazar's surprise, Castiel let out a bitter laugh.

"What's so funny?"

"Please don't let Dean hear you trying to persuade me to end things with him," Cas asked him. "He already thinks that I deserve better than him, and I think he worries that you're perhaps better suited to me than he is."

Balthazar sniggered. "Are you trying to tell me that he thinks I'm going to steal you from him? Cassie, I hate to break it to you, but you're not my type."

Castiel chuckled despite himself. "Try telling Dean that."

"I wouldn't dream of it," Balthazar smirked, taking a sip of his drink. "It'd be too much fun flirting with you just to see him squirm."

"That would be cruel," Castiel chided him.
"It might make him jealous enough to realise how he feels about you. *If* he really cares about you."

"Or you could force him to repress his feelings even further, if he truly believes that you're interested," Castiel countered. "Leave the psychology to Pamela."

* * *

"It sounds to me that you need to move past your fear of losing Cas before you can accept that you want him."

"So how do I do that?" Dean asked sceptically.

"Have you tried speaking to him about this?"

"A little."

"And?"

"And he just tells me that he's always going to be my friend."

"So why isn't that good enough?"

"Huh?"

"Why isn't it enough that Cas has told you this? Don't you believe him?"

"I don't know."

"Take a moment to think about it. Be honest with yourself."

Dean already knew the answer to her question; it was just harder to be honest with a stranger than it was someone you knew. Except, he'd opened up to those two gay guys in the bar that one time. That hadn't hurt. In fact, it had helped.

"Because he deserves better," he told her. And Cas did - he really did. "He deserves someone that can make him happy. One day he's going to realise that."

"You don't think you make him happy?" Pamela asked him, her expression one of puzzled intrigue.

"I think he doesn't know any better."

"Why doesn't he know any better?" Pamela asked him, her expression one of puzzled intrigue. "Because really, how many other guys had Cas been with? None.

"And you do?"

Dean opened and closed his mouth. Lisa had been a fantasy, he knew that now. He loved Cassie, but he'd been young and she'd dumped him. Every other short-lived fling or one night stand had been... not meaningless, but nothing special either. The unions had been born out of a physical need; a desire to move together, dancing under the sheets until they were both sweaty and sated.

"Not really," he admitted.

"Then why are you so convinced he's wrong? That you can't make him happy?"

The muscle in Dean's jaw twitched as he clenched his teeth together. "Because that's the way it always is, alright?!" Dean snapped. "Now can we talk about something else?"
"We could, but whatever you're avoiding telling me is probably important." When Dean stayed silent, she continued, "If you want to move on, that's fine. Remember, you set the pace here."

The pace had been the problem with Cassie - he'd wanted serious for the first time in his life, but she'd just wanted casual. With Lisa he'd wanted stability and to be needed, whereas she'd wanted serious and dependable. It was no wonder they'd both given up on him.

"Everyone leaves," he said quietly.

"What was that?"

"I said everyone leaves," he repeated, louder this time. "My mum died, my dad was AWOL most of the time growing up, then he died. The only woman I've ever really cared about left me. The only other woman I've tried to have a relationship with left me, too. My brother's all but disowned me." He said all of this in a forced, matter-of-fact tone to hide how much it really bothered him. Before he spoke again, he shrugged dismissively. "Cas is the only person I've got left. It just makes sense that he's going to leave at some point. I mean, he already has once."

"But he came back," she reminded him.

"It's not really the point, is it?"

"Isn't it?"

Dean looked at her.

"Cas didn't want to leave; he was only doing what he thought was best for his own well-being. As soon as you made it clear you wished to pursue a relationship with him, he came back. So I think it really does matter." Pamela picked up her glass of water and took several gulps. Holding it up to Dean, she asked, "Would you say this glass is half empty or half full?"

"Half empty."

"You're a rather pessimistic person," Pamela observed.

"No," Dean disagreed. "You just emptied it."

"What do you mean?"

Dean took an empty glass and filled it halfway up. "That's half full."

Pamela rolled her eyes, but smiled at him. "You are a very interesting individual, Dean Winchester."

* * *

"Dean?" Cas called as he opened the front door.

He didn't know how long Dean would be; if he'd come straight home after Pamela's or drive around for a while. Go for a drink, maybe. Or two, or three. He knew that talking about the stuff that mattered to him wasn't something Dean was comfortable with, and he desperately hoped that his boyfriend wasn't going to take one step forwards and two steps back.

There was no answer to his call, so he assumed that Dean still wasn't home yet. He popped into the kitchen to see Chuck Norris, who was becoming much more of a handful now that he was settling in. To prevent him from climbing onto the table again, they now had to place the chairs upturned atop it when they weren't in use. They didn't want any repeat disappearing acts. Although now
whenever they ate at the table Chuck sat and glared at them from his box, as if silently judging them for going places he wasn't allowed.

Making himself a coffee, he took it into the living room and discovered he wasn't as alone as he'd thought.

"Dean?" he asked, putting his mug on the table and kneeling beside the sofa.

Dean was lying on his back with his eyes closed.

"Are you asleep?" he whispered lightly.

"Yes," Dean grunted.

"Oh. Sorry."

"I'm kidding, Cas, I'm not asleep."

He shifted onto his butt and crossed his legs, deciding that he'd sit beside Dean for a while. Close by, but not crowding him.

"So it turns out that spilling your guts for an hour is emotionally draining," Dean continued, trying and failing to make it seem like it wasn't a big deal.

Castiel raised a hand to stroke through his hair. "It does get easier," he promised. "So how did it go?"

"You said I didn't have to talk about it."

Cas nodded, and dropped his hand. "And you don't," he agreed. "If you don't want to."

"I don't."

"Okay, then. Would you like anything?"

Dean shook his head.

Castiel reached for his coffee and took a sip. "I thought, maybe, I could help you wash the car this afternoon," he said, cradling the mug in his hands. "If you were still planning on washing it, that is. Where is it, by the way? I didn't see it when I came in."

"I had to park it 'round the corner. Some asshole in a Buick was taking up two spaces."

"Well, I don't know what a Buick looks like, but I think they must have gone because I don't remember seeing anyone parked so inconsiderately."

Dean snorted half-heartedly.

"What's so funny?"

"You work in a garage."

"In the office," Cas reminded him.

"Still."

Dean fell silent, after that, and Cas didn't push him. He was content just to sit and drink his coffee while Dean recharged mentally. When he was finished, he swapped his empty mug for a puzzle
book and started a new crossword.

"How was your lunch?" Dean asked eventually.

"Pleasant."

When he said nothing else, Cas thought that Dean had lapsed into silence again.

A moment later, he spoke. "Why are you on the floor?"

"So that I'm here if you need anything."

"Why don't you just sit up here?"

"Because you're lying across the sofa," Cas reminded him.

"I could move," Dean offered.

"There's no need. I'm fine here."

Dean exhaled audibly. "I want you to do that thing where you run your fingers through my hair," he admitted quickly, as if he thought that speaking fast made him sound less vulnerable.

"Oh," Cas said. "Okay."

Dean sat up to let Cas sit down, before lying down again with his head in Castiel's lap. He closed his eyes as Cas stroked his fingers through his hair.

"You and Chuck Norris have a lot in common," Cas chuckled softly. "You like food, you enjoy being stroked—"

"But I don't shit on the kitchen floor," Dean pointed out.

"How do I know what you did before I moved in?"

Dean laughed at that, before remembering that Pam had made a similar joke about being stroked.

"We talked about you," he revealed quietly.

Castiel's hand froze for a second in his hair, before resuming its path around his ear. The light scrape of nails over the back of his neck sent a light shudder through Dean's body.

"I want this to work."

Cas didn't know if he meant the therapy, or their relationship, or both. And, as he'd promised, he didn't pry.
As Cas tidied up the desk at the end of the day, Bobby came into the office.

"Here, stick that up before you go," he said, holding out a hand to him.

Castiel's brow furrowed in confusion as he took what his boss was holding out to him. Then he realised what it was. Unable to stop the smile that spread across his face, he nodded. "Of course."

Moving towards the office window, he carefully peeled the layer from the back of the sticker. As he applied the vibrant rainbow to the new glass, he smoothed it out with his fingers until there were no bubbles trapped between it and the glass. Even though Bobby hadn't known about his sexuality when he'd displayed the first sticker in the window, it meant a lot to Cas that he continued to show his support - even in such a simple gesture.

Returning to the desk, he filed away the few last pieces of paperwork for the day as he waited for the computer to shut down. Once the last update had installed and the screen went black, he switched the power off at the wall and retrieved his coat. Dean wasn't yet out of the garage, so Cas hurried around the back of the building before Dean could tell him that 'he didn't need to look at a car he surely knew by heart by now'.

He knew that Dean didn't think much of it, but he liked it. Besides, Dean couldn't be described as the best judge of things, considering he thought so little of himself.

"You know you're going to have to say goodbye to it at some point?" Dean asked, startling him.

Castiel sighed. "Yes. But at least I'm dating a mechanic who can tell me what kind of car I'm looking for, should I ever get one of my own."

"You don't want something... a little nicer?" Dean asked desperately. The thought of his baby parked next to something like that made him shudder.

Cas pouted playfully. "How would you like it if I insulted your car?"

"It would be all lies," Dean grinned.

"So it's not a 'gas guzzler', then?" he asked, making air quotes with his fingers.

For a second Dean looked torn between being insulted and impressed. Then realisation struck him. "Benny's been talking shit about her again, hasn't he?"

Castiel shrugged innocently.

"Listen, sometimes you have to compromise on mileage to drive a thing of beauty - and nothing is more beautiful than her."
"I'm not sure I like the idea of competing with your car for your affections," Cas teased, nudging him lightly. Amusement laced his tone as he asked, "How did Lisa take it - or didn't you share that small detail with her?"

When Dean spoke again, he sounded distant and almost wistful. "I can't believe he's going to be here, soon."

Dean didn't have to call Ben by his name for Cas to know who he was talking about. He reached out to touch Dean's arm lightly, just enough to coax him out of his thoughts. "Come on," he said, leading the way back to the front yard again. "Let's go home."

* * *

It was a quiet drive home; neither speaking as music played in the background. Though Cas tuned out the sounds as he dwelled on his concerns over Ben's upcoming visit.

He wanted all to go well, for Dean and for Ben. But he'd be lying if he wasn't also a little afraid. Afraid that it would go badly, afraid that Dean's response to such an outcome would be detrimental to the progress he'd made over the past few months.

"I'm sorry if I upset you," he said, breaking the silence as they entered their apartment building. "Bringing up Lisa," he clarified when Dean shot him a confused look.

"You didn't," Dean assured him. "What made you think I'd get upset over that?"

"I don't know how much of an issue it still is for you; her leaving you."

"It's not an issue," Dean said, and it was mostly true. "I wasn't at my best, then, and she did what was best for her and Ben. I can't blame her for that."

"But you miss her."

"Of course I miss her, Cas. I spent a year living with her. And Ben, he's..."

"Going to be here soon," Cas said when Dean trailed off regretfully.

A smile eased the crease in Dean's forehead. "Yeah."

A stray thought flew through Castiel's mind - if Lisa would take Dean back, would he go? He refused to consider the answer, however. Convincing himself it wouldn't do either of them any good to focus on what-ifs, he ignored the small flame of fear flickering in his gut that worried the answer to his unspoken question might be 'yes'.

While Dean headed to the bathroom to wash the sweat and grease off his body, Cas sought out Chuck's affections. "You'd better not get too used to this place," he advised sadly. The kitten mewed unhappily at him.

"I know," he agreed, imagining that Chuck was trying to tell him that he didn't want to leave. "But it'll be better for you to live somewhere that will offer you more freedom."

Trying not to dwell on things, Cas dangled a fluffy mouse toy in front of him. He laughed as he watched Chuck pouncing and clawing at the stuffed toy, sometimes missing it as Cas jerked it out of his reach at the last second.

"Do you want to just get a takeout tonight?" Dean asked, shaking a hand through his wet hair as he
came into the kitchen.
"I don't mind cooking," Cas told him.
"I just felt like something simple."
"Okay. What did you have in mind?"
"Do you want to just get one of those Chinese meals for two and share it?"
"As opposed to eating an entire meal for two yourself?" Cas queried.
"No, I meant sharing the meals," Dean explained, adjusting the hem of his shirt. "Half and half, you know?"
"That would be fine," he said.
To Chuck's irritation, Cas placed the toy out of reach as he went to retrieve the newspaper.
Dean pulled the menus out of a drawer. "What do you fancy? Beef curry and sweet and sour chicken? Or Kung Po prawns and vegetable chow mein?" Dean asked, reading out the options.
"I didn't like the Kung Po when I tried it."
"Okay, curry and sweet and sour it is. Do we just want to stick with beef and chicken? Because I'm sure we can switch the meats if we wanted."
"Stick," Cas replied. "Unless you want pork?"
"No, it's fine. Comes with chicken and sweetcorn soups, spare ribs, prawn crackers, and fried rice."
"That's more than enough. We could even keep a small amount for lunch tomorrow."
"Ooh, that sounds like a plan!" Dean grinned. "Okay. I'll phone this in. When do we want to eat?"
"Six?"
"Okay. That was easy."

* * *

It was easy, and at five past six they were sitting down to eat while Chuck glared at them from his box.

Feeling sorry for him, Dean chucked him a piece of chicken halfway through their dinner.

"Dean! That's got sauce all over it!"

Dean shrugged. "So? It's a new flavour for him."

"What if there's something in it he shouldn't eat?"

Dean looked a little guilty. "It was just a small piece. I'm sure he'll be fine," he said, trying to excuse his careless actions.

Cas huffed, not looking mollified at all.
"Oh, come on - like you've never eaten anything that's bad for you!"

"There's a difference between eating too much chocolate and eating a poisonous wild mushroom!"

Dean looked over at Chuck, who was licking his paws and looking very pleased with himself. "Don't die," he commanded the cat.

"Because that's going to stop him from dying if cats aren't allowed to have garlic, or soy sauce, or anything else that might be in this!"

"Jeez, Cas, I'm sorry! What more do you want me to say?!"

"I don't need you to say anything - just acknowledge that your actions were irresponsible and think before you feed him human food. You wouldn't feed chocolate to a dog, would you?"

"Well, no, but chocolate's..." He trailed off as he realised he was about to say 'bad for dogs', which was exactly the point Cas was trying to make. "Yeah, okay. I'm a dumbass," he admitted bitterly. "Happy now?"

Cas sighed. "You're not a dumbass, except when you claim to be one," he said, leaning over and kissing Dean's cheek. "How's your dinner?"

"Good. How's yours?"

Cas smiled. "Good," he echoed.

Dean laughed, and the two of them resumed eating. When Chuck circled his feet, rubbing himself endearingly against his legs, Dean refused to give in to his silent pleas for more.

* * *

After they'd eaten, Cas stored their leftovers in the fridge while Dean washed up. He refused Castiel's offer of assistance, telling him to go relax while he took care of the dishes - not that there was a lot of them.

It was a lot less fun without someone to talk to, washing and drying as a team. As a partnership. Partners. It felt like they fought a lot more, now that they were together.

He scrubbed roughly at a particularly stubborn piece of sauce that had dried onto one of the plates.

This was the way it had been with Lisa. Things had been fine, at first, then they'd started to argue. Over the little things, because she hadn't wanted to address the bigger things. His drinking. Was that the way he and Cas were going to be? Arguing over the little things, because Cas didn't want to address the bigger ones - like his inability to commit fully to Cas, or 'internal conflict' as Pamela had put it? The realisation should be a sign - a sign to work harder to make everything right before he inevitably fucked it all up. Jeez, that was why he was washing up alone, wasn't it? A way of apologising to Cas for maybe nearly killing the damn stray he'd brought home one day.

The cat was winding around his ankles again. He gave it a gentle nudge with his foot to encourage it to move, and it did - to his other leg. Chuck Norris was going to trip him up and he was going to break his leg. Again. He imagined trying to tell the ER nurse what had happened and smirked. She wouldn't need to know that Chuck Norris was a cat...

"Meow!"
"Look, are you _trying_ to get stepped on?!!" Dean asked, nudging it more firmly.

Chuck let out an irritated mewl and scampered across the room.

"I'm already in the dog house for feeding you - how many dishes am I going to need to wash if I stand on you?"

He could almost swear he heard a quiet chuckle from the other room, but decided he'd imagined it.

"Don't look at me like that," Dean grumbled as he grabbed the dish towel.

Chuck Norris was staring at him from across the room with narrowed eyes, his ginger tail twitching as if in irritation. He might only be a cat, but sometimes it was scary how very _human_ he seemed.

Dean dried the dishes and put them away, periodically checking to make sure Chuck wasn't attempting to trip him up again.

"We've got to get you a bell," he decided aloud.

He had no idea how long it was going to be before they found someone to take Chuck in, but for as long as they were taking care of him they had to take responsibility for his welfare - and being stepped on _wasn't_ good for him. But he didn't want Cas getting any ideas about keeping the cat - Dean refused to spend the next however-many years popping antihistamines like they were candy.

He put the last of the dishes away in the cupboards and made his way to the living room, making sure to shut Chuck Norris in the kitchen when he left. Dropping down onto the sofa beside Castiel, who had his nose buried in the newspaper, he dropped his head back and sighed.

"You know you didn't have to wash up alone to say sorry, don't you?" Cas asked, not lifting his eyes from the paper.

"That _was_ you giggling I heard!"

"He _likes_ you," Cas told him fondly, then circled something.

"Likes my feet, you mean. What's so funny?" he asked as Cas unexpectedly burst out laughing.

"Do you remember that time you came home drunk and offered to count my toes?"

"I didn't!" Dean exclaimed in denial and disbelief.

"You _did_."

"When was that?" he demanded, convinced that Castiel was pulling his leg.

"Sometime before Christmas," Cas told him. "We'd been at the Roadhouse, and this girl had given you her number." Then he frowned and crossed something out in the paper.

Dean didn't miss the tightness with which Cas said that last part. "I don't get it," he said, still trying to figure out what that had to do with counting toes.

"Hmm? Oh," Cas said when he realised he hadn't finished explaining. "She apparently had six toes on one foot."

"Dude, that's freaky."
"That didn't seem to be your opinion at the time. You wanted to count my toes, and your own, to make sure we both had ten."

"Well, of course I have ten toes!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Cas smiled. "As do I, just so you are aware. But you were rather shocked when you realised you had never counted your own toes before."

"I still don't remember that."

"I'd forgotten about it until just now. It's funny the way random things just pop into your brain out of the blue."

"Yeah," Dean absently, trying to glance at what Cas was finding so interesting in the paper.

"I think it was shortly after that night I dragged Balthazar out and tried to meet someone."

"Now that I remember!" Realisation dawned on Dean. "Did you... Was that because of the girl with the toes?"

"I'll admit that, yes, I was jealous." Another scratch of pen on paper as something else was circled. "I'm not proud of it. But I realised that dwelling on my unrequited feelings for you wasn't healthy, so decided to try to get you 'out of my system', so to speak."

"It didn't work?"

Castiel's cheeks turned slightly pink. "I couldn't stop thinking about you," he confessed. "It was the first time I admitted, out loud to someone, that I loved you."

"You told him you were in love with someone else?"

"No. I told Balthazar."

Dean clenched his jaw at the revelation that Cas could more easily open up about his love to Balthazar rather than Dean, before realising that it wasn't like Cas could have approached him about his feelings. He'd struggled to trust in Dean's acceptance at first, and to admit he harboured more than a crush for the man who, by chance, had come to his rescue when he was at his lowest would have surely been intimidating.

As he came to this conclusion, he tried not to feel too smug knowing that Cas had told Balthazar he loved Dean. Even though Dean was still struggling to accept the change in their friendship - relationship - he could still be glad that the man he was jealous of knew he didn't have a chance.

They fell into a comfortable silence, the only sounds the rustling of the newspaper and the scratch of Castiel's pen on the pages.

"You're not looking for another place to live, are you?" Dean asked, only half-joking, when he realised that was what it looked like Cas was doing.

"Now why would I do that?" Castiel asked him, scoring something else out.

"Then what are you doing?"

"Job hunting."

"You have a job."
"I have a part time job. And if I do go back to university, then I probably won't be able to work there anymore - I'll have classes during the day."

Another job advert was struck off.

"Unfortunately, I am very under-qualified for most of these."

"We managed before you got a job, you know - we could manage again if you wanted to focus on your studies."

Cas looked at him. "That's a nice thought, but you and I both know it's not true. Not when we're both in therapy and you have a car to run."

Dean opened his mouth but then closed it again, swallowing a joke about ditching his therapy sessions. "I could stop drinking again," he suggested instead.

Cas leaned over and pressed a chaste kiss to his lips. "You're already drinking less," he reminded him. "And so long as you're not using alcohol as a crutch to cope with your issues, I don't see why you can't continue to drink occasionally." He sighed, and cast the paper aside. "I only see a handful of jobs that I might stand half a chance at. One's only a Saturday morning."

"Even a few extra hours' pay could help out around here."

Castiel shot him an amused glance. "I thought we'd be fine without my income?"

Dean shrugged. "I lied."

"I know you did." He slipped his hand into Dean's and said, "I'm so grateful that I have your support."

"Of course you do." He gave Castiel's hand a light squeeze. "I might not be good at the whole... relationship thing, but I don't want to hold you back. Whatever you want to do, know that I've got your back."

Castiel smiled at him, then shifted in his seat so he could kiss Dean fully.

Cas was still a clumsy kisser, but at the same time there was something almost sweet about the way he didn't care that he wasn't that great. And the raw passion behind his lips, in those rare moments he didn't withhold his emotions for Dean's sake, held an intensity that even the most skilled kisser would find hard to match.

Dean's hands found Castiel's hips, neither pulling him closer nor pushing him away - simply holding him there. Trying to ignore the twist in his gut as he kissed Cas back, he nevertheless could feel his restraint. The subconscious need to control himself kicked in and stopped him from getting lost in the kiss. It wasn't fair on Cas - and kissing was something that Dean was good at - but he figured that as long as he wasn't pushing him away, then that was progress.

Unless ignoring his discomfort was some kind of denial, then maybe Pam would rip him a new one when he told her. If he told her. He still wasn't comfortable with the idea of spilling his guts to a stranger, even if she wasn't supposed to judge him for it. It was a human thing, to judge the other people around you. Could she really turn that part of her off? He doubted it.

Castiel pulled back slightly. "Where are you?" he asked, forehead creased in concern.

Dean looked confused. "I'm right here."
Cas stroked a hand through his hair. "I meant in here," he said, tapping a finger to Dean's temple.

"Oh." Dean looked sheepish. "That obvious, huh?"

"I like to think that I pay close attention to more about you than just your looks."

"Yeah, because if they went I wouldn't have much to— Mmph!"

Castiel's lips cut him off mid-sentence.

"Shush," he instructed firmly.

"But—"

A finger to his lips silenced him.

"There are many wonderful things about you and, if I have to, I shall make a list."

"It's gonna be a very short one," Dean mumbled behind Castiel's finger.

"Shush!"

Dean sighed.

When Cas was convinced Dean wasn't going to put himself down anymore, he dropped his hand.

"Perhaps the reason you doubt us is because you doubt yourself."

Dean shook his head. "No, I don't think that's it. I don't know what it is, but I'm pretty sure it isn't that. Don't you think it'd have affected me and Lisa, if that was the case?"

"Hmm, probably," Cas conceded.

"And it's not so much us, as..."

"Me," Cas finished for him, realising what Dean was reluctant to say.

"Yeah."

"Why?"

"Why, what?"

"Why can't you believe that I love you, and that I want to be with you?"

Dean tipped his head back, and looked at the ceiling. They were rehashing the same old conversations, and he'd talked about it with Pamela the other day. "You left," he accused.

"You didn't want me - I thought it was what was best for me," Cas explained patiently.

"You thought it was best not to be with me," Dean stated thickly, his vision starting to blur as tears filled his eyes.

"I thought it was best to put space between us," Cas said carefully. "Temporarily. It was never meant to be permanent, Dean - just until I stopped loving you."

"But if I can't figure out why it is I can't..." Dean licked his lips. "You're going to go again."
Despite doing his best to hold them back, a tear fell down his cheek. Immediately it was brushed away by Castiel's gentle touch.

"You are, and always will be, my friend," Cas told him. "No matter what happens. But I would prefer we were more than that."

Dean screwed his eyes shut.

"And that is why, for as long as you are willing to try, I will be right here by your side."

His fingers running through Dean's hair was soothing as he battled to get his emotions under control. He'd only meant to state a simple fact - not turn into a sobbing wreck. For some reason Castiel's touch was always relaxing so he leaned into him, seeking more comfort. Doing this kind of stuff with Cas never bothered him, and he wished that everything with Cas could be this easy.

"Maybe... you should talk to Pamela about this?" Cas asked hesitantly, a little unsure if he should be asking the question.

"We did. Kind of."

"Oh. Well, that's good," Cas replied warmly.

Dean stayed silent for a moment, before admitting, "I just don't get why you'd want to stick around."

"Because I love you," Cas stated simply. It was easy to say; he just wished it could be as easy for Dean to believe.

"We keep going around in circles." He feared Cas would leave, Cas assured him he'd stay, he didn't believe him so still feared Cas would leave... He closed his eyes and focused on memorising the feeling of Cas's fingers in his hair.

"Is there anything I can say that will make you believe me?" Cas asked, a little sadly. It pained him that Dean couldn't see what an amazing man he was, and he wished he could find a way to show him how he saw him.

Dean sighed. "Probably not. But then, I guess that's why I'm dragging my sorry ass to Pamela's."

Cas nibbled on his lip for a moment. "I think you have a very nice ass," he admitted, once he'd decided to speak.

Dean barked a laugh. "Yeah, I guess it's a pretty nice ass."

Cas grinned.

Turning to Cas, he changed the subject. "Oh, hey - so I've been thinking about what you've said before... that this isn't our apartment, but my apartment, and I was thinking... how about we put your name on the lease?"

Cas stared at him. "I couldn't possibly afford my half of the rent."

"You wouldn't have to. I wouldn't ask you to," he clarified.

Cas shook his head. "Dean, that's a huge step, and I'm just not financially able to—"

"It is a huge step," Dean interrupted carefully. "And I'm saying that, even though I don't get why you'd want to be with me - even though I can't be what you want right now - I want you here."
Cas was still frowning, but a second later his eyes widened as he realised the implication of Dean's gesture - the commitment it represented.

"This is your home," Dean emphasised.

"Are... are you sure?"

Dean looked him dead in the eye and held his hand. He didn't say anything, but then he didn't have to - Cas could read it in Dean's eyes that he'd made up his mind.

"Do I have to give you an answer now? Can I... can I think about it?"

Disappointment flashed across Dean's face for a brief moment, before he got control of himself again. It made sense that Cas wouldn't want to be tied to him - that he'd want the freedom to leave again when he finally realised that his life with Dean wasn't enough for him. When their dad had died and they'd inherited the contents of his storage unit, Sam had wanted nothing to do with it. He'd wanted nothing to do with their father, and hadn't wanted to be tied to Dean by John's things.

Castiel squeezed his hand, cupping it between both of his. It was warm, and Dean could feel his hand starting to sweat, but he didn't move it. Physically feeling Cas there helped ease some of the tension Dean felt, and the thought of losing him faded away for the moment.

"It's just a huge step," Cas repeated, as if he could read Dean's mind and knew he needed reassurance, "and I need to know that I - that we - are ready for it."

"Okay," Dean said thickly.

"I want to say yes," he assured him. "I just want to make sure it's the right decision. For us," he added.

* * *

Cas did think about it. A lot. And when Pamela observed that he seemed distracted during his next session with her, he admitted what was occupying his thoughts. "Dean wants to put my name on the apartment lease."

"Wow. That's a big step," Pamela said.

"That's what I said. I don't know how much thought he's put into it."

"It's not the sort of thing you suggest lightly," she commented.

"I know. But..." Cas trailed off

"But what?"

"With whatever... reservations... he has about us, is it a good idea?"

"That's something you have to decide for yourself."

"I don't know if I can," he admitted. "I know what I want, because I know how I feel, but I can't make an important decision like this blinded by my emotions."

"And yet you are aware of your emotions, so by extension you can't be blinded by them."

Castiel fell into a thoughtful silence as he mulled over her words.
"Benjamin Franklin was quoted as saying, 'Nothing ventured, nothing gained.'"

"Are you saying I should take Dean up on his offer?"

"All I'm saying is, there is often more to be gained by taking a few risks every now and then. Look at where you are now, compared to where you'd have likely been if you'd never moved in with Balthazar."

"Dean would be less afraid of me leaving."

"But..."

Castiel had been seeing Pamela for so long, he knew when she was trying to guide him towards a particular idea.

"But," Cas smiled, realising what Pamela was prompting him to realise, "Dean wouldn't have been pushed to act on his feelings for me."
Chapter 52

Chapter Notes

Dean's therapy is proving to be a nightmare to get right. Thankfully I have a wonderful beta to keep me right - "A therapist wouldn't say this! A therapist wouldn't make her patient feel like that!"

Also, I have no knowledge of how cars work so my analogy is only as accurate as my understanding of my research.

"Could we talk about your father today?" Pamela asked Dean at the start of his next session.

"No," he said flatly, expecting a fight.

But Pamela surprised him - again. She was good at that. She simply jotted a couple of words down and changed tack. "Okay. Your mother, then."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Why not?" she asked him.

"Because she's dead?" Dean reminded her. "She died when I was four - she's got nothing to do with anything."

"Then why are you so defensive about it?"

Dean closed his mouth and swallowed thickly.

"I'm guessing you don't want to talk about your brother, either?"

"Why're you so interested in everyone else? I thought you wanted to fix me?"

She smiled. "I can't fix you if you're not broken."

"Then why the fuck am I here?"

"You tell me." As Dean stared at her in sullen silence, Pamela twirled her pen around her fingers. "To prevent you from breaking," she said eventually. "You're a mechanic. Think of your mind as the suspension on a car - if it's too tight the metal can become stressed and break, leading to a costly repair. If your mind is too stressed with thoughts, even subconscious ones you aren't aware are there, it can fracture and lead to a mental collapse that can require hospitalisation and long-term treatment."

She fell silent, letting her words sink in as she waited for Dean to respond.

To her surprise, he smirked. "You really don't know how a car works, do you? You could have said the battery. Without the battery, the car is basically useless. Or the ECU, which automatically manages different systems as you drive. If that develops technical issues, it's kind of like having a stroke - messages are still getting sent between it and the rest of the car, except they might be a little screwed up. If anything broken suspension's like... I don't know, having a broken leg. You might still be able to walk, but... Look, I'm not saying you should, 'cause I broke my leg once and when I tried
to stand on it, it gave out and I landed on my ass and it hurt like hell - my leg, not my ass," he clarified. "What I'm trying to say is maybe you *could*, but you'd need to go a little slower, and take it easy."

She shrugged in defeat. "I tried. I thought it sounded like a nice analogy."

"It kind of was," Dean conceded. "'Cause I get what you're trying to say."

"Good. Because if I ever started to worry about my car, I'd take it into the shop. Let an expert - someone like you - check it over. I'm here to do the same for your mind."

"I still don't want to talk about my family," he told her stubbornly.

Pamela sighed. "We need to start somewhere, Dean. Otherwise there's no point in you being here."

"Well if there's no point in me being here, maybe I should just go, then," Dean cut in.

"If that's what you wanted, yes," she told him, disappointment evident in her tone. "You can leave any time you like - even if we haven't reached the end of your time. Sometimes it can be necessary, during a particularly intense session."

Dean considered this.

"You're not a prisoner here, Dean. You're a patient." She paused for a moment, thinking, then looked at him resolutely. "Would you refuse treatment for a broken leg?"

"No," Dean said through gritted teeth, clearly annoyed at having his own analogy thrown back at him, "but having a bad leg would affect your life."

"So could *any* physical health issues. Mental illnesses are no different, and can require just as much treatment - if not more - as physical ones, and they're harder to see. Some can require a lifetime of medical treatment, if they don't lead to the patient taking their own life. We need our minds to be healthy, Dean, because they control everything we do."

"Do you think Cas will need to keep seeing you for the rest of his life?" Dean found himself asking, even though he knew she couldn't answer.

"I can't talk about his counselling," she reminded him. "But, just like you, he has to make that decision for himself."

Dean glanced over at the door, but stayed where he was. "I don't want to be coming here for the rest of my life."

"Then talk to me," she urged him. "The sooner you open up about your problems, the sooner we can talk through them and help you find solutions to them. Then, maybe, you won't need to come back."

"I think I know that," he said. "But knowing it and doing it are two different things."

"Yes, they are," she agreed. "But you're here. That's a start."

"Yeah," he agreed non-committally.

"If you don't want to talk about your family, what about the women in your life?" Pamela glanced at her notes. "The ones you've tried to have relationships with?"

"Why are you so obsessed with my family?" Dean asked her curiously, ignoring the question about
his past relationships.

"That would be giving away trade secrets," she teased, with a twinkle in her eye. Then she leaned forward conspiratorially. "You've had two sessions with me," she said, "and in both of them you've expressed concerns about the people in your life leaving you. That tells me there are probably some unresolved issues there. Especially as we've already established that it's creating an emotional block between you and Castiel."

Dean shook the front of his shirt to cool himself a little. It wasn't even that warm in there, yet he was still sweating. Trying to peer over her notepad, he asked, "What else have you got scribbled down on that thing?"

"Just what you've told me." She glanced down at her notes and smiled. "You know how this works, Dean," she smirked, waving her notepad teasingly at him. "You show me yours, and I'll show you mine."

"Fuck," he said, sinking a little lower into the couch and crossing his arms dejectedly.

She sat back in her seat, giving him time to see if he'd bite. There was a long silence before Dean spoke again. "Look, Lisa's not a problem, okay?"

"Lisa," Pamela echoed, writing the name - presumably - on her notepad. "Which one's she? The one you cared about?"

"No, that was— No. Lisa's the one I tried to make a life with."

"Why?"

"Why does anyone try to make a life with anyone? I liked her, we got on great, the sex was amazing..." Propping himself up on one elbow, he leaned closer as if about to reveal something of high importance. "She taught yoga, and could bend all sorts of ways - I'm telling you, that weekend we met was the bendiest one of my life!" A boyish grin followed his statement, seeming to take years off his face. "Then boom - it's eight years later, Dad's just died, and she's got this kid who's turning eight and is just like me. I think to myself that there's a good chance he's mine, so I suck it up and make an effort and... and..." He licked his lips. "And I drank too much, and she left," he finished matter-of-factly, but his sense of loss still came through in his tone.

"I meant, why don't you consider her to be an issue?"

Dean stared at her, realising with a sinking feeling that he'd said far too much. "She's letting Ben come over for Easter," he revealed guardedly.

"Ben, is that her son?"

"Yeah."

"Did she ever tell you if you were his father?"

Dean opened and closed his mouth. "I asked her, once, and she said no," he admitted quietly. "But the way she said it, it was like she hadn't expected me to ask, you know? So I don't know if she was telling the truth, or if she didn't want me to know the truth and spun some story about his dad being a biker who'd been passing through. He picked at a loose thread in the stitching of the couch. "I mean, it's not like it was out of character - I'd just been passing through when we'd hooked up - but I always had this feeling, because he was so much like me."
"You don't think that you were perhaps projecting your desire for a family onto him?"

"Hell, no! I've never wanted a family. It's not something I thought I'd have."

"Those are two very different things." When Dean said nothing, she pressed a little harder. "You don't have to answer, but would it be fair to say that you didn't let yourself desire a family because you didn't believe you'd ever have one? That maybe you wanted to spare yourself the disappointment if it didn't work out for you?"

Dean shrugged, refusing to consider the question.

"Okay." Pamela said, allowing his silence to move the conversation on, "so Lisa's another person you've said has 'left you', yet is still in your life - however distantly."

"What's your point?" Dean grumbled.

"My point is that many of the people you feel isolated from are still present in your life, in some small way. My question is why you think they've gone for good when they're still there, hovering on the outskirts, waiting for you to let them back in?"

A sullen silence hung in the air.

"Why are you pushing them away, Dean?" Pamela asked quietly.

"I'm not," he growled. "They left me."

"There's a difference between leaving someone and putting space between them and yourself," she pointed out. "As soon as you've shown you are willing, this woman has opened herself up to you again; has shared her child with you again. Can I ask—"

"You're going to ask anyway, so why bother asking if you can?"

"Fair point," she acknowledged. "Why didn't you try to reconnect with Lisa and Ben sooner?"

"It was clear she didn't want me in her life. She left, after all." he reminded her pointedly. "My drinking wasn't exactly a shining example to Ben. I used to drink a lot more, back then."

"When the courts sent you to me before - was that for drinking? Is that why your relationship with your brother became strained?"

"No, it wasn't drinking - it was drugs," Dean corrected her. "They weren't mine, though," he added, almost as an afterthought. "I just took the blame."

"For who?"

"Sam."

"Why?"

"Because he's my brother! It's my job to look out for him." He swallowed. "It could have ruined his future."

Pamela wrote something down, then looked at him. "I want to address the first thing you said - you're Sam's brother, not his father. It's not your job to parent him."

"I'm the oldest," Dean told her. "When dad wasn't around, it was on me to look after him."
"Was your father absent much?"

Dean glared at her.

"Okay," she said, accepting - for now - that discussing his father was still off limits. She glanced at her notes. "You said that if your brother had been caught with the drugs 'it could have ruined his future.'" She looked him in the eye. "What about your future?"

Dean snorted. "What about it?"

"You weren't worried how it might be affected?"

"I was never destined for great things, okay? My brother's smart - I'm just a grunt. I fix cars. What's so great about that?"

"Everything," Pamela told him, "to someone who relies on their car."

Dean said nothing, his expression giving her no clue as to his thoughts.

"So why the strained relationship?" she asked.

"Money." When Pam said nothing, clearly waiting for him to go into greater detail, he elaborated, "I'm not good with it. I pay my rent and my bills, then I spend the rest. Sometimes it's all gone the first week, and I need to beg my brother for money to buy food."

"What do you spend it on?"

Dean shrugged. "This and that. Beer. Cards."

"So you like a drink."

"Yeah."

"And you gamble."

"Sometimes."

"Why?" she pressed.

"Why does anyone drink? Why do they gamble?"

"I mean, do you feel a need to? Could you stop?"

"Yeah," Dean answered after a moment.

Pamela's head tilted to the side as she looked at him. "So why don't you?"

"I don't know. What do you people call it - self-destructive behaviour?"

"Yes," she agreed, "but that's not to say that's what this is. I'm asking you why you think you continue this cycle of drinking and gambling and borrowing."

Dean thought about her question for several minutes, until he eventually shrugged helplessly. "I don't know," he admitted.

"You shouldn't beat yourself up for needing financial aid. Do you know what I think?"
Dean looked at her, knowing that she'd give her opinion whether he spoke up or not.

"I don't know what your relationship was like with your father," she started carefully, "but I can imagine that losing your mother so early in life, and having two young boys to raise alone, wasn't easy on him. I think you took on too much responsibility as a child - you had too much responsibility forced on you - that now, as an adult, it's possible you're subconsciously trying to shed some of that responsibility. Would you say that's a fair assessment?"

Dean said nothing for a long minute, before admitting, "I don't really know what you mean."

Pamela opened her mouth, then closed it again. She looked thoughtfully at him as she tried to make her point in a different way. "You've spent so long looking after other people: do you think that, deep down, you want someone to look after you?"

"No," he replied, after pretending to think about if for a minute or two. He thought about how nice it was when he could lie down with Cas, his fingers playing through his hair, tracing soothing patterns against his scalp. That when it was just the two of them, like that, he felt like he didn't have to worry about anything. He'd flat-out lied to her, despite promising Cas, Pamela, and himself that he'd give this therapy crap a real shot.

But he wasn't ready to admit out loud things he was reluctant to acknowledge to himself. The truth was, he did want someone to help shoulder the weight he carried. Someone who could help pick him up when he was just too damn tired of everything to go on.

"When you were with Lisa, whom you admitted was your only real attempt at an adult relationship until now, she was someone you could share a burden with," Pamela interrupted his thoughts, as if reading his mind. "It doesn't hurt to have people around you who will support you. As I've said before, it's more difficult to get through things on your own."

But Dean had never been the type of person to unburden himself onto others. Maybe it was because he'd never had the opportunity growing up. Maybe it was one of those things he needed to learn how to do.

"I don't know how to rely on other people," Dean admitted, with difficulty. "When I was younger... even when we were grown up... I could never talk to him about stuff."

"Why not? Was he unwilling to listen?"

Dean shook his head. "No. At least, I don't think he would have been." He paused, before adding, "I think I was unwilling to talk."

She nodded, satisfied with his admission. "Maybe the next time you speak to him, you could try to tell him something. Anything. I'm not asking you to go out of your way to talk to him," she assured him, when panic momentarily flashed across his face. "Just, the next time you phone him. Or he phones you."

"Sam doesn't phone me."

"Yet your relationship with him doesn't sound irreparable if he's still helping you out financially," Pamela pressed.

"I don't want to go to him every time I'm in trouble."

"Then why do you?"
"Because I've got no-one else to turn to."

"And he always helps you?"

"Every now and then he'll say it's the last time, but then the next time he helps me out again. One of these days it will be the last time, though. Or maybe not. I mean, we're getting on better, now."

"So your brother hasn't left you either, really?"

Dean hesitated before answering, clearly at odds with his answer. "No."

"Is it safe to say that you keep people at arm's length? To protect yourself from being hurt?"

"I don't know," Dean snapped. "You're the shrink."

Pamela simply stared at him as she waited for him to think about her question.

"I guess. Maybe," he admitted grudgingly.

"I think you're less alone than you feel, Dean. As an outsider, I think I can see a few people who care about you more than you let yourself believe they do."

Dean bristled at her pitying words, even if her tone was anything but. *You are not alone* was such an empty sentiment, and it didn't make him feel any less isolated from the people in his orbit. Take the sun, for example - surrounded by planets, but not close to any of them.

When he said as much, she nodded in agreement.

"But it's important to acknowledge, and accept, that there is a difference between being alone and feeling alone," she advised him.

"It doesn't feel like it," Dean grumbled. Sometimes having Pamela pick apart his every thought felt mildly intrusive. It made him feel weak, and powerless, and vulnerable in ways he'd never felt before thanks to his unwillingness to face his problems head-on.

"Try this," she suggested. "Every time you feel alone, remind yourself of the people you have in your life. Even if they're far away, list those who you feel would help you if you decided to reach out to them."

"It'd be a very short list," he told her. He saw a brief flash of emotion - disappointment, or something like irritation, perhaps - cross her face before she caught herself. Though, he acknowledged, that could just be him expecting the worst. He knew what *he* thought of himself, and never expected anyone to see him as anything better than that. But despite his low feelings of self-worth, there was something about Pamela's genuine concern for his well-being that made him think she saw something in him worth dedicating her time to. So maybe he should put as much effort in as she was. "But I'll give it a shot."

A natural quiet fell over them, and Dean glanced at his watch while Pamela looked over her notes. After a moment she leaned back, leaving her pen in her lap. "Earlier, you brought up self-destructive behaviour," she mused aloud. "Self-destructive behaviour can sometimes manifest itself in an active attempt to drive other people away - perhaps because they fear they'll 'screw up' a relationship, romantic or not, or because they can't process emotional stress stemming from a lack of self-confidence. A common example would be doubting a partner's fidelity as a result of wondering, 'How can this person really love someone like me?'"
Dean swallowed, his jaw trembling slightly as Pamela's words unknowingly hit too close to home.

"You're afraid that Castiel will one day hurt you, so you push him away and tell yourself that he deserves better. And if you push him too far and he does end up leaving, you can tell yourself that you were right - thereby reinforcing your belief that everyone leaves you so that you can continue shutting everyone else out. It's a vicious cycle, brought on by avoiding the cause of this fear. You might not always be aware of what you're doing, as some self-destructive behaviours - like drinking, or gambling, or even casual sex - can often start out as a habit, but pose the danger of becoming addictions. Self-destructive individuals lose themselves in these habits, or engage in deliberately annoying or alienating behavior, so that the other people in their life will reject them first. Therapy can be a good way for self-destructive people to find healthier coping mechanisms."

"Stop that."

"Stop what?"

"Trying to read my mind! You don't know anything about me!"

"I know that you've told me your brother has left you, yet he is still a big part of your life. You said Lisa left you, yet she's still letting you see Ben. You keep bringing up Cas leaving you, yet he's living with you and you're trying to make a relationship with him work."

Dean flinched at the blunt truth of her statement and she seemed to sense that, in her desperate attempts at getting Dean to open up to her, she'd pushed too far, too hard, too fast.

However she'd started, so she had to finish. Trying to salvage what scant rapport they'd begun to develop, she forced herself to take a step backwards. "The question is why you've developed this mindset, Dean," she told him softly. "And I believe the answer could lie with your parents."

"No."

"Dean—"

"I said no!"

She sighed and leaned back in her seat in defeat as Dean stood up, grabbed his jacket, and left in such a hurry that he was still putting it on as he left the building.

Pamela glanced up at the clock. Dean's appointment wasn't over, so there was a chance - however slim - that he'd return if and when he calmed down.

* * *

Dean didn't drive with any purpose after walking out on his therapy session - but he nevertheless found himself pulling into the Roadhouse parking lot. It would be quiet, as it was still early in the afternoon. But after Gordon Walker kicking up a fuss over nothing at the garage followed by Pamela worming her way into his head, Dean's day had been crappy enough to justify a bit of day drinking.

"Whisky!" he shouted over to Jo as he slid into a booth tucked away in the back corner, away from anyone else. "Double!"

There were only two people sitting at the bar - a man in a red and white baseball cap and another, slightly older, wearing a plaid shirt. They both had drinks and were deep in conversation, discussing the archery programme showing on the TV if their frequent glances towards it were anything to go by.
Dean knew he had issues. He was just reluctant to open up about them, because they were no-one's business but his own. Of course, that was easier said as a single man. He'd once told Cas that he'd made everything in his life good again - and it was the truth - but it had also opened him up to a world of hurt. It was as if Dean had mentally applied duct tape like a Band-Aid over the crap in his head, and every time it got worse or something else happened he stuck more, and more, and more over it, until he was all duct tape and safety pins inside. He'd been prepared to try, but he hadn't expected Pamela to grab several layers and just yank them off.

His own hostility probably hadn't helped matters, however. He could concede that trying meant actually talking, but there was so much that Dean didn't want to talk about. He'd opened up to Cas about stuff he'd never spoken about to anyone, but then he'd felt like he owed it to Cas at the time, for being such a pain in the ass. He couldn't explain why Cas affected him the way he did - making him feel safe and like his feelings were valid. But it still didn't mean he wanted to talk about them, though.

"Hitting the hard stuff, huh?" Jo asked. "Back to usual, or just a bad day?"

Dean simply looked at her and drained the glass. "Keep 'em coming."

* * *

Several drinks later, Jo slipped into the booth beside him.

"Unless you've brought a refill, leave me alone," he said, the edges of his words slurring slightly.

"Isn't it a little early for you to be drowning your sorrows?" she pressed lightly, caution lacing her tone.

Dean screwed his eyes shut.

"You've been better than this lately."

"I've had a rough day," he rasped.

"It's not Cas, is it?" she asked suddenly. "I mean, you guys are good, right?"

Dean chuckled bitterly. "Yeah. We're fine."

Jo had a feeling there was more to it than that, so she gave him a moment to see if he'd elaborate further. But the longer the silence dragged on, the less it became likely that he would speak. "Dean?" she prompted, silently willing him to open up to her.

"I'm trying," he said vaguely, desperately. "I just... can't..." A tear slipped down his cheek.

"How about I call Cas?" she asked, her concern for him growing. "He can come and walk you home."

Green eyes, wet with tears, looked at her. "He'll be at work. 'M supposed to pick him up."

"Not like this, you're not. Come on," she said, sliding out of the booth and tugging him to his feet. "You can lie down in the staff room until he gets here."

Reluctantly Dean let her help him to his feet and into the back room that passed as a staff room. A worn sofa that Dean had become very familiar with for a while - back before Cas had entered his life - a coffee table, a mini-fridge, and a small TV were crammed into the small box room.
"There you go," she told him, once he was settled. "Do you want anything to eat?"

He shook his head, and she sighed to herself. She'd need to make sure that Cas got some food into him when they got home.

As she turned to leave, Dean mumbled, "I'm not gay."

Stopping in her tracks, she slowly turned back to look at him. "I never thought you were," she told him. "I've seen how you are with women." Being with Cas didn't change the fact that Dean had genuinely cared about his hook-ups, even if it was only for a night.

"Me and Cas... it's complicated. But love shouldn't be complicated, that's what they said."

Who were 'they'? "Love is easy," she agreed, moving to crouch beside him. "It's everything else that's difficult."

Reaching out to cup her neck, he drew her closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead. She let him lean into her, closing her eyes and wondered what thoughts were churning around in his head. He'd never been very articulate in his emotions in the years she'd known him, and he was clearly struggling with something. But, when his lips found hers, she quickly pulled away.

"No," she told him, shaking her head. He didn't care about her, not like that. So what was he trying to prove to himself?

"'S just a kiss."

"Sweetheart, I have a little thing I call self-respect," she told him, putting space between them. And she wasn't going to do anything to jeopardise her friends' fledgling relationship.

"If you're into that kind of thing," Dean snorted, burying his head in the cushion again.

"Love isn't complicated," she said. "It's shit like that that complicates things."

"Who said anything about love?" he mumbled into the cushion.

"You did," she reminded him softly, stepping out of the room and closing the door behind her.
As far as I'm aware I've used UK insurance write-off categories because that's all I could find when I was researching it. I don't know if it's different in the USA.

"We're alone," Dean whispered as the elevator doors slid shut.

"Yes," Cas agreed, pushing the button for the third floor.

Dean had one arm draped around Castiel's shoulders. As the elevator jolted and began its ascent, his other arm wrapped tight around Castiel's body. Then that hand slid lower...

Castiel stared resolutely at the elevator doors as his pulse quickened. He didn't say a word, not wanting that hand to disappear any time—

"Dean!" he exclaimed as his ass was squeezed playfully.

Dean let out a throaty chuckle. "You know, maybe I should count your toes," he whispered seductively in Castiel's ear.

"I'm beginning to think you have a fetish," Cas told him, removing Dean's hand from his ass.

"Dark hair... blue eyes..."

"Not a type," Cas cut him off, a pleased smile tugging at his lips. So Dean may have trouble accepting his newfound interest in another man, but at least Castiel wasn't too far off his type. "But you know, I'm not sure leaving your therapy session and heading straight to a bar to drink yourself under the table was a good idea."

"Not under the table," Dean corrected him seriously, his drunken swaying exaggerated by the rhythm of the elevator. "On the couch."

"Yes, I'm glad you have friends who'll take care of you when you refuse to take care of yourself," Cas told him.

The doors opened on the third floor to reveal Mr Shurley waiting to go down.

"Good afternoon," Cas greeted him politely, encouraging Dean out of the elevator with a nudge. He was reminded that he still hadn't come to a decision about signing an apartment lease with Dean. The suggestion had been so unexpected. He wasn't sure it was the right time to be making serious commitments given that what they had was so new, and Dean was still struggling to adjust to their relationship.

When they got to the door, Cas almost dropped the apartment keys when Dean made to grab his ass again, but eventually he got the door open and pushed his drunken boyfriend inside.

"Mm, what's for dinner?" he asked as Cas helped him out of his jacket.
"Something simple," Cas told him. "Soup, perhaps. There's some in the freezer I can defrost. And while I do that, you can take a nap."

"I don't want to take a nap,"

"Yes, you do."

"No, I don't. I want to watch you cook."

"I'm not going to be cooking," Cas told him, encouraging him in the direction of the bedroom. "I'll probably have a shower while the soup defrosts."

"I could watch you do that instead."

Cas blushed. "No, you couldn't," he told him firmly. Dean was usually a lot more easily persuaded when he was drunk, and the idea of Dean watching him shower had some truly sinful thoughts entering his mind; thoughts that would send his father to confessional just by association. Now if he did have a shower, it would need to be a very, very cold one.

"How much did you have to drink?"

Dean belched. "Quite a few," he admitted.

"And maybe a few more?" Cas asked wryly.

He guided Dean towards the bed and, once he'd collapsed onto it, tugged the other man's shoes off. "I'll wake you when it's time to eat," Cas whispered, kissing the top of Dean's head and quietly retreating out of the room.

* * *

Dean walks out into the yard and looks over at the office. He sees Cas at the window, and watches as his hands stroke the glass. When he steps away, a rainbow is painted over the glass. It's bright and, as the sun shines down on it, the glare catches his eyes. He blinks and steps back into the darkness of the garage.

Except, it's not the garage. Not any more.

Where moments ago there were cars and tool chests, there are now tables and chairs. The grinding and clanging that is the soundtrack to life as a mechanic has become a steady beat. He walks across the room to a group of men sitting in a curved booth. They're strangers, and yet he feels like he knows them. A man with dark hair and blue eyes pats the worn leather beside him, and Dean sits down next to him.

They laugh like he's not there, but Dean forces himself to laugh along with them anyway. They laugh and drink, and drink some more. Suddenly there's a cold drink being pressed into his hands and someone is whispering with warm breath in his ear.

"Drink up!"

Dean drinks, and the men laugh. A hand on his thigh turns his attention back to the dark-haired man next to him. As he smiles at Dean, his face changes. The jaw becomes broader, the nose longer, the eyes larger.

"Cas?" he asks as the stranger turns into his friend, wondering why he's in the bar when a moment
ago he was in the office.

Not-Cas smiles, his lips stretching apart to reveal a multitude of teeth. His predatory smile grows larger until his whole face is a dark mouth, tipping backwards to reveal the veins in his neck slowly turning black.

The hand on his thigh is joined by another splayed across his chest, pinning him where he sits. He can feel a third on his foot and he fights their grip, squirming and struggling. When a hand bursts out of the leather seat and digs sharp nails into his stomach he screams, but the sound is drowned by the laughter of the monsters around him. The laughter continues as the hands pull him backwards, through the seat and down, down, down into an endless, murky pit of nothingness.

* * *

The next morning Dean jolted awake in a cold sweat and with a pounding head. As he rolled over to turn his alarm clock off, he noticed the glass of water and painkillers sitting on the nightstand waiting on him.

"Thanks, Cas," he mumbled, swallowing them down gratefully. "Ugh."

With great difficulty, he heaved himself out of bed and dragged himself down the corridor and into the kitchen.

"Good morning, Dean," Cas smiled from where he was sitting at the table.

Dean stared at him, flashes of his dream - nightmare - coming back to him. His gaze dropped to Castiel's mouth, examining the white and rather blunt teeth that lined his mouth.

"Morning," he replied gruffly. He cleared his throat. "Any coffee?"

Cas nodded at the machine, and Dean poured himself a mugful.

"How did you sleep?"

"Not great," Dean admitted.

"You didn't seem all that keen to be woken up to eat last night."

"I don't remember that."

"No, I don't suppose you would. You ate it, then promptly threw it all up again."

Dean pulled an apologetic face.

"So I just put you straight back to bed again."

"Thanks."

"Do you... ah... remember anything you said or did last night?"

"I remember being at the Roadhouse..."

Reaching out to cup her neck, he drew her closer and pressed a gentle kiss to her forehead.

"...and talking to Jo..."
When his lips found hers, she quickly pulled away.

He swallowed uncomfortably, nausea turning his stomach. Why the hell had he done that? "Then, uh, not much after that."

"Hmm," Cas said, almost sounding a little disappointed.

"What? What did I say? What did I do?" Please say Cas doesn't know...

"Oh, nothing important."

Oh, thank—

"You were just very flirty. And, um, a little handsy."

Shit. "With... you?" he asked, his voice coming out as almost as high as when he'd hit puberty.

"There's no need to sound so disappointed," Cas rebuked him.

"I'm not! I'm just... surprised."

Cas looked a little reassured. "So was I, if I'm being honest."

"As long as I didn't make you feel uncomfortable?"

Cas raised an eyebrow. "It depends on your use of the word 'uncomfortable'."

Dean's face grew hot.

"Don't worry, I didn't take advantage of you," Cas assured him with a chuckle, slipping out of his chair. He put his empty mug in the sink and kissed Dean's cheek, one hand resting on his waist. "Though I'd be lying if I said I didn't wish you were like that more often."

The memory of not-Cas from his nightmare putting his hand on his thigh had him pulling away. "I need a shower," he said, by way of explanation. "And I need to brush my teeth."

* * *

At work, Dean buried himself in the job so that he didn't have to think: about Jo; about Cas; about his own stupid choices. By the time afternoon came around, he found several excuses to stay far away from the office.

"You and Cas had better not be fighting again," Bobby remarked.

"What? No!" Dean shot back defensively.

"Hmph," his boss snorted. "That's what he said - why don't I believe you?"

"Because you like a little drama in your life?"

"Ha! That's something I need less of in my life. You see these grey hairs?" Bobby asked, taking his cap off. "I swear you're responsible for most of them."

"Nah," Dean grinned. "You looked like that when I started working here."

Bobby clipped him around the ear. "Hey! Less of the cheek."
Dean laughed.

"Laugh it up, Winchester. In fact, laugh yourself all the way over to the office and give this to Cas."

Immediately Dean's laughter faded. "I'm in the middle of this," Dean told him, jerking a thumb towards the car he was working on.

"It'll take you two minutes."

"Fine." Reluctantly, Dean took the envelope from Bobby and headed over to the office.

Cas looked up as he entered. "The coffee's fresh, if you want one."

"No, thanks, I'm in the middle of something. Bobby just asked me to give this to you."

Cas took the envelope and dropped it onto the desk beside his mug.

Dean moved to go, but something about Castiel's demeanour had him turning back. "Is everything ok?"

"Yes," Cas said, his tone making it evident he wasn't being truthful.

"Is it me?" Dean asked.

"What?" Cas asked, frowning.

"I know I've been kind of off today, but—"

"It's not you, Dean," Cas assured him. Then he sighed. "The Lincoln's going."

"Oh, yeah? So the insurance company finally decided what it wanted to do?"

"Yes."

"Took them long enough."


"Ah, Cas, I'm sorry."

"It's stupid to get so attached to a car."

"Look who you're talking to."

Cas gave him a half-hearted smile. They looked at each other in silence for a moment, and the wheels in Dean's head slowly began to turn.

"Do you know what category it was?"

"Umm," Cas said, clicking the mouse and looking at the computer screen. "Category C."

"Huh. Could be better. Could definitely be worse."

"What do they all mean?"

"Category A means crushed. Absolutely no salvaging any part of it," he said, tapping his forefinger. Moving to the next finger, he continued, "B gets crushed too, but you can salvage parts from it. C
and D are repairable, but the costs of repairing the vehicle are greater than the value of the car so it's not really worth it."

"It seems like such a waste."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, "but someone could still buy it and fix it up themselves. If they knew what they were doing."

"At least there's a chance it could end up back on the road again. If someone doesn't just buy it for parts."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Anyway, uh, I've got to get back to work."

"Dean," Cas asked him, reaching for his hand. "Are you... Are we okay?"

Dean looked at him, guilt churning in his stomach for ignoring him that afternoon. He squeezed Castiel's hand reassuringly. "As okay as we can be. "Considering I'm doing a good job of screwing everything up as usual, Dean thought to himself.

* * *

With the air somewhat cleared between them, Dean felt the self-induced awkwardness subside. "Do you want to eat at the Roadhouse tonight?" he asked as they settled into the Impala at the end of the day.

"So long as you don't drink too much and throw it all up again when you get home."

"No," Dean agreed, putting some music on before driving out of the yard and joining the main road.

The journey to the Roadhouse was uneventful, and Cas spent it alternating between staring out the window and casting sideways glances at Dean. He couldn't help but wonder what it was that had clearly gotten to Dean, given the distance he'd put between them today. Was it that he could remember how he'd been all over Cas in the elevator, and didn't want to give Cas the impression that he'd moved past his reluctance - no, Cas corrected himself mentally, his inability - to take their budding relationship further? Or had something come up in his therapy session that afternoon, something that had triggered Dean's desire to get drunk, and forget? His drinking habits had much improved since the anniversary of his mother's death - and even more so since Lisa had given him the alcohol-free month ultimatum. Wary of making an already problematic situation more difficult, he was reluctant to push Dean despite his growing concern.

"You're, uh, quiet," Dean observed as they pulled into the Roadhouse parking lot.

"Just lost in thought," Cas smiled. "But so were you. Quiet, I mean."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "I guess I was kind of lost in thought, too."

They stepped out of the car and, as they walked towards the door, Cas gave Dean's arm a reassuring squeeze. Dean nudged him back, then held the door for him. As he followed Cas through, his eyes found Jo at the bar and he flushed.

As they settled onto a pair of stools at the bar for a change, Dean unintentionally made eye contact with her. "Listen, um, about the other night..." he started when she came over, trailing off as he searched for the right words to excuse his actions. Not that he could excuse them. "I'm sorry," he settled for, but it wasn't enough.
Jo was glaring at him with crossed arms. "You're lucky we're friends, otherwise I'd have punched you." Then her hard expression softened and a grin spread across her face letting him know there were no hard feelings.

Dean chuckled. "I don't doubt it."

"What happened the other night?" Cas asked him.

"Uh..." Dean glanced over at Jo. How the hell did he explain his actions to Cas? He couldn't do it without hurting him, and he didn't want to do that. "I got drunk and... kind of came onto Jo," he admitted shamefully.

Cas went stock-still.

"I don't know, dude, I mean she's like a sister to me. I don't like her like that at all." He rubbed a hand across the back of his neck.

"And I have too much self-respect to go for someone who won't be there tomorrow," Jo chimed in.

"Who won't be there tomorrow?" Ash asked, appearing behind them with a tray of empty glasses.

"Me," Dean said, at the same time Jo said, "Dean."

"Ooh, anything you want to share with the class?" he asked, his interest piqued.

"I see you still haven't gotten a haircut," Dean observed, ignoring his question.

"Dean got drunk and hit on Jo," Castiel stated bluntly, not bothering to disguise his displeasure.

Ash clapped Dean on the shoulder and flashed him a shit-eating grin. "Dean-o, you should have made your move a year ago! You remember, when she had a crush on you?"

Jo caught Castiel's eyes and flashed him a sympathetic look. Sorry, she mouthed.

"It's not your fault," he murmured quietly.

A group of bikers hollered across the bar for another round, and Jo slipped away to serve them.

"Say, when was the last time you got laid?" Ash asked, slipping behind the bar. "I haven't seen you hook up with anyone in ages, now I think about it. Usually you're all over the women in this place."

Dean shrugged.

"The doctor is in, Dean." He leaned over the bar, resting his chin on his hand, and put on his best psychiatrist voice. "Are you having difficulty getting it up?"

"Butt out of my sex life," Dean growled.

"Chill, man, it's just a joke," he said, leaning back as if Dean might bite. "What'll it be?"

"Just a soda for me, Ash," Cas said coolly. "And a couple of menus."

"A beer over here."

As he slid a menu in front of each of them, Castiel shot a disapproving look at Dean. "Do you think that's a good idea?"
"I'm not going to go overboard, back off."

Castiel refused to look at him.

"And I promise I'm not going to hit on Jo again, either, alright?" he added once he was sure Ash was out of earshot.

"You can do whatever you like," Cas told him petulantly. "After all, in his eyes you're single."

"Hey, I thought you said you were fine keeping it quiet?" Dean asked in a hushed voice.

"I was, when I thought it was to make you feel comfortable and not so you could use it as an excuse to continue to hit on other people!" Realisation dawned on him. "This is why you've been so weird today, isn't it? You've been feeling guilty," Cas accused.

"No!" Dean exclaimed quietly. "It's not an excuse, and I'll point out that I also came onto you last night!"

"And so you should!" Cas whispered back fiercely. "After all, I'm your—"

"One soda, and one beer," Ash said, placing them down in front of them as Jo and Ellen made their way back behind the bar.

"No, Mom, that's not what I—"

"Nonsense, it's a great idea. That poor boy deserves someone good in his life."

The two women came to a stop in front of them. Ellen looked from one to the other, seeing their miserable expressions. "Did we interrupt something?" she asked coolly.

"No," they chorused untruthfully.

"Hmph," she said, clearly not believing them. "Well, Cas, you'd better wipe that frown off your face."

Behind her, Jo buried her face in a hand whilst shaking her head.

"What about my frown?" Dean grumbled.

"You can frown as much as you like. Cas, I'd like you to meet one of Jo's friends, Max," Ellen said, gesturing at a rather attractive man a few seats over.

"And I'm his sister, Alicia," the woman next to him added in mock annoyance at not being included. "But pretend I'm not here, it's fine."

Cas could only stare at Max as he moved to sit in a nearer seat, mesmerised by his bright eyes.

"Hey," Max smiled, full of confidence and charm.

Castiel felt desire pooling in his gut as he was drawn to Jo's handsome friend. He cleared his throat harshly, trying to remember that Dean was right next to him. "It's nice to meet you both," he said politely. "This is Dean."

"Max is single," Ellen emphasised.

"Recently!" Jo added, as if hoping the fact might make a difference.
Cas's face turned ashen. At a loss for words, he opened and closed his mouth but no sound came out.

Beside him, Dean choked on his drink. A glance to his left told him that Cas was as shocked as he was. If he wasn't so irritated that Ellen would try to set Cas up with someone when he was right there, he'd find humour in the familiar expression of panic that crossed his face, reminiscent of their introduction to Chastity. But then, it wasn't like Ellen knew they were together. Fuck, he was annoyed at her trying to set Cas up with someone but he was the reason she didn't know he wasn't available.

"And so's his sister," Ellen told Dean as an afterthought. She turned to Alicia. "Don't fall for his charms."

Alicia chuckled into her drink and shook her head as if in a silent promise.

Jo shot Dean a horrified look, clearly uncomfortable with her mother's matchmaking attempts given that she knew about them.

"I, um..." Cas stuttered, not sure what to say.

"You know, when Jo's mom said you were cute she didn't do you justice," Max smiled.

Oh, why couldn't Dean talk to him like this? As much as Dean frustrated him, he loved him and wouldn't betray him. He chewed his lip, a naughty thought occurring to him. Would it hurt to give Dean a taste of his own medicine? "Did she also tell you I don't really have much experience with dating?" he asked, wondering if his admission would put Max off.

What the fuck? Did he just... Was Cas flirting with the guy? Dude, tell him you aren't interested!

Dean screamed at him internally, glaring at the two of them. But of course Cas was inexperienced, and socially awkward, and probably had no idea how to let the guy down without being rude so was just going along with it to be polite. Unless he was praying that Dean would step in and come to his rescue. But fuck, Dean's wasn't his knight in shining armour! Hell, he was probably the villain in the story, given his actions with Jo the previous night. A meaningless kiss that risked everything he was trying to make work - and he really did want to make it work with Cas, even if he didn't know how to, yet.

He owed Pamela an apology, too, for storming out of their session.

Another thought occurred to him as Cas smiled at whatever it was Max had just said - what if Cas genuinely found Max more interesting than Dean was? A good-looking guy, confident in himself, who had no problems smooth-talking Cas. He took a large mouthful of his drink. A guy who could likely make Cas happy, and probably deserved the opportunity to do so.

A couple of seats away, Alicia was ignoring her brother's attempts to woo Castiel; probably used to being abandoned in favour of a prospective date.

"You don't even know if Max is Cas's type," Dean grumbled.

"That's why I'm introducing them," Ellen said slowly, as if explaining something to a small child. "They can find out for themselves if they're each other's type or not."

Dean glared pointedly at Cas.

"There's no harm in getting to know someone," Cas pointed out to Dean. You could never have too many friends, but he was walking a fine line between winding Dean up and trying not to lead Max
"Look, he's not interested, okay!" Dean snapped at her. "He doesn't want you playing Cupid."

"And how do you know what Cas wants?" she shot back.

"'Cause Cas and me, we're..." he gestured wildly, before trailing off when he realised what he'd been about to blurt out.

Castiel fell silent mid-sentence and looked at Dean wide-eyed, taken aback by his outburst and the implication of what he hadn't said.

Max looked at him, and then at Dean.

Even Alicia was giving them her full attention, now.

"You're what?" Ellen asked, getting impatient now.

"Out for lunch!" Jo piped up.

"They can have lunch together any day. It's not often Max and Alicia are in town."

"Maybe it's a quick dinner," she added insistently. "Maybe they have plans tonight."

"What, like drinking and watching TV? Besides, you're the one who said you were going to introduce them!"

"As my friends!" she clarified. "I wasn't going to try to set them up!"

"Well, there's nothing wrong with trying to spread a little happiness."

"Maybe Castiel is happy being single!" Jo suggested. "Just because you've got a mystery man doesn't mean everyone else needs to get a boyfriend."

"Or a girlfriend," Ash added. "Just 'cause Dean's happy with one-night flings doesn't mean I'm okay with wasting my good looks."

A muscle in Dean's jaw twitched irritably. He wished they'd all just leave them alone and let them have lunch.

"Give it a rest. They haven't even ordered yet," Jo pointed out.

She grabbed her notepad and tried to move past her mother, but Ellen was having none of it.

"Joanna Beth, you have exactly ten seconds to tell me why you're acting so strange."

Noticing that Cas and Max had fallen silent, no doubt in Castiel's case uncomfortable at being the centre of attention, Dean felt a surge of protectiveness rise up inside him. He had a feeling that Ellen had actually forgotten that they were all still there. It wasn't rare for her to ignore her surroundings when caught up in an argument with her daughter.

"I'm not!" Jo exclaimed. "I just don't think that... I mean, Max is just out of a relationship so won't be looking for anything serious..."

Max ganced at his sister and shrugged, as if to say, 'She's not wrong.'
"...and Cas isn't the kind of guy who looks for a little fun, and—"

He saw Jo's strained expression, clearly running out of excuses in her attempts at derailing her mother's matchmaking. Her words from weeks ago echoed in his mind: "You know we don't care, right? ... I mean, that you're both... well, guys. Mom and Ash'll be cool with it."

"Max is a good man who wouldn't take advantage of Castiel."

He slammed his fist down on the bar, making them both jump. "Damn it, Ellen, Cas has a boyfriend," he growled flatly, his tone making it clear that should be the end of it.

"I do?" Cas asked, gaze now fixed intensely on Dean.

Dean's cheeks flushed under Castiel's scrutiny.

"Oh, yeah?" Ellen asked, crossing her arms. "Who?"

Dean swallowed, realising that he'd dug himself into an enormous hole. He really needed to learn to think before he spoke. His mouth opened and closed several times, eyes darting between them all. Finally he settled on Castiel's confused expression and couldn't help it - he laughed.

"I haven't got all day, spit it out," Ellen prodded.

Dean's laughter died in his throat. Behind Ellen, he could see Jo giving him a little nod or support.

Turning his head, Dean looked Cas straight in the eye and found the strength there to quietly answer, "Me."

"Woah," Max and Alicia exclaimed in unison.

The background noise became muffled, muted, as an oppressive silence fell over them then, suffocating Dean as his words slowly sank in. He knew he couldn't take his words back even if he tried, so stared into his drink to avoid the shocked stares of the people around him. Staring at the liquid in his glass, he became aware of Castiel's hand moving towards his where it rested on the bar. As its warm weight settled over his loose fist, the waves of nausea churning in his stomach grew calm.

Oh, Cas thought. It took a moment for Dean's words to really sink in. Oh! When Dean had said a boyfriend, Cas hadn't expected this. A sudden wave of euphoria made him giddy as he realised their friends knew. They knew! Dean was no longer looking at him, though - his gaze had fallen to his drink. His heart sunk into the pit of his stomach as he realised that Dean had backed himself into a corner with only one way out - to come out.

The background noise had become muffled, muted, as an oppressive silence fell over them, suffocating Dean as the enormity of his admission slowly sank in. Staring at the liquid in his glass, Dean became aware of Castiel's hand moving towards his where it rested on the bar. As its warm weight settled over his loose fist, the waves of nausea churning in his stomach grew calm.

As happy as he was that he no longer needed to lie to their friends, his heart ached for Dean. He knew all too well what it was like to feel forced into coming out before you were ready, and he never wanted it to be like that for Dean - no matter how much he hated having to hide their relationship. Dean's bright green eyes, full of resignation and regret, flicked up to meet his. Castiel smiled and squeezed his hand, relieved when the corner of Dean's mouth turned up in response.

Ellen seemed to be considering the news, Jo was positively beaming, but a disappointed groan from
Ash broke the silence.

Everyone turned to look at him - Dean physically bracing for an argument.

"What? Dean being straight was supposed to be a sure thing. Now I'm gonna have to pay up."

Everyone turned to look at him.

"What? Dean being straight was a sure thing, and now I'm gonna have to pay up."

Ellen flicked her towel at his thigh.

"Ow!" he yelled, clutching the back of his leg.

"Serves you right."

Dean's tough posture eased, but his aggressive glare hardened. "You were betting on my personal life?" he growled, suddenly wishing he'd never spoken up.

"I—" Jo started, turning Dean's attention to her. But her mother cut her off before she could go on.

"Ignore him, Dean," Ellen told him. "I thought I could see something between you two, but I wasn't sure it was going to come to anything. I'm glad I was wrong. We're really happy for you both. All of us."

"Yeah," Max agreed carefully, as if not sure his reaction would be welcome.

"You're a lucky guy."

Jo stood quietly the whole time, never breaking eye contact with Dean. "I know it sounds bad," she started, "but it was just some friendly banter. And I knew you guys would be good for each other if you could just pull your head out of your ass—"

"Suddenly I'm not hungry any more," his gruff voice cut her off.

"I'm sorry, Dean," she apologised, not noticing Max reach over the bar to grab her pen.

He stood up. "I'm going to head home."

Immediately, Castiel moved to stand. "I'll come with you."

"No, you don't have to—"

"I want to."

Dean looked at him. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Max very obviously eavesdropping behind Cas while trying not to stare. He nodded once at Cas, then strode out the door.

Cas moved to follow, but a hand on his arm caused him to stop momentarily. Max murmured a few words and slid him a paper napkin, on which he'd written a phone number, then he gestured at Dean. With a backwards glance at the others, Cas followed his boyfriend outside.

"Dean, slow down," Cas said as he hurried to catch up with his boyfriend.

"I want to get out of here."

"I know."

"They bet on us," Dean said once they were in the car.
"Yes," Cas agreed calmly.
At his calm tone, Dean turned on Cas. "Did you know?"

"What?"

"Were you in on it?!"

"No."

"Then how can you be so calm?"

"I don't know! You're upset, and—"

"They bet on us!"

"—me being upset isn't going to change what they did— Dean!"

Castiel stopped talking as Dean started sucking in loud breaths.

"They... They..." Dean grabbed the wheel and leaned forward, leaned forward, all but hyperventilating. "What are we, Cas?" he mumbled, once his breathing was under control again.

Castiel opened his mouth, but no words came out. He rubbed a comforting hand across Dean's back.

"We don't need to put a label on anything," he offered eventually. "I'd love to call you my boyfriend - my partner - but if those words makes you uncomfortable, then the only thing that matters is we're together. We are what we are. It's nobody's business but ours."

Dean nodded, accepting Castiel's words and perhaps finding comfort in them. "I don't know why they had to go and make this into a big deal. They doesn't care when I hook up with women. It should be easy - you like me, I like you..."

"I'm sure they meant well," he said cautiously.

"I don't want to hear you defend them, Cas. Not right now."

"I'm just saying that they're our friends and they wouldn't have maliciously—"

"I said shut up, Cas!" he growled.

Castiel flinched.

Dean noticed, and some of the tension melted out of his shoulders. "I'm sorry," he said, more gently this time. "It's just that watching you with that guy—"

"Max."

"—wasn't easy, and I'm not used to feeling this possessive or jealous about someone, and then to actually say, 'Hey, that's my boyfriend you're playing cupid with' only to find out I'm the subject of a bet..." He took a breath and sighed. "I don't often say this, but I deserve better than that."

"You do," Cas agreed, though he believed there were no cruel intentions on their friends' parts. However he was glad Dean was starting to see himself the way he saw him, and he hoped it was a sign that things were finally looking up for them both.

Dean's hand paused on the ignition. "You'd better throw that number out when we get home," he
added, only half joking.

Castiel looked at the napkin he was still holding, and held it out to Dean. "It's for you, actually. In case you wanted to talk to someone who isn't me about, well... Anything," he finished lamely.

Dean stared at the napkin in Cas's outstretched hand for a long moment, anger and hurt and embarrassment swirling in his gut.

"Any friend of Jo's has got to be a good guy, right? He wants to help if he can."

Dean had nothing to say to Max. He grabbed it from Cas and crumpled it up, dropping it in the footwell.

Not wanting to push the matter, and not knowing what else to say, Castiel sat in silence as Dean drove home. The roar of the engine was usually almost calming to them both - a steady background noise that they could feel through their bodies, tying them to the car. Tonight, however, Dean pushed the Impala harder than usual and Cas worried he was pushing his anger onto her.

When they reached their apartment there was no space, so Dean let Cas out and parked further along the street. He turned the engine off but, instead of getting out straight away, he sat there for a long moment. He'd been humiliated tonight by his friends, and in front of his friends Bending over, he reached down and retrieved the napkin from the footwell. He smoothed it out over his knee and looked at the numbers written in black ink. Going against his instincts, he leaned across the seat and stuffed it in the glove box.
Hi, guys. So it turns out I'm an idiot. I've been concentrating so much on getting Dean's therapy right that, during various rewrites of Chapter 53, I managed to forget that Jo already knew he and Cas were a couple. (Oops.) So on top of redrafting and finalising Chapter 54, I had to rewrite that again as well. I suggest you go back and re-read the last scene of Chapter 53 before reading this.

Edit: My beta would like me to point out that she had a vague recollection of Jo finding out, but couldn't remember when or where, and when I looked back I couldn't find the scene so thought maybe it had been cut or changed. I only came across it after I posted the finished chapter. (I am a disaster.)

Pamela said nothing for a moment, quietly processing what Castiel had just told her. It wasn't unusual for someone to confide in her that they or their partner had been unfaithful, and to ask for help sorting through their emotions, but it was unusual for her to be counselling both parties. She probably shouldn't be, but technically Dean had been her patient before he and Castiel had even met, let alone started dating. And she thought it likely that Dean would be even more reluctant to open up to someone else. After all, he had a history - however brief - with her, and the motivation to commit after seeing how far Cas had come under her care.

Castiel watched her contemplate his revelation, wondering what her immediate response would be. He hadn't meant to bring it up. After all, he'd allowed Dean to believe that he wasn't too upset about it; that he understood it meant nothing. Reaching for his glass, he took a sip of water before placing it back on the table. But something had made him blurt it out.

"Who?" she asked finally.

"Jo. His - our - friend from the Roadhouse."

"She's the one you confided in about your feelings for Dean, yes?"

"After she guessed, yes."

Pamela lapsed into a thoughtful silence again. Eventually she asked, "At the risk of sounding clichéd, how does that make you feel?"

Castiel let out a slow breath. He'd been shocked at first, then angry. He understood that people could do stupid things when they were confused by their emotions, or drunk, and Dean had been both. Neither of them had brought it up since and, now that he was forced to think about it, he realised he was still hurting. He told her as much.

"That's understandable," she said. "Has he apologised?"

"Yes," Castiel told her. "Jo took it rather well - I think it would take a lot more than drunken advances to ruin their friendship."

"I meant to you."
"Oh." Castiel swallowed. "No."

"Don't you think he should? After all, he is supposed to be your boyfriend."

"But I can understand his struggles," he said, mentally berating himself for defending Dean even as he did so.

"And it's good that you can see both sides," she agreed, "but can you remember what we discussed when you told me about your father?"

Castiel cast his mind back. "Do you mean about unforgiving?" he asked unsurely.

"Yes," she nodded, "but also about responsibility?"

"That, even if I understood the reasoning behind his actions, I should still hold him responsible if those actions were wrong." He paused, as he applied the logic to his situation with Dean. "I need to hold Dean responsible for his actions, because what he did hurt me. If I don't, and I excuse him, I invalidate my pain."

* * *

Castiel thought about Pamela's words so deeply as he rode the bus home that he almost missed his stop. In his heart he knew Pamela was right, but every step upwards to their apartment door grew heavier at the thought of facing Dean. He usually avoided confrontation, and Pamela knew it. However, if he didn't say anything now, he never would. Ben would be visiting soon, and then it would be too late.

"Hey, Cas! I brought burgers back from the diner," Dean yelled through as soon as he opened the door. "They're not as good as mine, but—" He cut off when Cas slipped his arms around his waist.

"It's not often you compliment yourself," Cas smiled against his shoulder. He pressed a kiss against the fabric of his shirt and added, "You should try to do it more often." Even from behind, he could see the self-conscious flush that reddened Dean's skin.

"They're going to go cold," Dean said, changing the subject away from himself.

Letting him move the conversation on, Castiel withdrew his arms and took two plates out of the cupboard. He wasn't putting off talking to Dean for food, he promised himself.

"Ketchup?" Dean asked him, holding out the bottle.

"Thank you." The bottle made a squelching sound as he squeezed it, splattering red sauce across the worktop.

"I've got it," Dean told him, grabbing a paper towel and wiping the mess up immediately.

Cas opened the cupboard that housed their trash can so Dean could throw out the dirty towel.

"We make a good team, don't we?" Dean grinned at him.

Castiel smiled at him, doubts niggling in his mind. Was it really fair to risk upsetting Dean when he was trying so hard to commit to Castiel and to his therapy? "If... I excuse him, I invalidate my pain." It wasn't about what was fair to Dean, he reminded himself sharply. It was about what wasn't fair to himself.

They ate in the sitting room, Dean switching on a repeat of Dr Sexy to keep them entertained.
Although, as the doctor seduced yet another nurse, Castiel had to wonder just how *entertaining* this show really was - he was quite sure it was turning his brain to mush. Nevertheless, Dean seemed to really enjoy it - even if it was an episode he'd seen before.

Dr Sexy and his latest conquest fumbled their way into an elevator, hands stroking over and under clothing. Castiel couldn't help but think to himself that if it was *real* life, someone would have called the elevator and interrupted their sexual shenanigans.

The characters - or should that be the writers? - seemed to have thought of this as well. Just moments after, in a well-practiced movement, Dr Sexy reached out and pressed the 'stop' button without taking his eyes off Dr Piccolo.

When the same hand found the female doctor's shapely rear, causing her to let out a high-pitched giggle, Castiel's memory took him back to a few nights ago. He cast a sideways glance at Dean, wondering if he'd since remembered anything of that night after leaving the Roadhouse. As much as Cas disapproved of Dr Sexy having sex in a hospital elevator, he realised that if Dean instigated such an affair he'd be an eager participant - providing the elevator had a 'stop' button. Did their apartment elevator have...?

The sound of Dean laughing shook him out of his thoughts.

"Dr Sexy, this elevator seems to have broken. But don't worry, I'm sure you'll be going up in no time," Dr Piccolo grinned.

"You're going to have the ride of your life," Dr Sexy told her.

If Dean was laughing *before* the jokes, he'd seen this episode too many times. Cas rolled his eyes and smiled fondly at his boyfriend's adorable geekiness.

As the two doctors lowered to the floor, dropping out of frame, the screen faded to black and the commercials started to play.

"I've got genital herpes," said a woman doing yoga beside a lake.

Dean muted the TV and turned to Cas. "You've been pretty quiet over lunch," he observed. "Are you feeling okay? You're not getting sick, are you? I don't want Ben to catch anything when he—"

"I'm not sick, Dean," Cas assured him.

"Oh. Well, good."

"I'm just... conflicted," he settled for.

"About?"

"Us. You." Panic flashed across Dean's face, causing Cas to reach an arm out to calm him. "No, I don't mean..." He took a deep breath as he tried to find the right words. As he let it out slowly, he realised the words he wanted were simple. "I think you owe me an apology."

"What? Why?"

"You told me what happened with Jo, but you didn't apologise."

Dean stared at him.

"Did you consider the way it would make me feel? A reminder that this is all new to you, and that at
any minute you could decide it's too much? I've said that as long as you want to try I'll stay, but I'm still aware that you could end our relationship at any moment and climb into bed with a woman you've only just met."

Dean swallowed. Hearing him describe pretty much exactly how he himself felt about Cas - that at any moment he could decide he'd had enough of Dean's crap and leave him - made him realise what an ass he'd been.

"I'm sorry," he said genuinely. "Fuck, I was drunk and stupid and... and..." Licking his lips nervously, he forced himself to continue. "And I just got scared that I'm not going to be able to fix whatever's wrong with me. I saw you put up that damn rainbow sticker - that pride sticker - and I didn't want to think what it would mean if I could never feel confident in who I am. Who we are."

Castiel's expression softened. "I thought... I thought maybe you were unhappy with us." He sat down beside Dean and took his hands. "You need to talk to me about how you're feeling, Dean. It would save us both a lot of heartache and confusion."

"I know," he mumbled. "But I'm talking too much these days, and when I leave Pamela's more talking's the last thing I want to do."

Cas looked thoughtful for a moment. "Ok," he said. "So how about when you finish a session you come home, but don't feel like you need to sit with me. You could always spend some time in your room until you're recharged and ready to talk to me. You can read, or listen to music, or just lie down. I'll respect your need for time alone."

"Is that okay with you?"

"Of course it is!" Cas smiled. He ran a hand through Dean's hair. "I'd rather you came home and ignored me for a while instead of getting drunk and acting out."

Dean nodded slowly, remarking to himself how easily Cas could convey his feelings. "Okay. I can do that."

Cas pressed a kiss to his temple. "Good. And, I'm sorry I didn't tell Max I wasn't interested." He met Dean's eyes. "I was sort of trying to get back at you for hitting on Jo. It was silly, really, because I didn't need to feel jealous - you came home and hit on me." That had to mean that, on some level, there was a genuine attraction there. He just hoped that Pamela would be as good for Dean as she had been for him.

"I'm sorry," Dean told him again.

When Cas cupped his cheek, stroking a thumb across his stubble, Dean stared into his eyes. He could see the love, and the hope, and the hurt conflicted in the blue. He pulled Cas into a kiss.

Wrong.

Dean tried to ignore the feeling, fingers pressing into Cas's skin hard enough to bruise. A soft gasp parted Cas' lips, allowing Dean to deepen the kiss with a swipe of his tongue that made Cas moan. The sound was full of satisfaction and desire, and made Dean curious as to what other noises he could elicit from him. Confidence growing, he pulled Cas closer...

Get away from him.

He broke away with a shuddering breath, his father's voice clear as a bell in the depths of his mind, and buried his face in Cas's neck. Immediately Cas's arms came up around him, holding him close.
He didn't deserve this; didn't deserve Cas's patience and love. When Cas's fingers stroked through his hair, remembering that Dean had once asked for it, he sighed longingly.

"It's okay," Cas assured him soothingly. "You don't have to say anything."

Dean's own arms came up, gripping Cas tightly as if he might disappear. "I hate feeling like this," he admitted quietly.

Cas pressed a soft kiss into his hair, his fingers still working their magic to soothe Dean's mind and chase the voice out of his head. "I love you."

Dean fumbled with his shirt, scrunching the fabric in his fist. "I know," he mumbled into Castiel's neck. "And I wish I could love you back as easily. You deserve someone who can make you happy."

"Being with you makes me happy, Dean."

Dean shook his head, and Cas could feel a dampness on his skin. "No. It frustrates you, and it upsets you, and I make you feel like shit and—"

"And it hurts me to see you this upset," Cas cut in. "But I'm glad that I can be here to comfort you."

Dean stopped talking after that; just let himself be held and lost himself in the sensation of Castiel's fingers in his hair.

* * *

While Cas washed up their lunch dishes Dean lay on the sofa, staring at the blank TV screen in which he could just make out his darkened reflection. Cas was so patient - more patient than Dean would be if their roles were reversed. He wished he could just drill into his head, find the piece of his brain that was screwing up his attempts at building something with Cas, and cut it out.

Cas could insist until he was blue in the face that he'd stay as long as Dean tried, but Dean was sure he was getting impatient with his lack of progress. He'd only seen Pamela a few times, but even he was getting impatient with himself - he understood that therapy took time, but he was afraid that time was something he and Cas didn't have a lot of. What he felt for Castiel he couldn't put into words - not yet - but it was something real and meaningful and consuming. It was new, and he didn't know what to do with it.

He glanced at the clock, jolting upwards and shooting off the sofa as he noticed the time.

"Cas, we've got to go!" he said. He'd never hear the end of it from Bobby if they were late for work.

"I'm almost ready, I just need to grab a couple of things," Cas called through.

"What things?" Dean asked, half to himself. He didn't wait for an answer as he walked past the kitchen door to the bathroom. As he washed his hands, a dark shape in the bathtub caught his eye. A spider, about the size of the space between his thumb and forefinger if he touched them together, was stuck there.

He shuddered, but nevertheless reached for the glass sitting beside the sink and tried to nudge it in without touching it. Startled, it scurried in the opposite direction, trying to climb the smooth sides of the bath and sliding down again. It took him a couple of attempts, but he eventually managed to scoop it into the glass. Hurrying over to the window, he threw the spider as far away from the building as he could manage.
After shutting the window and returning the glass to the sink, he turned back to the door but found his attention drawn to the empty tub. It seemed forever ago that Castiel had huddled in the hot water, naked and bruised, the night they'd first met. He had seemed so small and lost, then - nothing like the well-built, self-assured man that now resided with him. He'd had a hand in that, but a large part of it had been Pamela.

A clattering in the kitchen pulled him from his thoughts and he rushed to grab his coat. "Damn it, Cas, we're going to be late," Dean hollered impatiently from the front door. He'd thought he had been the one keeping them, but what the hell was taking Cas so long?

"Since when did you care about being late for work?" Cas retorted, carrying the box Chuck Norris slept in out of the kitchen. His litter tray was balanced precariously on top, and a bag containing his food and toys hung from one arm.

A loud meow of irritation came from within.

"Where are you taking that thing?" Dean asked, looking pointedly at the box.

"To the garage."

"Why?"

"You wanted me to find someone to take him. I found someone."

"Who? Andy? Benny?"

"Bobby," Cas said, sidestepping smoothly around Dean before he could stop him from taking the kitten out of the apartment.

"Bobby's adopting the cat?"

But Cas was already hurrying down the stairs to the car.

"Damn it, Cas! I have allergies!" Dean shouted after him as he locked up.

* * *

"He's a scruffy looking thing, isn't he?"

Castiel simply hugged the kitten closer in response. "Ignore him," he cooed as the bundle of fur wriggled in his grasp. Obviously irked at being fawned over, the kitten's claws bit into Cas' arm. With a frown, he set the kitten on the ground gently.

"He's not as scruffy as when I found him," Cas told Bobby, as Chuck explored the office. "He's had his vaccines, and he's now a much healthier weight."

"And I'm guessing Dean named him?"

Cas sighed. "Yes."

"Chuck Norris," Bobby said, as if trying the name out for size. Then his nose wrinkled, and they both spluttered at the incredible stink that attacked their nasal passages.

"Oh, Chuck!" Cas sighed, seeking out the source of the smell. "Sorry - he's not fully litter-trained, yet."
"I think I've changed my mind," Bobby joked. A soft meow from his ankles refocused his attention on the ginger menace that was now rubbing against him. He couldn't help but smile. "Ahh, you're lucky you're cute," he told the kitten, bending down to scratch its ears affectionately.

Cas watched Bobby interact with Chuck from where he was kneeling under the desk, scooping up the kitten's poop. Seeing the way his boss had taken a liking to the tiny kitten helped reassure him that he was making the right choice.

Unbeknownst to either of them, Dean, Benny, and Andy were standing outside the office watching Bobby pet the kitten.

"Have you ever seen him so... warm?" Andy asked.

"No," Dean and Benny said at the same time. They all looked at each other.

"It's weird, right?" Benny asked.

"Oh, yeah," Dean answered.

"Definitely," Andy agreed.

The three of them scattered as Bobby stepped out, Andy and Benny retreating to the garage while Dean started wiping at a windshield with his cloth casually.

"Cas was telling me the Lincoln's going to auction," he remarked as Bobby walked past.

His boss paused. "That's right."

"Well, at least it'll clear up some space in the yard."

Bobby snorted. "It won't make that much difference - there's more junk lying around anyway."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, wiping the grin from his face when his boss shot him a glare. "But it's been sitting out there long enough - how much longer, do you think, before it goes? I mean, they're not going to leave it much longer now that they've decided what they're doing with it, right?"

"I can see it moving on sooner rather than later. I'd imagine the insurance company will be eager to reclaim some of the money they had to pay out over it."

Dean turned his cloth to the wing mirror. "How much do you think they're going to get for it? It's an old car, but I've seen them back on the road after being in worse shape."

"True, but anyone would be taking a gamble on the cost of fixing it up versus what they'd get for selling it on." Bobby frowned, as if suddenly realising something, and cast a sideways glance at Dean. "Unless, of course, they weren't planning on selling it."

Dean said nothing.

"It's not really a desirable car in the mainstream market - but who knows? If there are two bidders who really want it, maybe the insurance company could make out alright."

Dean nodded thoughtfully. "Do you think they'd be open to an offer?"

"And save on auction costs? Yeah, if the offer's good enough." Bobby smiled, taking a few years off
his face as he did so. "I think that'd be a damn fine idea."

"What?" Dean asked innocently.

But Bobby just smirked. "If I don't get a chance to say it at the end of the day, have a good holiday."
"Cas, did you vacuum the living room?"

Castiel looked up from his cereal. "Yes. And the hallway."

"And I cleaned the bathroom," he muttered to himself. "I don't need to worry about my room, because Ben won't be in it..."

"But I will," Cas pointed out teasingly.

Dean looked up at him in horror. "Shit!"

"Sit down and eat your breakfast!" Cas instructed loudly as Dean started to leave the room. "You don't have to clean your room on my account."

"There's some things I don't want you to see," Dean explained, reluctantly sitting down.

"Like your porn magazines?" Cas asked wryly.

"Well, yeah. Among other things."

"It's not like I haven't seen them before. You do buy them when I'm grocery shopping with you."

"It's not exactly something you have on display when you're... you know... with someone."

Castiel stared at him for a long moment, wishing that he could be enough and that Dean didn't need a porn stash. He sighed. "Just kick them under the bed and I promise I won't look."

Dean looked horrified. "No way! I have a very complete and organised collection of magazines. I just have a few to put away."

"Like the most recent issues?"

Dean looked cagey. "And a few favourites."

"I still think it's a terrible portrayal of women."

"Buy Hung Asian Hotties and then tell me that," Dean told him with a smirk.

"I don't need a magazine to jerk off to," Cas replied, eating another spoonful of cereal.

"You've got to jerk off to something."

Castiel's chewing slowed, and a guilty blush spread across his cheeks.

It took another second for the penny to drop in Dean's mind. "Oh," he said thickly. He'd known for ages that Cas liked him, but even now they were together he'd never considered that he thought of him when—

"Sorry," Cas said quietly.

"No, don't... Um... Don't apologise. I should've guessed. Not that I think about it, 'cause that would be... Um... I'm going to stop talking now, okay? But it's fine. Don't... Don't think that you've done anything wrong."
"You're not... upset?"

"Surprised would be more accurate. And I suppose... flattered. I mean, there are so many other guys out there who'd be better for you to... you know... so— Mmph!"

Dean was cut off by Castiel's mouth on his.

"Mmm..."

Slowly, Cas pulled away. "I love you," he stated. "And even though you're not sure you feel as strongly for me yet, that doesn't change the fact that I do. For that reason, there is no-one else I'd rather think about when I pleasure myself."

Then it was Dean's turn to blush.

* * *

"Would you relax?" Castiel said, as Dean walked into the kitchen for no reason for the third time in ten minutes.

"I am relaxed."

"You're pacing." Dean had been walking from room to room ever since he'd finished tidying away the things he didn't want Cas to see in his bedroom.

"I'm relaxed!" Dean insisted.

Castiel finished wiping down the sink and hugged Dean. "There's no reason to be nervous, you know. At least for you. Ben knows you and loves you. Me, on the other hand? I'm a complete stranger he may not even like."

"Of course he'll like you."

"You can't know that for sure. But I promise you I'll try my best with him."

Dean hesitated for a split second before giving Cas a quick kiss. "I know you will. But he will like you."

"I hope you're right," Cas relented.

* * *

"Do you think we should leave yet?"

"Only if you want to have a half hour wait at the airport."

"But there might be traffic."

"Which you took into consideration when you decided the best time for us to leave." Castiel sighed and closed his book. "Would you sit down?"

Dean shook his head. "I can't sit down. I've got to do something."

"You could always kiss me again," Cas told him with a smile.

Dean faltered. "Cas, about that..."
Castiel's smile faded, and he swallowed thickly. He wasn't going to like what Dean was about to say, he was sure of it.

"Can we just... Can we keep us... quiet?"

"You don't want Ben to know." It wasn't a question, but a statement.

"Yeah," Dean admitted. "But please don't think it's because I'm ashamed of you."

"Then explain to me why."

Dean took a breath. "He's going to be a long way from home and from his mom. I haven't seen him in five years; we'll both have changed in that time. And like you said, you're a stranger. I just don't want to overwhelm him."

At first Castiel said nothing, but then he nodded. "Alright. I'm not happy about it, but your reasoning is valid."

"Thanks, Cas," Dean breathed with a grateful smile.

"And maybe, if all goes well, we could tell him before he goes home?"

Dean swallowed, and nodded. "Yeah. Maybe. If everything goes okay."

"Come here," Castiel said, patting the empty sofa seat beside him.

Dean complied, and Castiel placed a long, lingering kiss on the corner of his mouth. After a moment, Dean turned his head subtly to meet his lips and a swarm of butterflies came alive in Castiel's stomach.

"Now," he said, opening his crossword book once again and chuckling as he read the next clue.

"What's a seven-lettered word for 'feeling or showing anxiety'?"

* * *

As the passengers slowly started to appear through the gate, Dean began looking for Ben.

"I don't see him."

"He was on the plane, Dean," Castiel told him calmly. Lisa had phoned them earlier to let them know that Ben's plane had departed on time - and to make Dean promise for the hundredth time that he'd look after him. "He'll be there."

"But I don't see him!"

Placing a hand on Dean's shoulder, and forcing himself to bury his own nervousness that had started on the drive to the airport, Castiel said, "Relax."

Momentarily caught by Castiel's loving gaze, Dean didn't notice Ben appear at first. "Hey, there he is!" Dean grinned. "Hey, buddy!" he greeted Ben, throwing his arms around the boy.

Ben allowed Dean to hug him, then looked at Castiel. "Is that Cas?"

"It sure is."

"Hello, Ben," Castiel greeted him warmly. "It's nice to finally meet you. Dean hasn't stopped talking
about you since we arranged this trip with your mother."

Ben turned back to Dean. "Can we go now?"

"Easy, kid!" Dean laughed. "We've got to grab your luggage first."

"Oh. Yeah."

They made their way over to the baggage carousel and waited for Ben's suitcase to appear.

"There it is."

As Ben started to haul his suitcase off the belt, Dean took it from him.

"I've got it," he said, pulling out the handle. "Now let's get out of here."

They wheeled the suitcase out to the parking lot, with Castiel practically interrogating Ben about his flight in what Dean saw as an attempt to be welcoming.

He wasn't very talkative, though, which Dean hoped was a result of the long flight and not a reluctance to be spending part of his Easter break with Dean.

"Did you have a good flight, though?" he cut in as they crossed the parking lot.

"It was okay. I got a free juice from the flight attendant."

"Yeah?"

"It's like she thought I needed looked after or something because I was flying alone," he said derisively.

Dean laughed. "You're practically a man now - I bet you don't mind flying by yourself."

"Yeah. I'm not a kid anymore."

Dean's grin faded as the truth of Ben's words hit home. He wasn't a kid - at least not the little kid he'd left behind.

"Was it very boring?" Cas asked.

"I played my game a lot. And at one point we all had to get in our seats because of turbulence, and the old lady beside me threw up."

Dean paled at the mention of turbulence.

"I've never been on a plane before," Cas revealed.

"Are you scared of flying, like Dean?"

"No," Castiel said as they approached the car. He cast an amused glance at Dean's back, treasuring that little nugget of information. Dean didn't often talk about himself, instead choosing to talk about the people he cared about. It was one of the things he loved about him - his capacity for love - but unfortunately it meant that Castiel didn't know many of the little things that made Dean Dean. "At least, I don't think so," he amended. "I haven't flown because I've never travelled far enough away to need to fly. If I'm not with Dean I usually either walk or take the bus."
Ben screwed his nose up. "I hate buses."

"I got you something," Dean interrupted as he opened up the trunk, pulling out a baseball and glove. "I thought we could toss the ball like we used to."

"Thanks, but I don't like sports."

Dean faltered. "I... But you loved baseball."

"Not anymore. I still watch it sometimes, but I stopped playing it ages ago."

Dean looked lost for words and Cas felt a surge of embarrassment on his behalf. "So what do you like now, Ben?" he intervened.

Ben shrugged.

Dean hoisted Ben's suitcase into the trunk. "Your mom sure made sure you came prepared, huh? Did she pack the kitchen sink in here or what?"

Ben smirked. "I'm sure she tried."

As quickly as the half-smile lit up his face, his expression fell again into a more closely-guarded one. Once they were in the car, Ben pulled a handheld gaming console out of his backpack and turned it on.

"You like video games?" Cas tried.

Ben shrugged. "They're okay."

Cas leaned over the front seat. "What are you playing?"

"Professor Layton."

"Who's that?"

"He solves puzzles."

"Sounds... puzzling," Dean quipped.

Cas chuckled.

"It's the second game in the series," Ben elaborated. "The first came free with this," he said, waving the console at them, "and I thought it sounded dumb, but it's actually pretty cool. There are newer ones, but Mom says we can't afford them. It's okay, though, because I haven't finished this one yet."

"Well, you must be very clever if you solve all these puzzles," Cas told him.

"Yeah," Dean echoed proudly. "He gets his brains from his mom."

In the back seat, Castiel frowned. He knew Dean believed there was a chance - though unlikely - that Ben could be his, and he hoped that his comment hadn't been meant as self-deprecating. Dean wasn't dumb, and Cas only wished that he could see how smart he was.

* * *

They stopped for pizza on the way home, getting getting two large ones and side to share. As much
as Dean liked to - and could - eat a whole large pizza himself, he thought Ben should eat better than that. As such, he reluctantly asked Cas to make up a salad for them. In response, Cas teasingly placed the back of his hand against Dean's forehead and asked if he was feeling okay. Ben complained but, to set an example, Dean forced a smile as he chewed on a mouthful of 'rabbit food'. It worked, though, because Ben cleared his plate.

Just as they'd loaded up their plates with a second helping, the phone rang. With a reluctant sigh, Dean tore himself away from his food and went to answer the phone. "Hello?"

"Dean?"

"Hey, Lisa."

"Did Ben get there okay?"

"Uh, yeah."

"You didn't call."

"Was I supposed to?"

"I told him to get you to call once you picked him up."

Dean shook his head. "Hang on a minute. Ben!" he shouted back into the living room.

"What?"

"Did your mom give you any messages for me?"

"No."

"Nothing about... oh, I don't know... phoning her?"

"Oh, yeah. She wants you to call her when I arrive."

"Uh-huh." He turned back to the phone. "Sorry."

"That's okay. I should have known better than to trust him to pass it on. As long he's there, and in one piece."

"Yeah, he's here. Only, you did send him with nine fingers, right? I'd hate to think he lost one on the way here."

"You're not funny, Dean," she told him, but he could hear the smile in her voice.

"I'll call you when he gets on the flight back, okay?"

"You could call me before that if you wanted."

"You don't trust me?" he asked.

"I miss my son," she corrected him, even though he wasn't wrong.

"It's only been a few hours! What are you going to be like at the end of the week?" he teased. Talking to her like this, it was almost like old times.

"Just... look after him, okay?"
"You just enjoy a few days of peace and quiet before he gets back. I'll call you later."

"Bye, Dean."

* * *

_Cars_ was playing on TV and, despite Ben's protests that he wasn't a child, all three found themselves engrossed in it. They'd stuffed themselves full, so it was an excuse to let their dinner settle before they had to start washing up.

Dean cast a glance at Ben. He'd seemed settled and relaxed during dinner, though no more talkative - however he _had_ been stuffing his face. The boy seemed more withdrawn than before, and he wasn't sure if that was an age thing or a distance thing. He tried to remember what _he'd_ been like at that age, but given the differences in their upbringing his own childhood probably wasn't the best point of reference. He hoped that Ben wasn't unhappy, or regretting this trip. What if he woke up tomorrow and wanted to go home? Would he _tell_ Dean, or would he simply be miserable the entire week? Maybe he was already counting down the days until he got to go home again. An awful thought struck him - that Ben might leave and never want to come back. It had taken Dean so long to get his act together that it might have cost him his relationship with Ben for good. If he only knew why Ben was so different, maybe he wouldn't be spending so much time _doubting_ and be able to just _enjoy_ him being around.

Castiel periodically looked over at the other two; Ben engrossed in the film, and Dean switching his attention between the movie and the boy. Neither paid him that much attention, which he could understand and was quietly grateful for. It allowed him to watch Dean without fear that Ben might notice.

He'd imagined that once Ben was here and they'd been introduced his nerves would ease up, but he'd been wrong. It felt like there was something... _off_. Like there was almost a tension in the air. Dean was ecstatic, and Cas was happy for him, but Ben... Maybe it was because they didn't know one another. Maybe it was because Ben hadn't seen Dean in five years. Maybe it was his nerves and he was imagining it, but it was enough to make him worry that the week wouldn't be smooth sailing.

As he stared, he found himself picturing what it would be like to have a _family_ with Dean. It was impossible, he knew that, but still... It would be wonderful to have that kind of bond with Ben; to have a shared history and inside jokes. Tears filled his eyes as he stared too long without blinking, and he tore his gaze away from Dean and back to the television.

Pamela would undoubtedly tell him that the fantasy was him secretly longing for a commitment from Dean. He chuckled at himself and rubbed his forehead. He just wished that Dean felt relaxed enough about their relationship to touch him freely, the way Cas longed to touch him.

Cas was so caught up in his thoughts that he didn't notice the credits start to roll, or that Dean switched the TV off. He started as a scrunched up paper napkin was thrown at him.

"Hey! Have you fallen asleep over there?"

"No," he replied, stretching and sitting up. "I was just lost in thought."

Dean frowned in his direction. "Thinking about what?"

But Cas shook his head as he stood and gathered their dishes. "It's not important. Perhaps I'll tell you later."

Usually Dean would offer to help, but he cast a glance at Ben who had by now retrieved his game
and was engrossed in the tiny screen. Settling back in his seat, and aiming for casual, he commented, "You've been quiet since we finished dinner."

Ben shrugged.

Dean took a breath, then let it out slowly. He needed to know what was going on, both to make Ben happy and calm his own nerves. Otherwise he'd probably keep Cas awake half the night, tossing and turning as his brain dwelled on Ben's apparent unhappiness. "Are you missing your mom?"

Ben pulled a face. "No! I just saw her this morning."

Dean chuckled. "Okay, then," he said, relieved that Ben wasn't homesick. But something was bothering him - or something about him had changed. But he'd definitely caught a glimpse of the old Ben at the airport. "So why the silence?"

Ben kept tapping away at his game.

"Can you put that thing down for a second and talk to me?" he asked, talking more seriously this time.

Ben flipped the lid closed, but continued to stare at it.

Dean resisted the urge to push him to open up, giving him time to find whatever words he needed - even if they were words Dean didn't want to hear.

After an excruciatingly long moment, he finally spoke. "I couldn't believe it when Mom said you wanted to see me," he admitted quietly.

Dean's heart broke as he realised Ben had thought he wasn't wanted. At the same time, relief flooded his system because he could fix this. "Are you kidding? I've missed you like crazy!"

"I didn't think you liked me any more," he mumbled, turning the gaming console over and over in his hand. "Mom said it wasn't true, so she made me send you cards and stuff."

Guilt twisted Dean's stomach as tears pricked his eyes.

"Maybe she was right. I don't know." Ben sighed. After another long pause, he looked at Dean. "I really missed you."

"I really missed you, too," Dean told him honestly, pulling him into a hug.

"Dean!" Ben protested, nevertheless allowing himself to be hugged. "So why didn't you ever call, or come visit?" he asked, once Dean had let him go.

Dean hesitated before answering. "I went through a... rough patch."

"I should have called," Dean acknowledged. As much as he wanted to be Ben's real Dad, he'd been a shitty excuse for a parent these past few years. "I should have been there for you. I'm sorry."

"If it was something I did, I'm sorry," Ben apologised, eyes desperately seeking Dean's reassurance.

Five years. For five years, Ben had thought he was the reason Dean had left. That he wasn't wanted. A single tear slipped down his cheek and he wiped it away before speaking. "Listen to me," he said, his voice breaking. "You didn't do anything. You understand that? Look, one day you'll..." Dean
hesitated to say 'understand'. He wasn't even sure that he understood exactly what had gone wrong - just that he was a large part of the problem. Dragging a hand over his face, he sighed. "Oh, you'll get this when you're older."

Ben scowled. "Don't talk to me like I'm six."

"Okay, fine. It's like this, then," Dean said. "Just because you love someone, doesn't mean you should stick around and screw up their life. So I had to go."

"Why?"

"I wasn't in a good place. I tried to play the part of a dad, and a partner, but the shit— I mean the, uh, crap in my head, it turned me into somebody that couldn't sit at your dinner table. And if I'd stayed, you might have turned out just like me."

"Why do you say that like it's a bad thing?"

"Trust me, Ben - I'm not someone you want to aim to be."

"Brave, selfless, loving, loyal..." Cas listed, coming into the room at that moment. "I'd say you're exactly what he should aim to be."

Dean scoffed. The last thing Ben needed was a borderline drinking problem and commitment issues, but he didn't dare say that in front of Ben. Instead he turned back to the boy and said, "But it is not your fault, do you understand?" It killed him that Ben thought otherwise.

"Yeah," Ben said quietly. "Dean?"

"What?"

"Can I play my game now?"

Dean smiled and ruffled his hair. "'Course you can."

He turned to look at Cas, tilting his head questioningly in the direction of the kitchen. When Cas left the room, Dean stood up and followed him through.

"What's wrong?" Cas asked.

"He asked me if it was his fault me and Lisa broke up," Dean whispered.

"What? Why?"

"I don't know! I told him it wasn't, but I don't know if he believed me."

Castiel fell into a thoughtful silence.

"I'll take anything you've got, dude," Dean said, bracing himself for Cas to berate his parenting.

To his surprise - though he didn't know why, because it was typical of Cas - he didn't criticise him. "It's been five years since he's seen you, Dean. He's not the same boy you left behind. Seeing you again has probably caused him to confront a lot of feelings he had at the time; feelings that he buried because he had no reason to deal with them."

"You've spent too much time with Pamela," Dean told him half-heartedly.
"If I hadn't, I wouldn't be able to offer you such good advice now, would I?"

"Well, that's debatable," Dean said. Cas had always been great at giving advice, in his opinion. "So what's the advice?"

"To simply be his dad. Whether you are biologically or not, that was - and is - your role in his life. Be there for him, enjoy what time you have with him, and show him that you love him."

"You make it sound so simple," Dean said. "Fuck, I need a drink."

"Why don't you go and sit down with Ben, and I'll make us all some hot chocolate?"

A grateful smile tugged one side of Dean's mouth upwards, and for a second Castiel thought that he was going to break his own rule and kiss him.

"You're awesome, Cas."

* * *

When they finally made their way to bed later that night, Cas hesitated as Dean finished undressing.

"You don't have to wait for me," Dean told him. "Get in - it's cold in here."

"Which side is yours?"

"It doesn't matter. Just get in before you freeze your balls off."

Castiel got in one side of the bed, but then changed his mind and shifted over. As it looked like he was about to change his mind again, Dean joined him under the covers.

"Remind me to shut the window tomorrow morning," he told Cas.

"Why don't you just close it now?"

"It'll get stuffy," he replied softly, getting into a comfortable position before turning to face Cas. "Hey, what was it you were thinking about earlier?"

Cas was silent for a moment before shrugging. "It's nothing."

"Bull. You were so far away you were in Neverland."

"Where's that?"

Dean laughed fondly at him, but didn't answer. "What was on your mind?"

"I was just thinking how nice it would be if we were a family. I know it's silly. Seeing the man I love with a child that he loves... it made me start to think, that's all."

Dean swallowed thickly. "It's not silly, Cas."

"It's not?"

"No."

They each lay on their own sides of the bed in silence, Castiel listening to the sound of Dean's breathing. It was nice, lying so close to Dean. Though they could be closer...
"Dean?" he asked, after a minute.

"Huh?" Dean grunted.

"I'm cold."

"I'm not shutting the window. You'll warm up in a bit."

Castiel pouted in the darkness. "They say body heat is the best way to warm up," he hinted.

Dean turned to face Cas in the dark. "Yeah?"

"It's true."

"Have you suddenly turned into a 'True Facts' book, or is this your way of asking if we can cuddle?" he asked, amused.

"Brr." Cas shivered unconvincingly.

Dean let out an exaggerated sigh. "Come on then," he told him.

The covers rustled as Castiel shuffled closer, snuggling into Dean's side.

"You know," Dean said, once they were settled, "I hope you don't snore."
They'd let Ben stay up far too late the night before, so Dean wasn't in a hurry to wake him up the following morning. He still wasn't up by the time Cas had left for his session with Pamela, so Dean stayed in the kitchen and started making burgers for dinner that night. In theory, the longer they spent in the fridge, the better they'd keep their shape.

When he eventually heard Ben moving around in the living room, he put a couple of slices of bread in the toaster.

"Mom never lets me sleep this late," Ben said when he finally appeared, rubbing sleep from his eye. "She doesn't let you stay up until after midnight, either." Dean finished wrapping cling film over the plate of burgers and put them in the fridge.

"Is that lunch?" Ben asked hopefully.

"Dinner. I bet you've missed my burgers, huh?"

Ben's grin told him he was right. "Mom's tried to make burgers a few times, but they're nothing like yours."

Dean chuckled smugly. "It's a secret recipe," he whispered conspiratorially.

"Will you tell me?"

"Then I'd have to kill you," Dean said seriously. Then he winked. "Maybe."

The toast popped and Dean dried up a plate.

"Where's Cas?"

"He has a..." Dean searched for a non-specific way of putting it. "An appointment."

"Oh," Ben said, looking a little disappointed.

"Hey," Dean said, sliding the plate of toast in front of him and sitting down beside him. "It's important, okay? I promise. If it wasn't, he wouldn't have scheduled it for when you were here."

"Okay," Ben echoed, somewhat glumly.

"Now, are you gonna help me wash the car this morning or do I need to do it all myself?"

"Don't you usually do it by yourself anyway?" Ben asked through a mouthful of toast.

"Don't speak with your mouth full," Dean told him, before answering his question. "Sometimes Cas helps. And if you help me today, then we'll definitely be finished by the time Cas comes back. Then we can all go out and do something together."

"Can we go swimming?"

"I thought you didn't like sports?" Dean teased.

"It's not a sport."
"They do it at the Olympics."

"It's not like baseball, or basketball. So can we go?"

"Uh, we'll see," Dean said, thinking that Cas and water have never mixed well in the past.

"Please?"

"Let's see what Cas says, okay?" he asked, hoping that he wasn't setting Cas up to be the bad guy.

* * *

"What's wrong?" Pamela asked before he'd even sat down.

"What makes you assume something's wrong?"

"You're radiating nervous energy."

"Oh."

She laughed. "Spill."

"Ben arrived yesterday."

"Dean's may-or-may-not-be son?" she recalled.

"Yes."

"And how does that make you feel?"

Castiel thought before speaking. "Nervous," he admitted finally. "Ben is an important part of his life."

"As are you."

"Am I?"

Pamela frowned.

"It felt like we were just beginning to find our feet together, though home was the only place we could really be together, and now even that has been taken away from us."

"Whoa, back up. How has that been taken away from you?"

He slumped forward and looked at his knees. "Dean doesn't want Ben to know we're together until he's had the chance to get to know me."

Pamela looked understanding. "So no kissing, cuddling, hand-holding? No intimate actions at all?"

Castiel shook his head.

"A lack of physical intimacy can be detrimental to the health of a relationship," she started carefully. "But then you did say Ben was only staying for a week, yes?"

"A little bit less than a week, actually. He arrived yesterday morning and he leaves on Friday afternoon."
"So. Five days, give or take. Would you be as concerned if Dean had gone to visit Ben, leaving you behind?"

Castiel thought about it. "Probably not."

"Then be patient - give him a few days with Ben. Or talk to him. Share your concerns. Tell him how you feel - that you simply want to know where you stand."

"But—"

"You can't avoid confrontation all your life, Castiel. It's not always a negative thing."

He supposed she was right.

"Dean is doing what all good parents should do – slowly introducing a child to a new partner. It's harder for him, however, having not seen Ben in a few years. And having a new partner who is of the same sex."

"I suppose you're right," Cas agreed with a sigh. "We don't want to confuse him. And I don't want to risk alienating him straight away."

Pamela chuckled. "You know something? I started counselling you for depression, low self-esteem, and mild anxiety. Now you're more self-assured, though you still need to work on your assertiveness."

"I don't understand why that's funny."

"It's not. But somewhere along the line I seem to have turned into your relationship counsellor," she smiled.

* * *

Cas took the bus to and from his appointment, so that Dean could spend more time alone with Ben. It wasn't that he didn't want to spend time with him, too - it was just that he was aware they had a lot of time to make up for, and he didn't want to intrude on that.

He wasn't expecting Dean to meet him at the door almost as soon as he'd stepped inside.

"Ben wants to go swimming after lunch," Dean warned him in a hushed tone.

"Then take him," he responded as he hung his coat up.

"I'd like it if the three of us went together. And I think Ben would, too."

Cas turned to look at him. "Oh," he said warily.

"Yeah, I know. But he really wants to go."

"But I can't swim."

"You can just sit up at the side and dangle your feet in the pool if you want. But the shallow end's only about waist-deep, so you don't have to worry about swimming."

"I haven't got any trunks."

"We'll stop off and get you some on the way."
Castiel still wasn't convinced and, despite what he'd said earlier, Dean reached out to stroke a hand down his arm. "Do you think you could give it a shot, for me?" he asked. "I know I don't deserve to be asking anything of you right now, but I'd really like it if you and Ben could get along."

"I'd like that, too," Cas smiled. Then he sighed. "Alright," he conceded reluctantly. It would do him good to face his fears, he reasoned. And Ben deserved to have a good holiday with Dean.

* * *

As they were picking out trunks, however, Cas started to have reservations again. Even if he sat at the edge of the pool, what would Ben and Dean do? He couldn't expect them to stay with him just because he couldn't swim. And if they swam off and left him, was there any point in him being there?

"What about these?" Dean sniggered.

'These' were a very vivid lime green that hurt Castiel's eyes.

"No," he shook his head. "You know, Ben, I wouldn't mind if you wanted to spend some one-on-one time with Dean."

"We're getting you trunks, Cas. Do you like these?"

"Oh, yes, they're— No."

They were a lovely shade of blue, but when Dean turned them around he could see they had a gaudy pattern across the ass.

"Cas?"

He looked at what Ben was holding. "Do you think you could perhaps find something... with more fabric?" he settled for.

Ben showed Dean and the two descended into giggles.

Castiel smiled, holding a pair of dark blue trunks with lighter blue highlights. "These are perfect."

"Those are boring," Ben told him, showing him a pair of Hawaiian print shorts.

"Come on," Dean told him, ruffling his hair playfully. "The sooner we buy these, the sooner we can hit the pool."

* * *

Castiel resolutely kept his back to Dean as they got changed, until he was certain he had his trunks on. He couldn't trust his gaze not to wander, and the last thing he needed was for Ben to catch him staring lustily at Dean's half-naked body. As he turned to put his clothes in a locker, Castiel chanced a look at Dean - his strong arms, his freckled back, the softness around his belly. His fingers twitched, and he had to ball them into the fabric of his clothes to stop from reaching out to him. He wanted so badly to touch him, to explore every inch of his body, and feel Dean's hands everywhere on his.

"What are you looking at?" Dean asked defensively, sucking in his gut a little when he caught Castiel staring at him.

There was no-one else in the changing room and, despite Dean telling him to wait for one of them to
go in with him, Ben was already in the pool.

Castiel blushed. "You really are very attractive."

"Oh."

Dean's gaze dropped down briefly. Cas was in much better shape, now. He was eating better, jogging regularly, and had filled out in good ways. He didn't carry any extra weight around his middle, Dean noted with a touch of jealousy. When he glanced up again Castiel was staring at him, lips parted.

"Ben's not here," Cas pointed out, stepping closer.

"Yeah, I told him to wait for one of us," Dean told him, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of the pool. When he turned back to Cas, he was standing right in front of him.

"Seeing as Ben's not here, can I kiss you?" he asked quietly.

After a moment's hesitation, Dean briefly captured Castiel's lips with his own. "Come on," he said, grabbing Cas's wrist and dragging him in the direction of the pool. "Let's go find Ben before he does something stupid like dive bomb into the water and get us kicked out before we even get in."

They found Ben playing with one of the inflatable balls. "It's about time you guys got here!" he shouted across at them when he saw them come out of the changing area.

They walked round to the shallow end where Cas sat down at the side of the pool and, as Dean had suggested, dangled his feet into the water.

"Ooh, it's not too cold!" he smiled happily, splashing his feet a little.

Dean grinned. "You're like a little kid."

"Catch!"

Dean turned to Ben just in time to see an inflatable ball heading for his face.

"I said catch!" Ben laughed as Dean ducked out of the way.

Dean acted like he was going to throw the ball forcefully back, but then laughed and gently tossed it over to him. They threw it back and forth as Cas watched, sometimes having to swim after it when their aim was off.

"Hey, Cas! Head's up," Dean called, throwing the ball over to him.

Cas smile widened, and he caught the ball that was flying his way before passing it back to Ben.

They tossed the ball back and forward a few more times, before a particularly strong throw from Ben sent it halfway across the pool. Watching Dean swim after the ball, Ben tread water for a moment before paddling over to Cas.

"Don't you want to join us?" he asked.

Cas smiled at him. "I can join in from here."

"You should come in the water," Ben insisted.
"Really, I'm happy where I am."

"Come on, Cas," he laughed. "What was the point in coming if you weren't going to swim?"

Before Cas had a chance to answer, Ben had grabbed his hand and tugged him into the pool.

_**Water on all sides, pulling him under. Waves crashing over him.**_

After a moment of panic Castiel's feet found the bottom of the pool, and he stood up just as Dean made his way back to them. "I said no!" he shouted, sucking in lungfuls of air.

Ben stared at him in silence for a long moment, before turning around and swimming in the opposite direction.

"I'm sorry," Cas called after him, almost immediately. "Ben, I'm sorry!" He shot a helpless look at Dean, who couldn't meet his eyes.

Abandoning the ball, Dean set off after Ben. He caught up with him on the other side of the pool, clinging to the edge with his back to everyone else.

"Ben?"

"Cas doesn't want me here," Ben told him angrily. "He skipped out on us this morning, he didn't want to come swimming with us, and he doesn't like me!"

Treading water behind Ben, Dean sighed. "Of course he likes you, Ben."

"No he doesn't."

"Before you arrived, he was afraid you wouldn't like him. He made an effort with you yesterday because he wants the two of you to be friends. I'm..." Dean's tongue darted out, tracing across his lower lip. "I'm important to him, and you're important to me. That means you're important to him, and he wants you to like each other."

"Then why did he yell at me?" Ben snapped, glaring at Dean with reddened eyes.

Dean closed the rest of the distance between himself and the side of the pool with one stroke and held onto the side of the pool, so he was touching shoulders with Ben. "Look, Cas can't swim. He nearly drowned once. That's why he didn't want to come swimming with us at first. Not because he doesn't like you. He changed his mind because he does like you."

"Oh," Ben said, sounding faintly embarrassed.

"You've got no idea how much it means to me that you want to get along with him, but—"

"Yeah, I do," Ben interrupted quietly.

Dean bit back his instinctual response, because he didn't want to argue with him. "But you've got to listen to what people tell you, and respect when they tell you they don't want to do something. Cas told you he didn't want to get into the pool."

"I didn't mean to make him mad."

"He's not mad at you," Dean assured him. "I think you just scared him a little."

"Sorry."
"I know you are. But next time try not to get so carried away, okay? I want us all to get along and have fun this week." When Ben didn't say anything straight away, Dean quietly asked, "Do you think maybe you owe him an apology?"

Ben said nothing, but set off back across the pool to Cas. Dean watched him for a second, wishing that parenting Ben could have always been that easy, before following along behind him. Castiel was where they'd left him, crouching into the water until his nose and mouth was covered and then standing up again.

Dean chuckled. "You alright there?"

"Well, I'm not drowning," he replied dryly.

"Not funny."

"I'm sorry, Cas," Ben apologised meekly, not looking him in the eye. "I didn't know you couldn't swim."

"That's quite alright, Ben."

Only then did he look at Cas.

"And again, I'm sorry for shouting at you. I suppose it is unusual for a man of my age to be unable to swim," Castiel said generously, casting a questioning look at Dean.

"I told him you nearly drowned once," Dean explained.

"Twice," Castiel corrected. "Or had you forgotten that time at the beach?"

"That was hardly drowning!" Dean exclaimed with a laugh. "You fell over and crawled back to the beach. It was nothing like that first time when I had—to—" He stopped himself mid-sentence. "Anyway. Maybe we ought to get you some water wings?" he teased.

"I am not a child."

"Well then, maybe I can be your wings."

Castiel was aware of Ben looking between the two of them, a weird half-smile tugging at the corner of his lips. "I don't think that would work," he replied hesitantly.

"Course it will. Turn around."

Castiel started when Dean arms tucked under his.

"Now I'm going to take a couple of steps back, and you just let your feet off the floor."

"Dean—"

"It'll be okay, Cas. I've got you."

Castiel stepped backwards with Dean.

"You're supposed to take your feet off the floor."

"I'm afraid," Castiel admitted quietly.
"It's okay, I've got you. Just trust me."

"Don't let me go."

"I won't let you go, Cas. Not until you tell me I can."

"This is like the time you helped me ride without stabilisers," Ben commented.

"And you can ride a bike, now, can't you?" Dean grinned proudly.

"Yeah," Ben told Cas eagerly. "And Dean can help you swim! Then you can't drown."

Cas smiled at Ben's enthusiasm. Perhaps he hadn't ruined his chances at getting along with him after all. He tried to take just his left foot off the floor to begin with but, with Dean taking another step backwards, his right slipped. Instinctively he started kicking out, splashing everywhere, but Dean didn't let him go.


Once the initial surge of panic ebbed as Castiel realised he wasn't going to drown, he willed his body relax.

"It feels like I'm flying!" he exclaimed, tipping his head back to grin at Dean and getting water in his eyes.

Dean chuckled. "You're floating. Can I let you go now?"

"Not yet."

The three of them stayed in the shallow end once Castiel had become more confident in the water, swimming and playing until their time in the pool was up.

"Aw, but I never got to go on the slides!" Ben complained as Dean ushered him in the direction of the changing rooms.

"Next time, okay?" Dean promised.

"And I'll be sure to keep up my swimming lessons with Dean, then maybe next time I can venture out of the shallow end."

"Okay. 'Cause you know, Cas, the shallow end's for babies."

"Hey! Cheeky," Dean grinned, playfully threatening to whip him with his towel.

Ben danced out of the way with a giggle but Dean didn't follow through, instead lowering his arm and dropping the towel back on the bench.

"But did you have fun?" Cas asked as he slid his soaking trunks off.

"Yeah! But now I'm starving."

Dean chuckled. "Well you've still got a while to wait for dinner."

"Aw," Ben pouted glumly.

"But maybe we can grab a chocolate bar or something out of the vending machine on the way out."
"Yes!"

"But I'm warning you, you'd better not drop any of it in the car."

* * *

The vending machine was broken - it kept spitting their money back out - so they couldn't get their candy. However, since Ben now had his heart set on having a chocolate bar, Dean was forced to take a detour to the store on the way home. He went in alone, not wanting them to get distracted and end up buying the whole store.

That left Cas and Ben alone in the car. As Castiel tried to think of something to say, Ben unbuckled his seatbelt and leaned over the front seat.

"So, how did you meet Dean?"

"I drowned," Cas replied wryly, turning in his seat to look at him.

Ben pulled a face. "That's a terrible way to meet someone."

Castiel chuckled. "Nevertheless, it worked. Dean and I became very good friends."

"Dean and my mom were never really friends," Ben remarked wistfully. "Maybe they'd still be together if they were."

Cas opened and closed his mouth as his stomach sank. "Is... is that what you want?" he asked thickly.

"It was," Ben told him. "For ages, I just wanted him to come home. Even after we moved away."

"He didn't want to leave you," Cas assured him.

"I know that now."

Cas didn't really know what to say after that, so they sat in silence until Dean got back into the car.

He looked between them both, obviously detecting some residual awkwardness. "Everything okay?"

"Fine," Cas told him.

Glancing back to check with Ben, who grunted an affirmative, Dean nodded in acceptance and started the car up.

* * *

Ben sat in the living room playing his video game while Dean cooked their dinner. Cas leaned on the counter and watched. Neither said anything for a long time, cooking and watching in a companionable silence.

"I get the feeling I interrupted something in the car," Dean blurted out suddenly. He wasn't sure he should push the matter, but he needed to make sure Cas and Ben weren't arguing behind his back.

Cas straightened up slightly. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know."
Without turning around he could hear Cas moving closer to him, sensing when he was near enough to reach out and touch him. A second later, Castiel's hands found his waist. It was little gestures like that, innocent touches that had Dean leaning closer, that made him sure he'd made the right choice in trying to make this work with Cas. Even though he was always the one to pull away first, he wanted more. When Cas rested his chin on Dean's shoulder, Dean leaned back into him.

"You're going to need to help me out a little. I can't tell you what you need to hear if I don't know what you need to hear."

"I know," Dean sighed. He swallowed. "What were you talking about? Before I came back? Or didn't you talk?"

"We talked," Cas told him. "About you, and me, and Lisa."

Dean turned his head slightly, towards Cas but not quite looking at him.

"He observed that your relationship with Lisa had never been built on friendship."

"Where did that come from?"

"I'm not sure. He was asking how we met."

Suddenly remembering that Ben was in the other room, Dean tried to jerk away from Castiel's touch. "Shit, what if he—"

"He's engrossed in his game," Cas assured him.

"But what if—"

"Then I'll just start tickling you," Cas told him deadpan.

"What, why would you..." He trailed off with a chuckle as Castiel's fingers danced across his ribs. "No, don't! Cas! Cas!"

His protests sounded weak even to his own ears, lost in his laughter. But nevertheless, Castiel complied and stepped away.

"Why would you do that?!" Dean asked, unable to hold back his grin.

Cas shrugged. "I wasn't sure if you were ticklish," he smiled. He sniffed the air. "Are the burgers burning?"

"Shit, the onions! Quick, Cas, get me a plate or something."

A few seconds later the onions were on a side plate, just slightly on the burnt side of caramelised.

"Eh, they're not too bad," Dean said. "A splash of sauce and they'll taste fine. Ben! Dinner!" He turned to Cas. "Go make sure he moves, please. And that game thing—"

"His DS."

"—stays in the living room. He's not playing it at the table."

"I capiche."

"Make sure he capiches."
Ben grumbled a half-hearted protest at having to abandon his game, but his attitude became more eager once he'd washed his hands and Dean was sliding a thick meaty patty into his waiting roll. Onions, tomato, cheese, and sauce were piled on top of their burgers until they could hardly get their mouths around them.

From across the table, Dean watched Ben tuck into his dinner as if he hadn't been fed since he left home. Had he been that hungry when he was that age? He didn't remember eating like that; only the number of times he'd gone hungry.

Beside him, Cas let out most inappropriate of noises. Eyes wide, he turned slowly to stare at him.

"These make me very happy," he announced, moaning again as he took another bite.

Dean bit back a response about exactly what kind of 'happy' he was talking about. It's not like his secret ingredient was an aphrodisiac, after all! Instead, he simply smirked and took a bite of his own burger. A slice of tomato fell out of the opposite side onto his plate, which he picked up and slipped back between the burger and the bread.

Cas tutted at him fondly, a teasing sparkle in his eyes.

Holding his burger more firmly as he took another bite, Dean subtly moved his leg so his foot rested against Castiel's. He deliberately didn't look at Cas - the picture of innocence in Ben's eyes - but a second later, Cas's foot moved to rub against his ankle.

"You really do like Dean's burgers," Ben observed, as a grin spread across Cas's face.

Dean snorted, his head falling back when he couldn't hold back his laughter, then Castiel's head bowed forward as he chuckled.

"What? What's so funny?" He looked between them both, waiting for an answer.

"Nothing," Dean said, still sniggering. "Eat your food."

They ate the rest of their meal in silence, Ben already starting his second burger.

"I've missed these," he said when he was finished.

"Did you chew that at all?" Dean asked, only half joking for Ben had devoured them in minutes.

"Duh. That's why I didn't choke on it."

"Watch it," Dean warned him. He didn't remember Ben being this cheeky, either. But he supposed pushing boundaries was a part of growing up. And, as much as he didn't want to admit it, Ben was growing up. He was no longer the child he'd left behind, confused as to why Dean's relationship with his mother had ended and doubting just how much Dean cared for him.

"I'll wash up," Cas announced when they were all finished eating.

As he stood to gather their empty plates, Dean reached out to stop him.

"No. You washed up last night - I'll wash up tonight. And Ben's going to help me."
"Aw, but—"

"No 'but's," Dean told Ben firmly. "You can play your game again after the dishes have been done."

"Fine," he grumbled.

While Cas retreated to the living room, Dean filled the sink with hot, soapy water as Ben cleared the table.

"There's not a lot," Dean said. "It won't take us long."

"Yeah," Ben agreed glumly.

"Come on," Dean grinned, flicking some bubbles at him. "It's just a bit of washing up, not the end of the world."

Ben said nothing and started drying, but at least he was smiling now. They worked in silence, and were done in a matter of minutes.

"See? That didn't take long."

As Ben put the dishes away, Dean rinsed out the sink and dried the counter where he'd splashed.

"Dean," Ben said, breaking the silence as he hung the dish towel up to dry.

"Yeah?"

"What made you get back in touch now?"

Dean's hands came to a stop as his brain worked overtime. "Cas gave me the push I needed," he said finally. "Wait, maybe that came out wrong," he said, turning around to look at Ben, wanting to make sure the boy understood him. "I wanted to - I just didn't know how. That's the push Cas gave me. He helped me figure out what to say." He swallowed. "I don't always find it easy to put what I'm feeling into words. That was one of the problems I had with your mom - I kept everything inside and shut her out." It wasn't something he'd ever consciously realised until now, saying it aloud to Ben.

And now that he had realised it, it made a lot of stuff with Cas make sense. He was shutting Cas out, even as he dealt with his problems. When it was Cas having issues, Dean had helped. Cas had needed his help, and Dean had wanted to help him. Well, it was a two-way street - Cas wanted to help him, and Dean needed to let him.

Ben hummed as he thought about Dean's words.

"Look, why don't you go through and see what Cas is doing. I'll finish up here and be through in a minute."

"Okay."

Ben darted out of the room, not needed to be told twice that his chores were done. Dean huffed a laugh and shook his head fondly. He was - as he knew Lisa was, too - eager for Ben to learn some responsibility; but, at the same time, he was glad the boy had never had the same level of responsibility thrust upon his too-young shoulders as he'd had.

Once he'd finished wiping down the sink, he hung the cloth over the tap and dried his hands. Before joining Cas and Ben in the living room, however, he retrieved a few slips of card from his jacket pocket
"I picked up a little something in the supermarket," Dean announced as he walked into the room. Cas looked up from his book - for once a novel, and not a damned crossword.

"Oh?"

Ben was already too engrossed in his game to care.

"Hey, Ben!"

"What?"

Dean rolled his eyes. "Look at me when I'm talking to you."

With a heavy sigh, Ben hit pause and looked at Dean.

He held up three scratch cards. "Who wants one?"

"Do I get to keep the money if I win?" Ben asked immediately.

Castiel and Dean both laughed.

"Yes."

"Awesome!" Ben exclaimed, leaping out of his seat and snatching one from Dean's outstretched hand. "Uh, have you got a penny?"

"I do," Cas said, retrieving his wallet and shaking out three coins. He gave one to Ben, one to Dean, and kept one for himself.

"I got a hundred thousand dollars on my first go!"

Castiel's eyes widened, but Dean shook his head and laughed.

"You've got to find another two to win it."

"I know. Five thousand! ... Oh. Two dollars."

Glancing at Cas, he asked, "You know what you're doing, right?"

"Yes."

"Ten dollars."

At Dean's surprised look, he chuckled. "Balthazar likes to gamble. I won two dollars off a scratch card when I was staying with him."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. But I was only helping Balthazar scratch off his cards, so he got the money."

"Well, you you can keep whatever you win."

"Even if it's a hundred thousand dollars?"

Dean swallowed thickly. "Yeah," he said, his voice coming out a little higher than usual. "Even then."
Cas smiled, and began scratching his card.

"Dean, I got two dollars."

"Did you? Great!"

"I'd rather have the hundred thousand."

"Yeah - that would pay for your university degree," Dean agreed, scratching off his card. "Nothing," he declared a moment later. "What about you?"

Cas was still staring at his. "Forty dollars."

"Damn, I should have picked that one!" Ben complained with a grin as he unpaused his game.

"Let me see?" Dean asked, letting out a low whistle when he saw the three '$40.00's on the card. "Nice one."

"I could put it towards driving lessons, or new clothes, or pay more towards the rent this month," Cas said, clutching his scratch card.

"Or you could treat yourself to something nice," Dean suggested.

"That's rather impractical when we have bills to pay."

Dean shrugged. "It's a win. You're supposed to be impractical."

He settled down in his seat and flicked through the channels for something to watch, stopping on a documentary about polar bears when Castiel let out an interested 'Oh!' beside him.

He expected to be bored, but half an hour later found himself engrossed as a female polar bear outwitted a male to escape his unwanted advances and protect her cubs.

* * *

They made sure Ben went to bed at a reasonable time that night, Cas retreating to Dean's room to wait his turn in the bathroom. Once Dean was finished and Cas finally stepped under the hot spray, he groaned in pleasure. The room still smelled faintly of Dean's body wash and, with a smile, Cas reached for that bottle instead of his own. As he massaged the gel into a lather across his body, he wondered if Dean would notice. Probably.

Trailing a hand down his chest - gliding easily across his hot, wet skin - he let his head fall back as it filled with thoughts of Dean. He hardened quickly at the memory of Dean's smooth chest firm beneath his head, strong arms holding him close. Cas focused on the feeling of his touch, imagining Dean's hands in place of his own. Sliding along his shaft, thumb rolling over the head. Quick, quick, slow... Like a dance. Two people coming together - except this was a dance for one. As his breathing became shallow his head bowed forward, curling in in himself as he brought himself to climax, bracing a hand on the cold tiles.

When Cas slipped into bed, he didn't ask to snuggle Dean - he just shifted closer as soon as he was under the covers. Automatically Dean raised his arm, draping it around Castiel's shoulders as their bodies pressed together, and kissed the top of his head once they were both comfortable.

"Why do you smell like me?" he asked, sounding amused.

"I must have used your body wash by mistake."
"By mistake, huh?" Dean didn't sound convinced.

Cas murmured an affirmative, and Dean didn't comment further.

Dean was warm, and his thumb rubbing along Cas's arm was oddly relaxing. It was nice, going to bed with Dean at the end of the day: he almost wished that Ben never had to leave, so he didn't have to go back to the sofa. Alone.

His thoughts drifted to the money he'd won, and Dean's proposal to share the lease. If he could win money on a scratch card every month, he'd have fewer reservations about agreeing. It didn't seem fair to him that he could have an equal share of the apartment without contributing an equal share.

But didn't he want more commitment from Dean? Although not the commitment he longed for, it was certainly a strong first step. And putting his winnings towards the first month's rent of a new lease - their new lease - would make him feel, if only for that month, that he deserved to have his name on the paperwork.

Dean had suggested he treat himself, but to what? There was nothing he wanted enough at that moment. He wondered what Dean would say if Cas used the money to treat him - probably that he didn't deserve it, and Cas shouldn't have done it.

But there was something that Ben wanted.

"It's the second game in the series. ... There are newer ones, but Mom says we can't afford them."

"Dean?" Cas spoke loudly, forgetting for a moment that his boyfriend might be asleep.

"Hmm? What?" Dean asked sleepily.

"I was thinking," he started slowly. "What if I treated Ben?"

Dean was silent as he processed Cas's question. "Huh?" he asked after a moment. "What do you mean?"

"What if I used the money I won on my scratch card to buy him another one of those puzzle games? He's nearing the end of that one - though he says he's missed a few puzzles - and he did say there are others he'd like."

He waited silently in the dark, but grew impatient in his desire for Dean to tell him it was a good idea. You couldn't buy love, but he and Ben hadn't exactly gotten off to the best start and he wanted to assure him he cared. "What do you think?" he asked when Dean said nothing.

"I think that'd be a really nice thing for you to do," Dean told him honestly.

"It could be from both of us, of course," Cas told him, his fingers tracing patterns across Dean's shirt. "After all, you bought the scratch card."

Dean hummed in grateful acknowledgement, stroking his thumb across Castiel's arm and enjoying the feel of the warm body beside him. He'd been on the edge of sleep, but was awake now.

"You're not the only one who's been thinking," he declared after a moment.

Castiel's hand stilled.

"I know I find it hard to explain what's going on in my head - and to be honest I'm not really sure that I want to, because I don't fully understand it myself - but I know I need to, because I don't want
to shut you out."

Castiel's hand started moving again, though he maintained a thoughtful silence.

"Cas? If you want to know anything..."

"I'm not going to pry into your therapy," Cas told him. "And as much as I want to understand what you're feeling, you need to tell me because you're ready to open up about it, not because you feel you have to talk about it."

"Thanks, Cas. Man, I must've been awesome in a past life to deserve someone like you."

"That being said," Cas continued. "Do you think there will ever be a time you don't push me away when I get too close? Or rather, when we get too close?"

Swallowing, Dean replied, "I want there to be."

"I want there to be, too. I want to have sex with you, Dean," Cas stated bluntly. "I want to have sex, period. But I won't push you. I just need you to know that's what I want. What do you want?"

"Well... Yeah. I mean, I don't want to go the rest of my life without having sex," Dean admitted. "But when I think about you and me, I don't know. A part of me wants it, but a part of me feels..."

Not 'weird'. Don't say weird. "...uncomfortable. Maybe it's just because it's different." He licked his lips, wishing he had a definitive reason for his unreasonable aversion to sex with Cas. "I'm sorry."

Not wanting to go without sex wasn't the same as wanting to have sex. Just as not wanting to lose Cas wasn't the same as wanting to be with him. But, Cas reminded himself, Dean was moving closer to accepting himself and his feelings. It didn't mean Cas had to like it, though. "Don't be," he told him, keeping his tone carefully controlled. "I'm glad you can be honest with me, even if I don't like everything you say."

"Cas, I..." Dean trailed off, his voice breaking over words he didn't know how to say.

"I love you, Dean," Cas murmured, his breathing becoming more steady as sleep beckoned him.

"Yeah," Dean said softly, stroking Castiel's arm until he fell asleep.
As they stood in line for the zoo, Castiel looked at the ticket prices. A weekday discount gave a child entry half price with a full-paying adult, a family ticket gave a discount to two children and two adults, but there were no deals for two adults and a single child.

"I'd volunteer to stay at home to save some money if I thought you'd let me," Cas told him in a whisper.

"Don't be so stupid. You're family, Cas."

"But this is expensive."

"We'll manage," Dean assured him. "This is the reason I cut back on the drink, remember?"

"I know, but wouldn't you like some one-on-one time with—"

"Two adults and one child, please."

Castiel stopped arguing as Dean handed his card over to the woman. A moment later, she handed him his receipt (which he stuffed into his wallet), three tickets (which he entrusted to Ben), and a map of the park (which he handed to Cas).

As they headed through the park gates and Cas began unfolding the map - a lot larger than it needed to be given the number of ads for other 'nearby' attractions - Dean realised Ben was no longer beside him. For a second, panic flooded through him. Had someone taken him? What would Lisa say?

Then he caught sight of him a few metres up ahead.

"Ben, come back here!" he yelled as the boy took off in the direction of the llama enclosure.

A hand on his arm stopped him from chasing after Ben.

"He'll be fine," Cas assured him.

Dean frowned, unconvinced.

"He wants to see everything, and we'll catch up with him soon enough."

"But what if he—"

"Ben is a sensible young man. He'll wait for us before running off to the next area."

"I'd feel happier if he'd walk with us," Dean grumbled.

Castiel laughed. "I know you would, because you're a good parent." He nudged Dean playfully in the ribs. "But I think he wants to see everything today!"

"Are you telling me I'm slow?"

"I can get round the store twice in the length of time it takes you to go round once."

"Oh, that's it," Dean exclaimed, pushing Cas away. "Last one to the llamas buys the ice creams."

"Wha—"
But Dean was already running away from him.

"Cheat!" Castiel shouted, giving chase.

It wasn't a fair race, given that Castiel was laden with the camera (kindly loaned to them by the church), bottles of water, and even a bottle of sun lotion. The week was forecast to be unseasonally hot, and the last thing they wanted was to look irresponsible by sending Ben home with sunburn.

"Hey Ben, Cas is gonna buy us ice cream."

"Awesome!"

The two fist-bumped each other while Castiel caught his breath. "After lunch," he conceded.

"Can I get two scoops?"

Castiel narrowed his eyes playfully. "Maybe. If you have a piece of fruit with your lunch."

Ben rolled his eyes.

"The same goes for you, too, Dean."

"Hey, that wasn't the deal!"

"You never outlined the number of scoops included before you ran away," Castiel said, poking him in the side.

"Ow! Okay, okay. We'll eat fruit," Dean laughed.

Castiel smiled and turned to look at the llamas in the field. Most were a mix of white and brown, but there was one that was completely black. "They're beautiful, aren't they?"

"They're kind of freaky."

Castiel nudged him.

"Well they are!"

Castiel fiddled with the camera until the lens zoomed out and the screen at the back showed him the dirt at his feet. He raised it and focused it on the lone black llama.

"There are moose over there!" Ben pointed, consulting the map.

The camera clicked.

"We've got to go that way," Ben persisted.

"I always said my brother belonged in a zoo," Dean grinned.

Castiel frowned as he turned the camera off again. "I don't understand."

"It doesn't matter. Hey, Ben – wait up!"

But it was no use shouting after him, because he was already racing ahead to the moose enclosure.

As they followed Ben, Castiel's fingers accidentally brushed against Dean's. It sent a spark through him but he jerked his hand back, because they'd agreed to keep their distance while Ben was around.
But, to his surprise, Dean draped an arm around his shoulders – though he supposed it appeared more heterosexual than hand-holding. He leaned slightly into Dean as they walked, craving physical contact that he’d been denied the past few days. Thankfully Ben's attention was on the animals rather than them for now.

"I've missed this," he murmured quietly.

"It's just a few days, Cas," Dean promised him.

"I know."

"So what's after the moose?" he asked as they neared the enclosure, before his eyebrows furrowed in thought. "What is the plural of moose?"

"Moose," Castiel replied, looking at the map.

"I hate that. Fish and fish, deer and deer... Shouldn't it be meese, like geese?"

Cas ignored his rambling. "Then there's antelope, and..." He laughed. "They have impalas."

"Do you think they'd notice if I took one home?" Dean grinned.

"They might when you try to walk it out the front door."

"Yeah, I don't think I could fit one under my jacket."

"After that it's zebras, giraffes and elephants. There's some kind of talk scheduled in this building after the elephant enclosure in..." He checked his watch. "Half an hour."

"Do you think we can make it?"

"Mostly."

"Does it say what—"

"Dean! Come here!" Ben shouted, waving them over.

"Ben, get off the fence!" Dean ordered, removing his arm from around Cas's shoulders and jogging over to where Ben was.

"I just want a better look!"

"Get down!"

Ben grumbled but did as he was told.

"What does that sign say?" Dean asked, gesturing to the wooden sign with a stern look on his face.

"Keep off the fence," Ben mumbled.

"Then keep off the damn fence!"

"Dean," Castiel said quietly, shaking his head when he had his attention.

Dean took a breath and hunched over to Ben's level. "I really don't want to explain to your mom that we can't send you home because you got eaten by a moose."
"I don't think moose eat people, Dean," Castiel told him.

Dean ignored him. "If you're going to get eaten by an animal, make it a lion or a tiger. Something cool."

"Dean!" Cas protested in horror.

But Ben laughed.

"Now which one of these guys would you say looks like a 'Sam'?"

"Uh… That one. No! That one."

"Cas, get a picture."

Castiel squinted at him, feeling like he was missing out on a joke, but dutifully took a picture of 'Sam' the moose.

As they walked along, he snapped pictures of the zebras, making sure to capture the young foal lying in the shadow of the tree.

"Did you know a giraffe's tongue is twenty inches long?" Ben exclaimed, reading the information off a sign.

The elephants, unfortunately, weren't co-operative when it came to taking their photo. One of them even sprayed water in Castiel's direction, much to Dean's amusement. He jumped back instinctively, even though the water landed several feet away, and pouted as he dried his camera with the sleeve of his jacket.

They missed the start of the talk but, as it wasn't held inside the building on the map, they were able to find a space at the edge of the crowd. A bird of prey - perhaps some sort of eagle, or falcon - was on display, circling the field and returning to its handler's glove when they got there.

Dean was intrigued but Ben was disinterested, so Castiel took him to the next enclosure – after promising Dean that he wouldn't let him out of his sight.

They waited for him by the entrance to the monkey trail, reading about the different monkeys they would see, as they waited for Dean to catch up with them.

"Did you know you can buy what they call an 'experience day'?" Dean asked when he appeared.

"A what?"

"You can handle the birds and all that, like that guy was doing back there."

"Really?" Castiel asked, moving through the door Dean held open for him.

"Yeah."

"Is that something you'd want to do?"

"I don't think I could afford it."

"I didn't mean today—"

Dean shrugged. "Hey, look at them!"
Behind a large pane of smudged glass, a group of monkeys leapt across branches and platforms. Some were chilling out on the upper platforms, eating and grooming each other. One bounded over to sit on the ledge on the other side of the window while Castiel cursed the bad lighting.

"Dude, you don't need to get a picture of everything," Dean reassured him.

"Then what was the point in borrowing the camera?" he hissed moodily.

Dean cast a glance at Ben, who was focused on the monkeys, before slipping his hand into Castiel's and giving it a squeeze. "It doesn't matter."

Castiel looked down at their hands and smiled.

"Did you see that?"

They both turned to look and Castiel felt Dean's hand tug out of his hastily. Ben was crouched down in front of the glass, one hand raised. They waited and waited, wondering what they were waiting for, before one of the monkeys leapt over and jumped up as if high-fiving Ben.

"Awesome!" Dean exclaimed, crouching down beside him.

Another monkey hopped over from another branch and Dean rested his hand against the glass, laughing when another jumped up to meet him. Castiel joined them, accidentally-on-purpose nudging his knee against Dean's. At first Dean shifted and his stomach dropped, but then Dean's knee rested against his and stayed there.

They spent ten minutes there, laughing and high-fiving the monkeys, until some obvious coughing made them aware of the other people gathered behind them.

"Maybe we should, uh," Dean said, ushering Ben out.

"Sorry," Castiel apologised, following them out.

They continued along the path, chuckling at the baboons and awwing over the lemurs, then doubling back to see the sun bears and pygmy hippos.

"Which way?" Dean asked Ben when the path split three ways.

"I don't know."

"Cas likes fish," Dean whispered loudly, sending a wink in Castiel's direction.

Castiel smiled at Dean, remembering the little aquarium by the beach he had taken him to, as Ben studied the map.

"There's an aquarium past the penguins," he declared after a moment.

"Well why don't we get lunch just now before Castiel forgets about our ice cream, and by then it'll be time for the penguin parade. Then we can take Cas to see the fish. How does that sound?"

"Okay. But we have to be at the bird zone before four or else we won't be able to feed them."

"Yes, sir," Dean said, saluting him.

There were two cafés in the zoo, according to their map, so they headed for the nearest one - their path taking them past the lions and tigers. Their enclosures seemed small to Cas, but provided them
with foliage, water, and toys. They sprawled leisurely in the shade, regarding their admirers with lazy superiority.

"It looks like you won't be getting eaten today," Dean joked.

"Please don't joke about that," Castiel asked, placing a protective hand on Ben's shoulder.

Dean stared at Cas's hand where it rested on Ben's dark jacket, grateful that they both got on and that Cas was so considerate of Ben's welfare.

Then Castiel's stomach growled, knocking Dean out of his thoughts.

"If we don't get food soon Cas might eat you!" he grinned.

Ben backed away from him, an expression of playful horror on his face. "Don't let him eat me, Dean!"

"Survival of the fittest, Ben!" Dean shouted, running in the direction of the café.

"Dean! He looks hungry!" Ben shouted, racing after him.

Castiel offered an apologetic smile to an elderly couple and their granddaughter, who looked rather shocked, before giving chase.

"I like little boys!" he shouted after them playfully. "They're my favourite!"

Dean skidded to a halt, letting Ben race past him to the café which was a few yards down the path.

"Dude!" he hissed, grabbing him. "You can't say things like that in public! You can't say things like that at all!" Castiel must have looked confused, because Dean continued, "You'll get arrested!"

He replayed his words over in his head and his expression turned to one of horror. "I didn't mean—"

"I know that!" Dean said, unable to hold back his laughter any longer. "Jeez… Besides, he's hardly little," he pointed out once he stopped laughing.

Ben poked his head out of the café entrance. "Did Cas eat you?" he grinned.

"No," Castiel replied, moving again. "I'm saving him for dessert."

There was the sound of choking behind him and Castiel suddenly realised the innuendo in their words. He blushed.

"What about ice cream?" Ben reminded him.

"Ah, yes." He acted disappointed. "Then I guess I won't eat Dean. For now…" he teased, turning back to look at Dean who was turning a vivid shade of red. "That gives me longer to fatten you up," he teased, poking Dean's stomach.

"Hey!" he protested, the lines around his eyes fading as some of the humour disappeared from his tone.

Castiel's face fell as he realised he'd hit a nerve. Dean was beautiful - and certainly not fat, despite the amount of junk food he devoured - so why did he seem to be so self-conscious about his stomach? "I'm starving," he declared, guiding Ben back inside again. "What's on the menu?"
After a lunch of toasted sandwiches and salad, Castiel bought them ice creams – with two scoops and sprinkles – which they ate while sauntering along to the penguin pool via the koalas and kangaroos. They took the route that led them past the bird cages because they had time, and so they knew where to come back later. Castiel spent two minutes tutting and cooing at the parrots that squawked scornfully back at him.

"You're an idiot," Dean told him affectionately, once he'd finally managed to tear him away from the cages.

"Says the man who talks to his car," Castiel shot back with a grin.

"Hey, you leave Baby out of this."

"Dean *loves* his car," Ben informed Castiel helpfully.

"I know. Perhaps even more than me," he joked. "*Us,*" he amended, seeing Dean's wide-eyed stare and the frantic shake of his head. He tried not to dwell on the fact that hiding their true relationship from Ben hurt him, because Pam was right - Ben was more important.

"Nah," Dean grinned. "I think it's a tie."

"Hmph," Castiel huffed, appearing only slightly mollified. "Equal to a car in your eyes. I'm not sure what that says about me."

"Not just *any* car," Dean murmured when Ben's attention turned elsewhere.

Castiel shot Dean a discreet smile. "So what you're saying," he clarified, "is that I'm important to you."

Dean flashed him a cheeky wink, and they followed the signs to the penguins. They arrived in time for Cas to take a few pictures of the three different species kept at the zoo before several keepers appeared and instructed them to take a position behind the yellow line. This allowed Cas to take some photos of the three different species kept at the zoo, before several keepers appeared and instructed them to take a position behind the yellow line.

There were a few other adults in front of them, so Dean took the camera from Cas and handed it to Ben before giving him an encouraging nudge to push his way past them so he could see.

Hidden from Ben's view for the next few minutes, Cas leaned in closer. "He's a great kid," he told Dean.

"Yeah," Dean agreed proudly. "He is." A moment passed before he turned to look at Cas. "Are you thinking about having a family again?"

"Not *having* a family - more like *being* a family. And because you haven't forced a religion on him I feel like I can just enjoy watching him simply *be* a child, it makes me regret that my life was dictated to me for so long. He has a freedom I never had - one that I'd want for my children, if I had any - and I suppose I'm a little jealous."
mom," he told him, slipping him some money. "And get this, too. I'll go distract Cas so he doesn't see."

"Okay. Can I keep the change?"

"No," Dean told him, before veering off to intercept Cas. "Whatcha looking at?" he asked innocently.

"The fossils. They're very interesting. But unfortunately also very expensive."

Dean looked at the price and let out a low whistle. "I'll say. It'd definitely be a... What do they call it? A talking piece? You know. Put it in the living room, guests see it, we talk about it... What?" he asked, when Cas couldn't stop smiling.

"It would be," he agreed. "Except we never have guests around. And the one time Balthazar came over you were rude to him."

Dean shrugged. "I never claimed to be perfect."

"No. But I love you all the same," Cas told him quietly. "For all your flaws."

"Are you saying I have more than one?"

But Cas refused to answer, instead looking around the small shop. "Where's Ben?"

"Buying a gift for his mom."

"That's nice of him."

"Do you think he thought to do it?"

Cas smiled. "Then it was nice of you to suggest it to him."

They continued to look at the different fossils for a few minutes, until Ben reappeared at their side holding out money to Dean.

"Do you want me to hold onto that bag for safekeeping as well?"

"Okay," Ben agreed, thrusting it at him.

"Hang on!" Dean said with a laugh. "Let me put the money away first."

"I could hold onto it."

"No!" Dean said, a little too quickly. "I mean, it's fine. You're carrying enough. I just need a second."

Castiel looked a little confused but otherwise said nothing as Dean got himself sorted then guided them towards the exit. "What would you like for dinner?" he asked Ben as they made their way back out to the car.

"Ben?" Dean pushed when he didn't answer.

"I'm thinking!" Ben told him. Then, a second later, replied, "I don't know."

"Why don't we look around the supermarket on the way home and see if we can find something
"You'd like, then?" Cas suggested. "Maybe try something new?"

"Sounds like a plan - what do you say, Ben?"

"Whatever."

* * *

At the supermarket Dean went to claim the money off their scratchcards, leaving Cas and Ben to wander through the aisles and browse the shelves. It was all jarred sauces - Indian, Chinese, Italian... Castiel would rather make a curry or order a takeaway than just throw a jar of sauce in a pot, for he'd tried a couple with Dean and they'd never come anywhere close to the real thing.

"What about this?" Ben asked after a moment, picking a taco kit off the shelf. "Dean likes tacos."

"I'd hoped we could find something none of us had had before," Cas told him. When Ben's face fell, he added, "If we can't find anything, though, we could come back to that. I've never had tacos."

"They're spicy."

Immediately Cas had regrets about promising they could reconsider tacos. He knew what Dean had been like after a particularly spicy curry one time, and he was currently sharing a bed with him.

"Or there's these - fadge... fadgey..."

"Fajitas," Dean's voice said from behind them.

"Have you had them before?" Cas asked him.

"I like tacos."

"So Ben tells me. But have you had these?"

"No, but they're pretty much the same thing, right?"

"Just with chicken instead of minced beef, more vegetables, and no cheese," Cas smirked, comparing the boxes.

"Get them both," Dean said decisively, tossing squeezy bottles of sour cream and salsa into the cart.

"Really?"

"They're on sale. We can have the fajitas tonight, and you and I can have tacos another time."

"Okay," Cas agreed, putting them both in the cart. "So now we just need the stuff to put in it." They headed back towards the produce area. "Ben, do you want to remind me what we need?"

The boy grabbed the box out of the cart and looked at it. "Peppers and onion," he said. "And chicken."

Once the vegetables were sitting in the cart, however, Castiel looked doubtfully at them. "That doesn't seem like a lot."

"So we'll put some more in," Dean said. "Grab another pepper, Ben. No, don't. Put those back and grab a pack of three - it's cheaper."
Castiel slid a lettuce into the cart. Then, as an afterthought, added a carrot to the pile. "We'll grate that. And I think there's still some leftover onion at home we can use to bulk it out," he added as they went to get some chicken.

"It's going to be a feast fit for a king," Dean grinned, giving Ben a one-armed hug as they made their way to a cashier, Castiel following behind them pushing the cart.

* * *

The three got started on dinner as soon as they were home; Dean dicing the chicken, Cas chopping the vegetables, and Ben grating the carrot.

"Watch your fingers," Dean warned him.

Ben just rolled his eyes.

"He's managing fine," Cas said. "Maybe you could pay attention to your own fingers?"

Dean glanced down just in time to notice himself slide the blade down mere millimetres from his own flesh.

Once Ben had grated the carrot, Cas pulled a plastic knife out of God-knows-where for Ben to chop the lettuce.

"I'm not a kid!" Ben complained as soon as he laid eyes on it.

"It's not because I think you're too young to use a sharp knife," Castiel promised him. "It's better for the lettuce."

"Oh." With no further complaints, Ben started hacking at the lettuce with the knife.

"Really?" Dean asked quietly.

"Apparently it prevents the chopped lettuce from browning as quickly."

Dean made an interested sound. "I say it's a plot to get people to buy more crap they don't need."

Castiel cast him a sideways glance. "I'll admit, I haven't really noticed a difference."

While Cas started cooking, Dean washed up and Ben set the table before drying the dishes.

"We make a good team," Dean grinned, high-fiving Ben. "Team Winchester!"

"Team Braeden," Ben corrected him.

"Team Milton," Cas piped up.

Ben and Dean looked at him. "Nah," they said together.

"I think this is nearly done."

"I'll warm the tortillas," Dean said, already grabbing the scissors to cut the packet open. "Ben, do you want to grab some sodas out of the fridge?"

Two minutes later they were gathered around the table, tucking in heartily.

"Mmm, these are nice," Dean said through a mouthful of food.
"Don't talk with your mouth full," Ben said immediately.

Castiel chuckled.

"At least I know he listens to me," Dean said with a smirk.

"Maybe we should have followed the instructions," Cas mused as a few pieces of meat and vegetables fell out of the end of his wrap.

"You who's spent the last how many months trying to get me to eat more vegetables?" Dean joked.

"There's a difference between eating more vegetables and overeating," Cas pointed out.

"Mom's always trying to get me to eat more vegetables as well," Ben chimed in.

"Your mother is a very wise woman." Though perhaps not too wise if she left Dean.

"I hate vegetables," Ben told him. "But these are okay - they just taste spicy."

There was a squelch as Dean added more salsa to his wrap.

"And the salsa. And the sour cream."

"What any more?" Dean asked, offering him the bottle.

"No, thanks."

"Cas?"

Castiel shook his head.

* * *

They had an early night, tired out by all the walking and fresh air. As Castiel lay under the covers, waiting for Dean to brush his teeth and come to bed, he looked at the awkwardly wrapped gift on Dean's night stand. Dean had bought the game for Ben after claiming his winnings and before catching up with them at the Mexican food section. He hoped Ben liked it. He should, as he liked the others, but Cas still worried. When he eventually heard the light click off and footsteps making their way closer, he turned towards the door.

Then he heard the unmistakable sound of Dean passing gas.

"Ugh," he groaned under his breath. Then, so that Dean could hear him, "You could at least excuse yourself."

Dean did so with a chuckle as he settled down for the night.

Cas lay there in comfortable silence for a moment before telling him, "Today was fun."

"It was, wasn't it?" Dean grinned. "Ben seemed to have a good time."

Cas scooched closer and nestled his head in Dean's shoulder, laying a hand over his stomach. "I'm glad he's enjoying himself."

Dean's fingers brushed against Castiel's hand, stroking along his arm, before moving it up to his chest. Cas propped himself up on an elbow and peered at Dean in the darkness.
"You're beautiful," he said softly.

"Men aren't beautiful, Cas," Dean argued. "They're, I don't know... handsome, or good-looking, or —"

"You're beautiful," Cas repeated.

Dean wiped a hand across his mouth.

"You know, Ben isn't in here..." Cas hinted.

Even in the darkness, Dean looked confused. "I know."

"So maybe we don't need to pretend to be less than what we are."

"What—"

Cas silenced him with a kiss, one hand skimming over Dean's body to his waist. He gently pulled Dean closer, rolling over so that Dean was on top of him. His hands moved lower, over Dean's shorts, squeezing his ass.

Dean stiffened. "What are you doing?" he asked between kisses.

"Shh," Cas whispered, hands already trailing up over his freckled skin again, fingers curling around the strong muscles of his shoulders.

"Cas..." Dean said, rolling off him and staring at the ceiling with a sigh. He was tired of feeling confused, tired of disappointing Cas, and just plain tired. It had been a long day.

"I just want to feel close to you," Cas said dejectedly. "I'm not pushing you to have sex - but is it too much to ask that I can touch my boyfriend?"

Dean turned his head to meet Castiel's eyes in the dark. He slid his arm behind Cas's head and tried to pull him into his arms. But Castiel rolled away from him.

"Don't bother saying anything," he told Dean bitterly.

It was as if Cas could read Dean's mind in that moment - like he knew that Dean was searching for the right words to say to him. But there was nothing he could say. Instead he turned over, thumping the pillow a couple of times with his head until he was comfortable, and stared at the back of Castiel's head. After a second he reached a hand out, then thought better of it. He lay there, listening to the sound of Castiel's breathing growing more even as he fell asleep. Sleep took a lot longer to come for Dean, however.
When Dean woke up the next morning, Cas was back on his side of the bed with one arm stretched out and draped across his chest. It was as if, even in sleep, Castiel wanted to touch him. He allowed himself a few minutes to look at Cas, before giving him a gentle nudge.

"Hey," he said quietly. "What if I did pancakes for breakfast? Huh? I'm sure I've got a recipe somewhere."

"Hmm," Cas smiled. Then he remembered the night before. "Are you trying to butter me up?"

"Yes. No. Maybe?" Dean wasn't sure what the 'right' answer was. "Is it working?"

"No."

"Then what if it's an apology breakfast?"

Castiel paused. "It's going to take a lot more than pancakes to make me feel better."

"I know."

"I'm sure Ben would appreciate them, though."

It turned out that Dean did have a pancake recipe tucked inside one of his mom's old cookbooks, and it proved to be pretty simple - although he burned the first one when he was momentarily distracted by Ben.

"That was awesome, Dean," Ben said when he was stuffing the last of his pancakes in his mouth. "Didn't you like them, Cas?" he asked when the man didn't immediately agree.

"Yes, they were very tasty."

"Good. I'm glad you liked them," Dean said.

"You cooked, I'll wash up," he said coolly.

"Do you want a hand?"

"No."

"Okay. Come on, Ben."

"Is Cas okay?"
"He's fine," Dean assured him as they walked into the living room. "Now, what do you feel like doing today?"

"Can we go bowling?" Ben asked immediately. "There was an ad in the zoo map for a bowling place."

"Yeah, we can go bowling. I know where that is."

"Awesome!" Ben cried, punching the air in excitement. "Can I go tell Cas?"

Dean hesitated, if only for a split second. "Sure," he smiled. *Maybe it'd take his mind off last night.*

Ben leapt off the sofa and charged through to the kitchen. "Cas! Cas, we're going bowling!"

Dean grinned at Ben's enthusiasm and thought back to the last time he'd gone bowling, when he'd been teaching Cas how to play. Dean smiled fondly at the memory. In hindsight, he wondered how much of it had been Cas wanting more help and how much had been Cas wanting to be close to Dean. He chuckled to himself and shook his head. How had he not seen it at the time?

* * *

Dean took the first game easily, with Ben not far behind and Cas trailing them both miserably.

Ben was leading the second game, Castiel again bringing up the rear.

When Cas got up to take his next shot, Dean turned his head to look at Ben. "So," Dean began casually, "what do you think of Cas?"

"He's okay," Ben replied indifferently.

Dean supposed it was as enthusiastic as a kid his age could get "Yeah?"

"He's a bit weird, though."

"That's not his fault," Dean said automatically, and he wondered when it had become second nature for him to defend Cas. "His family were..." He trailed off, searching for the right words.


"Shit, I didn't think you'd—"

"It's okay," Castiel said, holding up a hand to silence him. "It's true. But please refrain from calling my father a 'dick'. That's just rude."

Dean grinned. "Alright. How many did you..." He trailed off, looking up at the screen. "Nine?! Damn, well done, Cas!"

Castiel tried not to look too pleased as he reached for another ball. "I don't think I'm going to manage to hit that last one, though."

He didn't, but it was his highest score for a frame.

"Have you done this before, Cas?" Ben asked as Dean got up to take his turn.

"Once. It was just the two of us," he said, motioning between himself and Dean. "We tried to organise a game with some people from work once, but we couldn't find a time when everyone was
free. We need to try and do that again some time," he told Dean.

"Do what?"

"Get the garage out for a game."

"Oh, yeah," Dean agreed.

"Are you a mechanic, too, like Dean?"

Dean burst out laughing, causing Castiel to glare at him.

"No, I work in the office."

"Yeah, Cas can just about tell the front end of a car from the back," Dean chuckled.

"I know more than that," he pouted.

"Yeah," Dean grinned, a nudged Ben playfully. "Like what colour they are."

The two laughed at him, and he pretended to huff. It was nice to see Dean and Ben having fun together - even if it was at his expense.

"You know I'm just messing with you, right?" Dean told him, dropping onto the seat beside him.

"I know."

"I wouldn't tease you if I didn't like you so much."

Cas looked at him. "I like you, too," he smiled, leaning a fraction closer to Dean. Just for a second. But when he gave Dean's arm a squeeze he jerked back from Castiel's touch.

"We said—"

"You said," Cas growled quietly, snatching his hand away. He stood up and moved to select his preferred ball from the rack, despite the fact it was still Ben's turn.

"Cas, don't be like that."

"Like what? Annoyed? Well, I have news for you, Dean - I am annoyed!"

"Sh!" Dean hushed him.

"It was a harmless gesture," Cas hissed. "Friends are allowed to touch one another!"

"Are you guys having a fight?" Ben asked, staring at them.

"No," Dean said glumly. He knew he'd overreacted, but things were going so well with Ben that he didn't want to throw a spanner in the works.

"You look like you're fighting."

"We're just... disagreeing," Cas sighed.

"Loudly," Ben told him. "You and Mom used to do that, and then you left." He looked at Cas, and then back at Dean. "Cas isn't going to leave you, is he?"
"What?" Dean exclaimed with a forced expression of incredulity that had Castiel's eyes rolling. "What makes you say that?"

"Mom said you were dating him, like you used to date her. She said she wanted me to be open-minded about it." Ben shrugged, like he didn't understand why he wouldn't be. "But now you're fighting."

Despite his shock that Ben knew about them, Dean felt a surge of adoration for Lisa and the way she'd raised Ben. "We're not fighting."

"I don't want you guys to break up."

Dean opened and closed his mouth, but no sound came out.

Dropping his ball back in the rack, Castiel sat down to talk to Ben. "Dean and I are not breaking up," he promised him. "Sometimes people argue, and it sucks, but it doesn't always have to end in a separation."

"What he said," Dean agreed, once he found his voice again.

"Good. 'Cause I kind of like you, Cas."

Castiel grinned. "I kind of like you, too."

"You're weird - but you're also cool, I guess."

Hesitantly, Cas opened his arms. When Ben stepped into his embrace and hugged him back, he grinned over Ben's shoulder at Dean.

Flashing Cas a thumbs up, his heart swelled as two of the three most important people in his life bonded. When Cas beckoned him closer, Dean wrapped his arms around the pair of them.

"I love you, Dean," Cas whispered. "And I love you, too, Ben."

When they broke apart Dean ruffled Ben's hair, chuckling at the boy's indignant noise as he smoothed it down again. "I owe you one," he told Cas quietly. "I wouldn't have known what to say to him."

"You owe me more than one," Cas teased. Then his expression turned serious. "But I owe you several, too."

"We must be about even, then, huh?" he smirked, leaning in to peck him on the cheek. It was an unusually shy gesture, given it was his first in public. Or maybe it was because it was in front of Ben.

"This is what's wrong with this country."

All three of them turned to the older man sitting at the bar behind them.

"Fags having families - it ain't right. God said—"

"God said to love and respect one another, and not to judge others," Cas reminded him coldly, "and commanded you not to take His name in vain."

The man was shocked into silence. He stared at them in disgust as his lips twitched, as if considering a response, but eventually just turned back to his drink.
"You told him," Dean grinned at Cas, as he retrieved his ball from the rack again. Despite his calm exterior, however, Dean's guts were churning inside. If he hadn't kissed Cas, would the old guy have spoken up? On one hand, Dean wanted to shield Ben from the horrible ignorance of closed-minded people. On the other, however, he wanted him to learn how hurtful people could be so that he didn't turn out that way.

"Asshole," Ben muttered.

"Hey," Dean admonished him. "What would your mother say if she heard you?"

"She's not here."

"But I am."

"If Mom was here she'd call him an asshole, and then tell me not to repeat her." He shrugged. "I hear worse at school."

"I'm sure you do, but that doesn't mean I want you repeating it."

Ben eyed him suspiciously. "Are you going to tell her?"

Dean sighed. "No, because you're right - he is an asshole."

Ben grinned, then the two of them started laughing.

"Four," Cas sighed, sitting down beside them and glancing up at the screen. "I'm going to lose this game."

"You needed the computer to tell you that?" Dean smirked.

Castiel glared at him. "I hope your ball lands in the gutter."

Dean's ball hit the first pin dead centre, and the other nine fell down in turn.

"Strike!" he exclaimed, fists raised triumphantly.

Cas sank lower in his seat, and a moment later one of the bar staff came over carrying three soft drinks on a tray.

"Oh, those aren't ours," Dean told her. No way was he paying for the overpriced drinks they served.

But the woman placed them down beside them anyway.

"On the house," she told him. "I couldn't help but overhear - we don't tolerate harassment here. Of any kind. Company policy. We, um, we want everyone to feel safe here, and are very sorry you were spoken to like that on our premises."

Dean just stared after her as she returned to the bar, only then noticing that the customer who'd insulted them was no longer there.

"Well, that was very nice of them," Cas said brightly, reaching for two of the glasses and passing one to Ben.

"Thanks," he said.

Lisa had done a good job raising Ben - largely on her own, Dean acknowledged to himself. When
he'd been living with her, he'd been impressed with the way she handled situations that arose. He hadn't always made the best parenting decisions - like advising Ben to fight back against bullies - but he'd loved Ben and always wanted the best for him. He'd just never imagined 'the best' would be not having him around.

As his gaze fell on Cas, lips wrapped around the straw instead of the side of the glass, a highly inappropriate thought pushed its way briefly to the front of his mind.

"Are you okay?" Cas asked him. "You've gone red. If you're too warm, take your outer shirt off. I don't know why you layer them up the way you do."

"I'm fine," he said. "I just, uh, wasn't expecting free drinks."

"There's no need to be embarrassed about it," Cas said, clearly assuming that was the reason his cheeks were flushed.

Dean saw no reason to correct him. "Whose turn is it to bowl?"

* * *

Dean was the champion of the afternoon, having won two games. Ben had won one, while Castiel's greatest achievement was his first half strike. He wasn't bitter about it, though he did wish that Dean wouldn't celebrate quite so much - after all, claiming victory over a beginner was hardly an accomplishment.

To neither of their surprise, Ben immediately occupied himself on his gaming device as soon as they were in the door.

Castiel sat down beside him. "Any other particularly challenging puzzles?"

"Yeah, there's a couple I can't get," Ben told him, tapping the screen a few times before thrusting it at him. "These ones."

"Hmm..." Cas mused as he read the problem.

Dean was still in the doorway, jacket in his hands, as he watched them. Warmth blossomed in his chest and he had a strong urge to kiss Castiel in that moment. He smiled as he remembered that he could, now, and hung up his jacket. But Cas's brow was furrowed in that adorable way it did when he was deep in concentration, so he settled for leaning over the sofa and kissing the top of his head.

Cas simply ignored him, muttering something about brothers and sisters.

"I'll go rustle us up something for dinner, 'kay?" Dean said, happy to let Ben and Cas share some time together.

"I'm starving!" Ben declared.

Dean chuckled. "You're always hungry."

He gave Ben's shoulder a squeeze and left them to their puzzles. Rummaging through the kitchen cupboards for inspiration for dinner, he eventually settled on macaroni and cheese after finding a tub of cheese sauce in the fridge.

A short while later Cas appeared in the kitchen. "What are you making?"

"Macaroni and cheese. I thought you were helping Ben with his game?"
"I helped him with a more challenging puzzle. I thought you claimed you couldn't cook?"

Dean scoffed. "It's hardly cooking. Boil pasta, heat up a tub of cheese sauce, mix, and serve. Or sprinkle grated cheese on top and chuck it in the oven until it's melted - makes it look home-made that way."

"Oh, really?"

"Yeah," Dean said, nodding. "It's a great cheat if you're trying to impress a girl."

"With macaroni and cheese?" Cas asked sceptically.

Dean ignored him as he drained the pasta, then tossed it into the pot with the cheese sauce. "Because my dad worked away a lot," he began as he stirred the pasta through the sauce, "I came up with about a hundred and one different ways to make macaroni and cheese."

"Seriously?"

"Oh, yeah. Now, add ketchup for spice, hmm? Uh, tuna, hot dogs, fluff marshmallow mix."

Castiel screwed his nose up at the last one. "That sounds disgusting!"

"Well, my brother thought it was exotic. So - do you want it home-made today? Decide, quick."

"Are you trying to impress me or Ben?" Cas asked rhetorically, already moving towards the fridge. "I'll grate the cheese."

Dean twisted a dial to turn the oven on, then switched the hob off. He poured the mixture into an ovenproof dish and then started scrubbing the pot clean before the sauce could set. Meanwhile, Cas finished grating a lump of cheese and sprinkled it over the top before putting it in the oven, and setting the timer according to Dean's instructions.

"Awesome," he grinned once the food was in the oven.

Cas immediately moved to wrap his arms around Dean's waist, his stomach fluttering ever so slightly when Dean's encircled him without hesitation. "That still counts as cooking, you know."

"Yeah?"

"Combining ingredients and heating them up to be eaten? Yes."

Dean smiled. "Okay, so maybe I can cook. A little."

Castiel pressed a kiss to Dean's jaw, then another closer to his ear, and another on his neck causing Dean to let out a pleased sound. "Do you like that?" he murmured.

"Yeah," Dean breathed huskily.

Cas kissed him again, trailed his tongue slowly across his skin. Dean's eyes fluttered shut at the sensation, enjoying Castiel's touch without having to worry that Ben might see. When he sucked lightly over his pulse, a shiver ran through his body. "Cas..." he moaned.

Then Cas's hands wandered lower, warm through the fabric of his shirt, and his eyes snapped open.

"Cas," he warned, catching the other man's hands in his own.
Disappointment flickered over Castiel's face as he opened and closed his mouth. "Sorry."

But Dean shook his head. "Don't be. It's not you."

"Isn't it?" Cas asked defeatedly. He tried to be patient, but sometimes he was just so tired of being kept at arm's length. Stepping away to give Dean space, he pointed out, "If I was a woman you wouldn't pull away."

To his surprise, Dean caught his wrist and pulled him back.

"This is okay," Dean told him, placing Cas's hands on his waist. He let go only when he was sure that Cas wasn't going to take his hands away, because he'd meant what he said the other night - he wanted to move past hesitant touches. He just didn't know how when he didn't know what was holding him back. Gently cupping Cas's face in his hands, he brushed the tip of his nose with his lips - a featherlight kiss that had him smirking at the sound of disappointment it elicited from him.

"Ew, get a room, you two," Ben remarked as he entered the kitchen. His remark was emphasised by exaggerated gagging noises.

"What's the matter," Dean asked without thinking, "have you forgotten how your mom and I used to kiss all the time?" Immediately he realised how that must sound to Cas. "I mean... Uh..." He trailed off, shaking his head at Cas in silent apology.

"I still can't believe you knew we were dating, while we were trying to hide it until you got to know me," Cas said to Ben, unwilling to dwell on Dean's relationship with the boy's mother.

"Is that why you've been so weird?"

Cas and Dean glanced at each other.

"Define 'weird'," Dean said, turning back to Ben.

"Like Dean said, he and Mom used to touch and kiss all the time," Ben said to Cas. "With you... The way you guys were always staring at each other was like a couple of girls with a crush - you think it's this big secret but you're really totally obvious."

"Not my idea," Cas said, pursing his lips and staring at Dean pointedly. But it was reassuring to know that other people could see that Dean truly cared for him.

"Yeah, well, it was a stupid idea," Ben told Dean.

"That's why it was so important that Cas like you, wasn't it?"

Ben stared at him. "Duh!"

"Come here!"

Ben protested as Dean pulled him into a hug and ruffled his hair affectionately.

"Get off!" he cried when he finally wriggled free, smoothing his hair down.

"Come here," Cas grinned, wrapping his arms around him but leaving his hair alone.

"I hate you both," Ben told them once they had finished attacking him. "But even if I hadn't know, I'd have figured it out pretty quickly."
"Oh, yeah?" Dean asked. "How?"

"Where did you think I thought Cas was sleeping? You have one bedroom."

Cas and Dean looked at each other

"Uh..." Dean said, hoping that Castiel had a good response.

"For the record, I attempted to take the floor in his room."

"Why?"

"Because you needed the sofa," Cas stated, as if the answer was obvious.

Ben just looked even more confused. "But why don't you guys sleep together anyway?"

"Okay, I think that's enough questions," Dean cut in. "When people start dating they only sometimes stay the night. Other nights they go home. End of discussion."

"But this is Castiel's home, too."

Dean's mouth opened and closed but no sound came out. He turned to Cas helplessly.

"When I first moved in," Cas said, hoping that it was the right thing to say, "it was as a friend. I needed a place to stay. The sofa's my bed, usually."

"But wouldn't you rather sleep in a bed? I mean I like being here, but I can't wait to get back to my bed."

"I suppose our relationship is rather... unusual."

"Because you're both men?"

"No, I mean that I moved in, we became friends, and then we started dating."

"But you just said you moved in as a friend."

"It's complicated," Dean cut in. "I have a very different relationship with Cas than the one I had with your mother - and not because we're both guys. Now, didn't I tell you to drop it?"

"Well. Maybe a little because we're both guys," Cas piped up.

"Anyway, thanks for keeping the noise down at night," Ben teased with a cheeky grin.

Dean choked.

Cas opened his mouth, closing it again when he realised that it wouldn't be appropriate to tell Ben that they weren't engaging in intercourse at present.

"End. Of. Discussion!" Dean repeated firmly.

* * *

Lisa phoned after dinner to inform Dean that she would be flying out the next day to fly back with Ben. The idea seemed absurd to him, until she admitted that she wanted to meet Cas.

"If you're worried about him, the time to meet him would have been when Ben arrived."
"I'm not worried about him," she said. "If I was, I'd never have let him go in the first place."

"Thanks for letting him," Dean told her again.

"You were always a great role model," she said, "during your good moments."

"Yeah, well... There weren't many of those."

"I'm really glad you're turning your life around now, though."

"Better late than never, huh?"

"Something like that."

He could hear the smile in her voice, and he sighed wistfully.

"I'm sorry," he apologised.

"For what?"

"For everything.

I put you through a lot."

"You'd had a tough time."

"It's no excuse for putting that on you." He cleared his throat. "Do, ah, you want to talk to Ben?"

"If he'll talk to me," she chuckled.

"Ben!" he shouted through. "Your mom's on the phone!"

"I'm going to see her tomorrow!"

"Come talk to her!"

Ben grumbled, but any signs of attitude disappeared as soon as he heard his mother's voice.

"He's all bark and no bite," Dean told Cas in hushed tones as he left Ben on the phone.

"Hmm?"

"Pretending he doesn't miss his mom."

"Why do I feel like you'd be exactly the same?" Cas retorted fondly, immediately regretting referencing Dean's past.

"Probably because I would be," Dean admitted softly, casting his eyes over to the picture of Mary.

Castiel placed a tentative hand on his thigh. "I'm sure she'd be very proud of the man you've become."

Dean snorted.

"You're brave, and loyal, and kind," Cas told him fiercely. "And you strive to set a good example for Ben, when you could so easily turn your back on him." He cupped Dean's face and kissed him passionately. "I need to remember how lucky I am."

"I wouldn't call you lucky," Dean murmured against his lips before kissing him again. "I think we've
established I'm pretty screwed up."

"Who isn't a little messed up?" Cas asked rhetorically. "But my own issues didn't disappear overnight, and I need to remember that. So long as I'm still what you want."

He said that last part hesitantly, and Dean was eager to ease his anxiety. Unfortunately he'd never been very good with words. Kissing Cas again, he hoped his actions spoke louder than any words could. "You are," he added, seeking to emphasise his point. Reaching for Castiel's hand, he intertwined their fingers. "Fuck, I want... I want to make this work. It'd just be a lot easier to get my head straight if I knew what the problem was."

Castiel put his other hand over Dean's, squeezing it between both of his. "That's where Pamela can help you."

"I know. Logically, I know that. I'm just not used to talking about stuff, you know? But I'm trying." He could hear Ben saying goodbye in the other room. "Ben's finishing up with his mom - I'm going to go and get the— thing," he finished, as Ben re-entered the room.

"What thing?" Ben asked immediately.

"You'll see," Dean said cagily. "Now, can you please start packing your stuff away?"

"I can do it tomorrow."

"I'd rather you didn't leave it until the last minute."

"Ugh, fine," Ben sighed dramatically, starting to gather his belongings together.

He'd only been there a few days, but in that short time he'd practically moved in - his stuff was everywhere.

"And can you give Cas your laundry? We'll do a load tonight and hopefully it'll be dry enough to pack in the morning. I don't want to give your mom extra work to do."

"You're just sucking up to her so she'll let me come back."

Dean paused, his heart in his throat. "Do you want to come back?"

"Yeah."

He let out a breath. "Awesome. 'Cause I've missed you."

"I missed you, too." Scuffing his foot against the carpet, he asked, "Please don't get mad at me?"

"For what?"

"I didn't really want to come."

Dean clenched his jaw to prevent it from trembling.

On the sofa, Castiel clutched a cushion and stared at Dean's reaction.

"I did want to see you, but I was afraid things wouldn't be like they used to be. And I had stuff planned with my friends, but Mom said I could see them any time. She said it was up to me, but I could tell she really wanted me to say yes."
"You came because that's what you thought she wanted?"

"I guess. A bit. And it hasn't been like old times, not totally, but I'm glad I came. I want to come back."

Dean said nothing for a long moment, letting Ben's words sink in.

"Are you mad?" Ben asked quietly.

Dean shook his head, eyes shiny with unshed tears. "No. No, of course I'm not mad." He pulled Ben into a hug. "You know, I was afraid as well."

"Yeah?"

"Yes," Cas piped up.

Dean huffed a laugh. "I was afraid you'd have grown up so much I wouldn't recognise you. That you'd have changed too much, and you'd be counting down the days 'til you went home."

"Dean?"

"Yeah?"

"I'll be counting down the days until I come back."

That was when the tears spilled over, and Dean wiped them away with the back of his hand. "So will I," he promised. "And I'm going to do a better job of staying in touch, this time. Letters, cards, presents. Phone calls."

"Skype?"

At this, Dean looked wary. "What's that?"

Ben laughed. "Have you even got a computer?"

"No."

"You're such a dinosaur."

"But speaking of presents..." Dean hurried down the hall to grab Ben's gift. "It's from both of us," he said when he came back, and handed it to him.

Ben tore into the paper, and his face lit up when he saw the game inside. "Awesome!"

Cas smiled. It was in moments like this he could truly see a resemblance between Ben and Dean, but was it nature or nurture?

"Cas?"

"Yes?"

"Can I call you if I get stuck on some of the puzzles?"

Cas beamed. "Of course you can. But I'm not sure how much help I'll be over the phone."

"Thanks," he said, hugging them both.
"Hey," Dean said as Ben moved to take the tiny disc out of the box. *All that money for a tiny piece of plastic?* "Laundry. Packing. *Then* playing."

"Okay, okay."

It was as if someone had lit a fire under him - he raced around, gathering his things and carrying an armful of dirty clothes into the kitchen where Cas dutifully set the machine, while Dean tried to help Ben find things he'd lost.

Eventually they managed to track everything down and, happy that Ben wasn't going to leave anything important behind, Dean permitted him to play his new game - though he didn't understand why Ben didn't want to finish the other one, first.

But then, to his surprise, Ben lowered the game just as the music started playing.

"Dean?" he asked hesitantly.

"Yeah?"

"Tomorrow, before we go, could we maybe go toss that baseball around?"

Dean's face lit up. "I thought you didn't play sports any more?"

"I don't."

"'Course we can."

"Awesome."

As Ben turned his attention to his DS again, Dean met Castiel's watchful gaze. The other man smiled at him, and warmth blossomed in his chest. In that moment, everything was perfect.

* * *

The next morning they ate breakfast and went down to the park for an hour, before heading back to pack the last of Ben's things. Thankfully his clothes were dry, he was able to get them packed away right before they left for the airport.

"I got here by myself - I don't know why Mom has to come get me," Ben complained when Dean explained they had to leave earlier than planned.

"She's missed you," Dean said. "And she wants to see us." He motioned between himself and Cas, which wasn't *entirely* untrue. "We can have lunch with her at the airport. Now, come on - grab your bags and we'll get them in the car."

"What if I've forgotten something?"

"We can mail it out to you," Cas assured him, staying out of their way as they carried the bags out into the hallway.

"What if you took my bags but forgot me?"

"Your mom would make us come back for you, and we'd look irresponsible."

Ben sighed. "I want to stay longer."
"Maybe you can stay longer next time," Cas suggested diplomatically.

"But your mom won't let there be a next time if we don't get you to the airport, so move your butt."

They eventually got Ben and his belongings into the car and set off for the airport. Halfway there Dean panicked, thinking he'd left Ben's ticket and passport on the kitchen counter. He'd been about to do an illegal U-turn on the highway when Cas calmly informed him that he'd picked them up and they were in his jacket pocket. Not satisfied until he'd seen them, Cas took them out and waved them at him.

"See?"

Finally mollified, Dean settled back in his seat and relaxed.

"Can we put some music on?" Ben asked.

Dean pointed Cas in the direction of his tape collection, and he shoved something into the player.

A moment later *Highway to Hell* boomed out of the speakers, and Ben whooped.

"AC/DC rules!"

* * *

As Dean waited at the gate for Lisa, his stomach started to perform flips and he had to keep wiping his hands across his jeans. He shouldn't be nervous, but it had been so long since he'd seen her. He subconsciously straightened when he saw her walk through the gate, even more beautiful than he remembered.

She made a beeline for him once their eyes met across the crowded terminal, and they hugged awkwardly in greeting.

"Where is he?" she asked, looking around for her son.

"At the café with Cas," he told her, guiding her in the right direction. "We've got a bit of time, I thought we could grab a quick lunch."

"We don't have that much time," she said, looking at her watch.

"Enough for sandwiches."

"Okay."

"So how was your flight?"

"Tedious. I read for a while."

It didn't take them long to reach the café, and Lisa stopped outside.

"So that's Cas?" she asked, looking inside at the man who was animatedly discussing something with her son, Ben's video game sitting open between them.

"Yeah."

"He's cute."
Dean blushed, and she chuckled when she noticed. "You've done good, there."

He smiled. She had no idea how good he had it. "Yeah."

"Please tell me he didn't just play that game all week."

"No. And he wouldn't even finish it before starting the next one."

"Next one?"

"Yeah. Cas won money on a scratch card so we bought it. He said you couldn't afford to. It's not like he was trying to push us to buy it, or anything," he added hastily when Lisa frowned. "It was Cas's idea - he wanted to treat him. I thought it was a nice thought."

"It was a nice thought," Lisa agreed reluctantly. "I just wish you'd spoken to me about it first. What if I'd bought it and put it away for Christmas?"

"It's April."

"Or his birthday?"

"You could have returned it?" Dean suggested. "Or sold it?"

"That's not the point."

"Look, I'm sorry. Cas just wanted to do something nice and I didn't see the harm in it. I was just glad they were getting along."

"I'm not mad, Dean - but you're going to need to think about these things if you're going to be a part of his life." She paused. "But I'm glad Ben's getting along with your boyfriend."

They both fell silent as Dean wished he could use the 'b' word as freely as Lisa and Cas could.

"So... Guys?" Lisa asked after a moment.

Immediately defensive, Dean asked, "What?"

"No, there's nothing wrong with it - I've just been thinking a lot this past week... about us..."

"What we had was real," Dean told her softly, taking her hand. "Or as real as it could be, considering."

She looked at him wistfully. "I wanted Ben to have a dad."

"And I wanted stability. But I really did care about you. I still do."

"And I'll always care about you, Dean." She looked over at Ben, who was laughing with Cas at something, and she seemed to struggle for words.

Her conflict stoked the fire of hope in his gut, and he licked his lips. "I know I've asked this before, but..."

"Is he yours?"

Dean nodded.

"I told you he wasn't."
"I know what you told me. But you let him fly across the country when I haven't seen him in years. I might not show it very well, but I love him."

Unshed tears glistened in her eyes. Then she nodded.

Dean's eyes widened, and he suddenly felt very light-headed. "Why didn't you tell me before?" he asked, his voice breaking.

She shrugged helplessly. "I wanted you to stay because you wanted to, not because you felt obliged to us - we managed without you. I didn't want you to feel like you were forced into staying with us. And let's be honest - you weren't exactly the best of role models back then."

"I know, but... Damn it, Lisa, I'd have stuck around. I'd have been better. I thought... I thought you didn't want me around."

"I wanted you to, Dean - for all the wrong reasons." She shook her head. "You weren't good for us."

Dean sighed. She wasn't wrong - he'd been a mess back then. "I know."

"Cas is good for you."

"How do you know? You haven't met him, yet."

She smiled knowingly. "I can see the change in you."

"Change?"

"You're... happier. You've got this glow about you - like in the movies when everyone knows the girl's seeing someone."

"Are you calling me a girl?"

She laughed, and he chuckled with her.

"I probably should have known. Or guessed, at least."

"What?"

"The fanboying over Dr Sexy - you had a crush."

"I don't have a crush on Dr Sexy!" he exclaimed in hushed tones.

"And then there was that time you checked out that soldier."

Dean fidgeted from one foot to the other. "There's nothing wrong with liking a uniform. They look smart. Respectable."

"And there's nothing wrong with liking the man in the uniform, either," she smiled.

"My dad used to be a marine! I went through a phase of wanting to be in the army when I grew up."

"The marines are navy."

"I know that now. As a kid I didn't know any better. Are we going to go in, or do you want to stand here until your flight's called?"

Allowing him to change the subject, she nodded. "I'm starving. But Dean," she said, stopping him
with a hand on his arm as he reached to open the door. "I don't want to tell Ben. About you." She swallowed. "Not yet."

Dean opened and closed his mouth. "I'm not going to screw it up this time."

"I believe that you mean that. But I - we - have to put him first."

Nodding, Dean opened the door and held it as she walked through it.

* * *

Arriving back at the apartment after having waved goodbye to Ben and Lisa at the airport, Dean had barely closed the door when Cas was in his arms, kissing him eagerly. He trailed kisses from his lips along his jaw, before burying his face in his neck. "I love you. And I love Ben. And Ben likes me."

Dean lifted his hands from where they rested lightly on Cas's waist, and wrapped him in a hug. He smiled in amusement and pleasure at Castiel's sudden outburst of emotion, but his eyes were sad. Of all the few times he'd tried committing to someone, sometimes it felt like no-one had ever loved him as much as Cas did - and that was terrifying. Terrifying because he didn't deserve that level of love, and because he wasn't sure he could return it. As much as he wanted to be able to.

As they walked through the empty apartment, it felt smaller without Ben in it - less homely - which caused Dean to reiterate his idea that they hang some pictures on the wall.

"Do you want to do that now?" Cas asked him.

"We should probably wait until payday."

"We could just look," he suggested. "It sort of feels like the walls are closing in."

"Like it's too small?"

"Yes.

"Okay," Dean said, grabbing his jacket again. "Let's go."

"What if we looked in the thrift shops?" Cas asked as he put his own coat back on. "It'd be cheaper."

"Good idea," Dean said, thinking that a year ago he'd have balked at the idea of setting foot in a thrift shop. They walked into town, despite the grey clouds threatening overhead, rather than pay the exorbitant parking fees charged in the centre.

"It's been so nice this week," Cas mused, casting a glance upwards. "Do you think it's going to rain?"

"Nah," Dean told him. "They'll pass."

By the time they got into the town, they were running to shelter in one of the shops.

"You were saying?" Cas asked, looking amused.

"Do I look like a weatherman?"

Cas chuckled, and looked around for any home decor. A few ornaments, chipped or unattractive, lined the shelves on the back wall. At their feet was a box of frames - though mostly empty. The few that held prints consisted of horses, flowers, and cats.
"I'm allergic to cats," Dean reminded Cas.

"It's an art print."

Dean just stared at him.

"Fine." He grabbed an umbrella from a stand. "We'll buy this, and move onto the next shop."

They looked ridiculous, two full-grown men huddled under a single, too-small umbrella, but it was also nice - even if there was an occasional drip down Dean's neck.

They found more frames, figurines that wouldn't have looked out of place in an old folks' home, and a tatty Star Wars poster.

"Really?" Cas asked, as Dean moved to take it up to the counter.

"What?"

He shook his head, bemused, and said nothing more. Until, that was, he noticed a print that reminded him of Pamela's office.

"Dean!" he called out.

"Huh?"

"Look at this."

A close-up of a palm leaf, showing the veins and water droplets, sat in a plain wooden frame.

"It's like that plant Pamela has in her waiting area," Dean observed.

"I know! isn't it peaceful?"

A print that would remind him of his torturous therapy sessions every time he looked at it wasn't what Dean would call peaceful. However, maybe it would also serve as a reminder of his commitment to his therapy. As he was considering it, he noticed another similar photo behind a old watercolour.

"There's a pair," he said, reaching down to pick it up. Looking at Cas, he realised the other man had his heart set on the prints.

"Fine. Get them. But I'm still getting this," he said, waving the rolled-up poster in his hand.

"Deal," Cas grinned. "But that goes in the bedroom."

"Fine," Dean agreed with a sigh. Anything to make Cas happy.

After buying their items - which Dean was pleased to discover they paid less than five dollars for - Cas turned to him with a smirk.

"You realise that's going to get wet?"

Dean looked out the window. "Shit."

They hurried to a bus stop, neither willing to walk back home in the rain that was hammering down. Dean was trying to protect his poster by tucking it inside his jacket, but he had a feeling it was just
going to be even more creased by the time they got home.

"How they hell did we manage to stay out for over three hours?" he exclaimed, once they finally set foot in their apartment again.

"I have no idea," Cas replied. "I'm going to take some soup out of the freezer - do you have any picture hooks?"

"Because I'm the kind of guy who has picture hooks," Dean retorted, waving a hand at his bare walls. But there might be some amongst his parents' belongings... Rummaging through the hall closet for ten minutes, he emerged triumphantly.

"Aha!" he exclaimed, waving a small box containing odd screws and clips and picture hooks.

"You have a cobweb in your hair," Cas told him, brushing it out with a tissue.

"But I have hooks."

"Great. Now all you need is a hammer to put them in the wall with."

"Oh. Yeah."

It was another five minutes before he found a hammer, by which point Cas knew exactly where he wanted the pictures hung and was looking around thoughtfully.

"Uh-oh..."

"What?"

"That's your thinking face," Dean told him. "What are you thinking?"

"That green cushion covers would be nice."

Dean closed his eyes and turned his face to the ceiling. "Somebody save me," he joked.

Cas penciled a dot on the wall, then used a ball of string and a tape measure to pencil another parallel dot further along the wall.

"There and there," he said, pointing.

Dean mock-saluted him. "Yes, sir!"

As he dutifully hammered the hooks into the wall and hung the pictures level, Cas smiled at the way Dean's muscles moved under his shirt. After a moment, his eyes wandered down.

"What are you looking at?" Dean asked when he caught him staring.

"You," Cas replied honestly.

The corner of his mouth raising in a half-smirk, Dean put the hammer down. Stepping closer to Cas, he grabbed the man's hips and pulled him into a hug.

Chuckling against Dean's shoulder, Cas wrapped his arms around him.

"Do me a favour?" Dean murmured.

"Anything."
"Stay another night in my bed?"

Cas smiled. "Of course."

"I don't really want to be alone tonight," he admitted softly.

"I'm not sure I do, either. It's too quiet without Ben."

He still hadn't told Cas what Lisa had told him. And he wasn't sure he would - at least not straight away. He just wanted to hold onto that thought and enjoy it for a while. But it warmed his heart that Cas had embraced Ben, and it both excited and scared him at the idea that they could be a family. He'd already called Cas family, but to include others in that only cemented the idea in his mind.

He kissed Cas, who took several small steps away until the backs of his legs found the sofa. He sat down, Dean straddling his legs as their lips never parted.

"Why is this okay," Cas asked, squeezing Dean's waist where his hands rested, "but this..." He briefly ghosted his hands down before returning them to Dean's waist. "...isn't?"

Dean's breath hitched even as Castiel's hands left his ass. "I don't know."

Cas looked him in the eye. Saw the apprehension there. "Yes, you do."

Dean sighed, and leaned back. They'd had this conversation before. "I don't. I'm enjoying it, and then I get this feeling in my stomach like what I'm doing is wrong and I feel like I'm going to be sick and I should stop but I don't want to stop and—"

He stopped and took a breath, realising how terrible that sounded. "Fuck, I don't mean... It's not you," he promised Cas, leaning in for another kiss.

"What else could it be?" Cas asked helplessly.

Dean moved out of Castiel's lap and tried desperately to think of something - anything - that could alleviate Castiel's worries, and promised himself that he'd try harder with Pamela. Then something dawned on him. "Do you remember that stupid photoshoot we did at the garage?" he asked, looking at him.

Castiel huffed. "It wasn't stupid."

"No, it wasn't," Dean conceded. "But I got that same feeling with Benny, when he was joking about..." He couldn't even say it. But he didn't need to, because Cas knew what he was talking about.

"It was just a bit of harmless fun," he told Dean. "A joke."

"I know."

Castiel could see how frustrated Dean was with his conflicted feelings. "You scared me a little bit, then."

"I'm sorry."

Castiel cocked his head thoughtfully. "Well... Maybe if I keep my hands in safe spaces," he suggested, clambering into Dean's lap and moving his hands to Dean's waist, "it will help both of us. You won't pull away, and I won't feel..."

"Unloved?"
"Not the word I was looking for, but... yes."

"Safe spaces," Dean echoed, kissing him softly. "When did I become a delicate flower?"

Castiel looked confused. "Is that an expression, or are you being self-deprecating?"

Dean cleared his throat. "Well, it isn't an expression."

Castiel kissed him, long and deep, before kissing his way to the spot he knew flustered Dean.

"Mmm... Cas..." Cupping his hands under Cas's thighs, he half-lifted, half-flipped the man - who was heavier than he looked - onto his back.

Cas let out a surprise 'Oof!' as his breath left him.

Gently, with love, he cupped Castiel's face in his hands. Stubble scratched lightly at his palms, and as he stroked his thumbs along his cheekbones Castiel's eyes fluttered shut. Leaning down he pressed a soft kiss to each eyelid, tender and sweet. The corners of Castiel's mouth turned up and his lips parted slightly. Expectantly. But Dean's lips fell on his forehead next, then his temples, then his nose. Along the line of his jaw, ear to ear. Castiel's mouth was open his, sucking in shallow, shaky breaths. But still his eyes were closed.

Finally Dean reached his lips, Cas's breath warm on his face as he hovered above them. As if he could sense Dean Cas tilted his mouth upwards, chasing his lips. But Dean pulled back minutely - not yet. He remembered what Cas had said to him when he'd moved back in - when they'd agreed to be in a relationship.

"I want you," he murmured, before kissing him passionately.

Cas let out a muffled, aroused sound as he kissed Dean back hungrily.

Dean couldn't pretend not to notice Cas's erection as he buried his face into his neck, but neither said anything about it. As Cas gently stroked his hands up and down Dean's back, - never venturing below his waist - he suddenly remembered the soup.

"Shit!" he exclaimed, pushing at Dean as he wriggled out from underneath him.

"What?"

"The soup will be sticking to the pot!"

As Cas hurried out of the room, Dean draped an arm over his face and laughed.

* * *

Later that night, as Dean lay staring at the ceiling, the bed dipped beside him as Cas propped himself up and fingers stroked through his hair.

"You're not asleep."

"Neither are you," Dean pointed out.

"You miss Ben."

"Yeah." Dean was silent for a moment, considering what he was about to say. "She told me he's mine."
"Oh, Dean, that's wonderful," Cas said, and Dean could hear the smile in his voice. Then he doubted himself. "It is wonderful, isn't it?"

"Oh, yeah, Dean agreed.

"Ben must be thrilled. He loves you so much."

"I don't know. She, ah, doesn't want him to know. I haven't always been present, and I guess she wants to know I'm committed to him before she tells him. He took it so hard the first time I left. I get it, but it sucks. Almost as much as finding out and then having to watch him get on a plane."

Castiel pressed a kiss into his hair. "Lisa said she'd let him come back."

"It's because of you that I saw him at all."

Castiel lifted Dean's arm around his shoulders and snuggled into his side. "Maybe. Maybe not. But go to sleep."

"You're really snuggly, you know that?"

Castiel looked up at him, only just able to make out Dean's eyes looking down at him in the darkness. "I like being close to you." He hesitated. "Why, do you think I'm being too clingy?"

"No," Dean said softly, running his fingers up and down Castiel's arm. "I just didn't peg you for the cuddly type."

"Maybe I'm too cuddly because you're not cuddly enough," Cas said lightly.

"Is that a veiled dig at me?"

Cas frowned. "Why would it be?"

"Because I don't touch you enough?"

"No, it wasn't," he said honestly. "But you're right - I do wish you'd touch me more. But I know you're working through your issues with Pamela, and I think that we've made some progress, establishing a boundary between what you're comfortable with and what... triggers... whatever it is that's causing you to feel awkward. Around me."

Castiel's voice broke over the last words, and Dean's heart twinged in sympathy. He couldn't even begin to understand how he was making Cas feel. He kissed his head. "I'm working on it," he promised.

Knowing he should go to sleep was a lot different than actually falling asleep - especially when his brain was working overtime. He had no problems getting close to women, and had nothing against guys who were into guys, so why did he have a freak-out every time Cas got too close? It frustrated Cas, and it frustrated him. He wanted to have sex - he missed sex. He hadn't even jacked off much the past couple of months because it felt wrong to look at his magazines when he was with Cas, and it felt weird to think about Cas when the guy was in his living room and he should be doing it with him.

It was no wonder Cas continued to have doubts about Dean's commitment. Hell, if Dean hadn't been too drunk to pay attention he'd have had the same doubts before Lisa told him it was over. During the last couple of months of their relationship, she wouldn't touch him or instigate anything - but would always seem willing whenever he made a move. They'd used each other, trying to find what
they needed in the other, but it had all fallen apart.

He glanced to his side, where Cas was sleeping peacefully. He didn't want what he had now to fall apart. What he had with Cas was terrifying and new, but also the best damn thing that had ever happened to him. Without him he'd never have cleaned up his act: taking it easy on the drink and making amends with Sam; developing a social life and becoming a father to Ben.

As he looked back on his week with Ben, his thoughts turned to his own father. Being dragged around the country, left alone in motel rooms, learning all too young what it meant to go hungry because you didn't budget for Sam losing a shoe. John Winchester worked hard, and drank hard. They'd never gone to the beach, or the zoo, or even spent an afternoon throwing a ball at a park. They'd taken one vacation to the Grand Canyon, however - a trip that Dean could barely remember. Their childhood hadn't been perfect, but he had no doubts that their father had loved them - in his own way. When Dean looked at his mother he saw himself in her, and he wondered what it had been like for his dad to see her in him. Dean's jaw quivered. Maybe that's why John had always drunk so much. And then it wouldn't have been his fault that they'd needed to celebrate his sobriety, and then—

No, Dean thought to himself, blinking away tears furiously. He wasn't going to start that shit - not again. He could barely live with the guilt of his mother's death. It would break him to take responsibility for his father's death, too.

John may have loved both his boys, but he hadn't been perfect. And neither was Dean. But damn it, he was going to try to be better. He needed to. For Ben.
The good weather that had welcomed Ben upon his arrival left when he did. It rained all through Friday night, continued all weekend, and was still raining when Dean turned up to work on Monday morning to find out that there had been a break-in and a large number of tools had been stolen. Expensive tools. It had put Bobby in a foul mood that didn't improve all day, so it was a relief when his shift ended and he could take Cas home.

Dean headed for the elevator as Cas moved towards the stairs. With a heavy sigh, Dean followed him. They bumped into Mr Shurley on the second floor, who asked if Dean still wanted to sign a new lease. After apologising, and explaining that some other things had come up, he promised to get back to him.

Once inside, Cas turned to him. "We should do it."

"Do... what?"

"I'd love to move in with you. Officially," he smiled. "If you still want me to, I want to sign the lease."

"For real?" Given Castiel's earlier hesitation, it was a surprise to find he'd made his decision. But a good one.

"I love you," Cas told him, moving closer and wrapping his arms around Dean's waist. "And this past week has shown me what I could have with you - a family. You, and me. And Ben. And I want that."

"You don't have to sign onto the lease to be a part of the family," Dean told him. And damn was it weird calling themselves that! But a good weird.

"I know. But I want to."

"Okay," Dean grinned. "First, dinner. Then we sort out all the paperwork."

"I like that plan."

* * *

After dinner, Dean's good mood continued. Cas was moving in. _Cas was moving in. Cas was moving in!_ Okay, technically he was already living with him, but - as Cas had said - this made it official. It was as terrifying as it was exciting but, even though Dean didn't like to dwell on his thoughts and fears, he wasn't dumb enough not to realise that he was scared of losing Cas. Cas was something good, and he wanted to keep that for as long as possible. But the fact that Cas was keen to sign a new lease with him suggested permanence, and gave him a sense of hope that maybe Cas wasn't going to walk away from what they had - or could have - no matter Dean's fears.

"You know what this means now, right?" Dean chuckled with glee as he snatched one of Cas's papers off the table. "I finally get to find out when your birthday is."

"It's not like I expect you to _get_ me anything."

"You threw me a party, of course I want to— What the _fuck_, Cas?"
Castiel glanced up at Dean in surprise, then realised what other truth he might see. Immediately, his face fell. He'd wanted to tell him the truth, but had had no idea how to broach the subject. Or had Dean already seen it? Is that why he looked so shocked?

"Cas, it's!"

Castiel let out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding, then swallowed. "Yes."

"Like, next month, soon!"

"Yes, now, can you please..."

Cas made an attempt to retrieve the page from Dean who, still reading it, held it at arm's length.

"Dean, may I have that back, please?" he asked tightly.

His heart sank when he realised the humour had disappeared from Dean's face. This time as he leaned forward and slipped the piece of paper out from between his fingers, Dean let him take it.

Dean sat as still as a statue; the muscle twitching in his clenched jaw the only indication that he wasn't. "Adler," he said eventually, breaking the silence. But he still wouldn't look at Cas.

"Yes," Castiel said quietly.

"Castiel Adler."

"Yes."

"Not Milton."

Castiel opened his mouth to speak, but closed it again. 'I can explain' was such a terrible cliché. "I wanted to tell you," he started, knowing that no excuse would justify the length of time he'd kept his silence.

"Why the hell would you lie about something like that?" Dean said, turning on him.

Cas wanted to do nothing more than kiss the hard expression off his face, but he knew that no amount of kissing could fix it.

"I might be full of crap, but I've never lied to you - hell, I've been more honest with you than with anyone else. It's your name, for fuck sake! It's like the very essence of who you are." "But not who I wanted to be," Cas growled firmly. He was not going to let Dean start scoring truths and lies as if it was a competition that Cas was losing. Something in the way he spoke seemed to catch Dean off guard, which created a silence that Cas desperately filled. "Milton was my mother's name, before she was married," he explained. "When my father threw me out he wanted nothing more to do with me. I had nothing, and no-one. There were places I stayed - briefly - but they never worked out." He paused before he got sidetracked, for that was a story for another time. He looked Dean straight in the eye. "Then I had you."

"And you decided to lie to me."

"No. Well, yes, , but I didn't mean it like that. You were kind and you were there and even though I tried to shut you out you wouldn't let me. I was starting to realise that I had a choice: I could bury myself under the disapproval of my father, or I could build a new life for myself. A happier one. And so I gave you my mother's name, and the pills I had taken."
Dean said nothing.

"I grew up being taught that I should honour and obey my father because it is God's will, and I still believe that, but my father also had a duty to care for me. I was family, and he rejected me. God will not look kindly on him for that, no matter my sins."

"Aren't you just doing the same thing, though?"

"I am not trying to pretend that he is not my father. Just distancing myself from the pain he has caused me."

Dean got to his feet and put on his jacket.

"Where are you going?"

"Out."

* * *

Some time later Dean returned home, with a clearer head and a lighter wallet. Stepping into the living room he saw Cas sitting where he'd left him, head in his hands as if bowed in prayer.

"I picked up some nachos on the way back," Dean announced.

Cas jumped, but didn't turn around. Clearly he hadn't heard Dean come in.

"I got hungry," Dean explained as he put them on the table and sat down beside him.

It was Castiel's turn to sit in silence, now.

Dean let out a breath. "Look, I get why you don't want to be associated with your dad."

Cas lifted his head up, but wouldn't look at him.

"But I'm disappointed that you never told me the truth."

"At what point..." Cas started dryly, before clearing his throat. "At what point do you tell your friend, or your boyfriend, that you lied about your name, of all things? No matter the reasons?"

With a heavy sigh, Dean draped an arm around him and pulled him into a hug.

Lifting his feet up onto the sofa, Cas snuggled into him as Dean stroked a reassuring hand up and down his back.

"So. Adler, huh?"

"I didn't want to be associated with him. I couldn't be. Not when he hated me." He took a breath. He'd already explained, but he wasn't sure Dean understood. "Not when he forced me to leave, not... Not when he didn't want me," he finished quietly, his voice breaking.

"You don't have to explain it to me," Dean promised him, wrapping his other arm around him and squeezing him tightly. If he ever met Cas's father he didn't know what he'd do, but he knew what he wanted to in return for all the hurt he'd caused his son.

"I want to. I want you to understand. To know that it wasn't because of you that I lied."
"I'm sorry," Dean apologised. "I shouldn't have gone off at you like that." He wondered if there'd ever be a time he wasn't waiting for everything good in his life to fall apart.

"You have a right to be angry," Cas told him calmly. "And I understand if you don't want to put my name on the lease anymore. Or want me to leave - Balthazar's going to France for the summer. I'm sure he could use a housesitter."

"Don't be stupid," Dean said. "But why don't we put the lease on hold for a while?"

Even as he felt as though the ground had given way beneath him, Cas nodded and snuggled closer to Dean. His boyfriend. His home. Both at risk because of one stupid lie.

"At least until you get your name changed."

It took a second for Dean's words to sink in, and then Castiel frowned. "What?"

"You can do that, you know. Change your name. Legally. I, uh, might've called Sam once I calmed down a bit."

Cas smiled. "I keep telling you he loves you."

"Really? You're going to tell me 'I told you so' after our first fight?"

Castiel snorted. "Well, seeing as we won't be having make-up sex, can we make-up make-out?"

"I am so going to pretend you did not just say that," Dean groaned, reaching for a tortilla chip.

As Dean chewed, Castiel eyed the string of melted cheese hanging from his lip. A split-second later he'd leaned up, caught it on his tongue, and was kissing him.

Dean grinned and Castiel chuckled against his mouth.

"So, are we good?" Cas murmured, kissing him again.

"Hmm, I don't know," Dean said playfully. "What else have you lied about?"

"Nothing," Cas told him seriously.

"We're good, Cas," Dean assured him, still stroking a hand over his hip. "And so are these nachos, so eat them while they're hot."

* * *

"I want to be better," Dean told Pamela as he strode determinedly into her office for his next appointment.

"Good afternoon," she greeted him pointedly.

"Afternoon," he replied gruffly.

"Now, what do you mean by 'better'?" she asked, reaching for her notebook.

"For Cas. I know what it's like when the one you love pushes you away, and I don't want to do that to him. Don't get any ideas, though," he added when he noticed her scribbling something down. "I'll own that I'm a big part of why Lisa and I didn't work out." He swallowed. "And I want to be better for Ben. And I don't want to be the reason Cas and I don't work out."
She nodded, accepting his statement. "Sometimes the things you find yourself discussing will be painful, or stressful, or make you feel uncomfortable. I feel you've been burying your head in the sand these past few sessions, but you're beginning to realise it isn't helping. I need you to work with me and try to face things. Do you think you can do that?"

He took a breath. "I can try." No. "I can do that," he said, more confidently than he felt.

She poured them both a glass of water from a pitcher, in which pieces of strawberry and raspberry were floating.

He gratefully accepted the moment's respite, before they'd inevitably delve into something he didn't want to, but needed to, talk about.

"I don't think I'm ready to talk about my mom and dad, yet," he admitted.

"So why don't you tell me about Ben?"

"Ben?"

"Yes. How was his stay? Did he have a good time?" she asked.

"Yeah," Dean grinned. "We sorted out a few misunderstandings about why his mother and I separated."

Tapping her pen thoughtfully on her chin, she asked, "Was he worried that he was responsible?"

"Yeah. How'd you know?"

"Children are often a lot more sensitive to the grown-up's issues than we realise. But I'm glad you were able to reassure him he wasn't to blame. Carrying around unnecessary guilt can be very damaging for a person, especially a child."

Dean hated it when she spoke like that - it always made him feel like she was talking about him as well.

"It was good to see him again. To be a dad. To be needed."

"You don't think Cas needs you?"

"I know he doesn't."

"I think you underestimate just how much he cares for you."

Dean looked down. "I've said it before - I don't deserve him."

"That's different from 'he deserves better than me', which is what you've said before," she pointed out. "One puts you down, the other raises him up."

"Is that a good thing?"

"I'd say that any time you don't put yourself down is an improvement. And speaking of improvements, wouldn't you agree that it's important to want to be better for yourself? That way, improving your relationships with others would be the natural progression of your recovery?"

Dean considered this. "I guess."
"So how would you like to be better?"

Dean sighed. "I'm a terrible..." He faltered over the word boyfriend. "...partner. And I've been an even more terrible father."

"You mean father-figure?"

At this, Dean's face lit up. "No - father. Lisa told me yesterday. I'm his dad."

"Congratulations," she smiled.

"I wouldn't say that," Dean told her. "Not yet, anyway."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't know, yet. And she doesn't want to tell him straight away. I wasn't the best example, and I guess she thinks there's a chance I could screw it up again."

"Do you?"

Dean was silent for a long while, and Pamela gave him time to respond.

"I respected my dad. And I admired him. He always tried to do his best by us. But, looking after Ben, I think that I want to do things differently."

"You can see his faults, now?"

"I'm still not sure I'd call them faults, but... I want to do better by Ben."

"And what would doing better by him look like?"

"Staying in touch more. Being someone he can look up to. I know what it's like to be a teenage boy, and there's stuff he won't want to talk to his mom about." He scoffed. "It's not like my dad was always around or sober enough to talk to, but if things had been different for us there's stuff I'd have wanted to ask him. I want to be someone Ben can turn to. I want to be a dad."

"For someone who doesn't think he's ready to talk about his father, you do bring him up a lot." Smiling encouragingly, she asked, "Do you think, maybe, deep down, you are ready to discuss him, but you're just not allowing yourself to? If so, why do you think that is?"

Dragging both his hands through his hair, Dean thought about his father - the man he'd always looked up to, but whose expectations he'd never managed to meet - and swallowed. "I think so. I don't know." Feeling the pressure of her gaze on him, he snapped, "Look, Cas might be able to come in here and talk to a stranger so easily but I can't, okay?"

"Most people find it hard to open up at first," she assured him.

But Dean continued as if she hadn't spoken. "I don't talk about them because people don't listen. It's always the same - I try my best but when I need help he doesn't listen. He thinks he knows best."

"Who knows best?"

"Sam."

"Your brother?"
"'S not like he makes the best decisions." Immediately he looked abashed. "I didn't mean that."

"Yes, you did. And that's okay. It's not going to help you if you lie to yourself about what you want, or how you feel. Know that I'm listening to you, Dean," she pressed, when he said nothing. "Whatever you tell me, I'm listening." Pausing as she decided which direction to push the conversation in next, she asked, "Are you jealous of your brother?"

"No."

"Is that how you feel? Or are you just telling yourself that because you feel guilty about thinking it?"

Dean opened and closed his mouth.

She gave him a few minutes to mull her words over before continuing. "Comparing ourselves and our lives to others' isn't good for our self-esteem; however it is normal, and I promise you everyone does it."

"I don't want his life, or his problems. But I want that feeling of knowing what I want. Of knowing, and not being afraid to go after it." He huffed and shook his head. "I got side-tracked again, but I kind of came back to what I wanted to say anyway. I want to be with Cas. I think. I'm happy when I'm with him, but I can't be happy with him. I'm always screwing him around. I don't mean to, and I don't know why I do, and he's frustrated, and I'm frustrated—"

"Okay, Dean, take a breath."

Dean did so.

"Slow down. Why do you say you're screwing him around?"

"Because I can't shake this feeling that what we're doing is wrong. I know it's not, and it's fine when we're kissing - I like it - but then I end up pushing him away."

"When you're kissing?"

"No. Yes. When we..." He trailed off, searching for the right words.

"When you get intimate?" Pamela tried again.

"No!" Dean exclaimed hotly, sitting upright. His cheeks grew pinker, but he admitted, "We're not doing... that. When we're making out. I have a total freak out, and we stop, and I feel like crap. And then Cas feels like crap. And then I feel even worse."

Dean turned and put his feet on the floor, then wiped his hands along his thighs. Cas. He was doing this for Cas. Standing up, he started pacing around the room.

"When I was a kid, it was all about Sam - making sure he had food, clothes, did his homework... With Lisa, it was all about her and Ben. With Cas, it started out being all about him... but, somewhere down the line, it became about us."

"You care about the people in your life - that's not a bad thing, though it can be when you don't ever think about yourself."

"Yeah. I guess the past few years I forgot what it felt like to feel alive."

"What do you mean?"
"I was working so that I could go out, and I was going out to get laid."

"That's a very astute observation, Dean."

"Uh, thanks?"

Pamela smiled. "Let me ask you something - it might be a two part question. When was the last time you were in a long-term relationship, not including Lisa?"

"Define long-term."

"More than two months."

"Never."

"Hmm." She pursed her lips thoughtfully as she wrote that down. "So what's the second part of the question?"

She looked him straight in the eye. "Have you masturbated recently?"

Dean stared at her, red-faced. "No," he answered eventually. "Would you normally?"

"Yes. Who doesn't?"

"How often?"

"Do I masturbate?"

"Yes."

"I don't keep track!"

"Ball park."

"A couple of times a week? Three times? If I'm having sex a couple of times a week?"

"So you have a healthy sex drive."

"I guess."

"So what's changed?"

Dean was silent for a long moment. Finally, he said, "Cas."

Pamela glanced down at her notes. "So this reaction you have when you're making out - is there anything in your life that could explain it?"

"No idea. All I know is it's not just Cas."

"What do you mean?"

Dean took a breath. "A guy at work was cracking jokes about my ass, and I didn't like it." He scratched just above his ear, and looked at her. "What are you thinking?"
"I'm thinking that you should try to meditate."

That was pretty much the last thing Dean expected to hear. "What?"

"It's clear to me that this is causing you a lot of frustration, and creating a lot of tension. I'm not saying you have to do it - but I am asking that you give it a try. A real try."

"How's that going to help me fix things with Cas?"

"It's not. It's going to help you relax."

"If I want to relax, I drive. But what about... this?" he pressed, gesturing at his head.

"Dean, I'm glad that you're committing to this - I really am. But we need to start at the beginning."

"Which brings us back to my dad."

Pamela smiled. "Are you starting to see how this is all connected?"

Dean sighed unhappily. "Yeah. I guess we've got a long way to go, huh?"

"I can't speculate. But if all our sessions are like this, you'll get to where you want to be a whole lot quicker."
Chapter 60

Two weeks later, Pamela tried to pick up where they left off.
"This might sound like a cliché but... what was your childhood like?"

He scoffed. "What childhood?"

"You were a child once, Dean."

"I was never a child," he retorted. "I was young, but I was never a child. Dad dragged us around the country as kids, in and out of schools. I never graduated! I got my GED but to most people that still isn't good enough," he spat bitterly.

He'd done a few odd jobs after leaving school, like the ones his father had taken over the years to put food on the table, but when he'd started to seriously consider taking an apprenticeship, he'd seen the way people looked at him. But he'd ignored their jibes and kept his head down, working hard until he was a fully-qualified mechanic and then he was out of there. He'd moved around a lot himself, never settling into a job anywhere because no matter how hard he worked, it wasn't hard enough.

"And that's their problem, not mine. I did the best I could."

And his best hadn't been good enough. Not for Sam. Not for Lisa, or Ben. And it wouldn't be for Cas. No, that wasn't fair. He was here, and he was trying. Even if he was convinced he was going to fail.

"Dad took what jobs he could. Sometimes it was labouring, sometimes it was driving. He could be gone for days at a time, leaving us to take care of ourselves with barely enough money for food and rent. I had to be more than just a brother. I had to be a father and I had to be a mother, to keep Sam safe."

"That wasn't fair on you," Pamela told him.

"No, it wasn't fair," he agreed. "And I couldn't do it. One time he ran away on my watch. I looked everywhere for him. I thought he was dead! And when Dad came home..." Dean trailed off, unwilling to recall the memory.

"Did your father ever... hurt you?" she asked carefully.

Dean clenched his jaw, wishing he could take everything that had just burst out of him and swallow it down again. Instead he glared at Pamela. "I don't need you to feel sorry for me."

"I don't," she told him calmly. "I actually admire you. From the sounds of things, your childhood wasn't ideal - and yet you haven't let that define you. Many people in your position may have, however unintentionally, found themselves on the wrong side of the law..."

Dean shifted self-consciously in his seat.

"...yet you have a good job, rent your own apartment, and have a loving partner."

"That I'm struggling to commit to."

"Despite your reservations, you are committing to therapy to confront the issues that bring you discomfort, you're signing a new lease with Castiel, and he has met - though not always in person -"
members of your family," she reminded him. "These are not the actions of someone with commitment issues."

"I guess."

"Have you tried meditating, like we discussed the other week?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because it's stupid. Why are you asking?"

"Because you seem rather uptight today."

Dean took a breath. "Work's been stressful," he admitted.

"Any particular reason?"

"There was a break-in. Some tools got stolen. It's just making it harder to get things done. And our boss is even grumpier than normal."

"I can't say I blame him," Pamela sympathised. "But you should try not to let his bad mood affect you."

That was easier said than done.

* * *

When Dean got back from his therapy session, he felt wiped. As the elevator rumbled upwards, he thought about his agreement with Castiel to retreat to his bedroom until he felt more sociable. But he already had to deal with Bobby's bad mood at work, so it didn't seem fair that he had to deal with Dean's post-therapy blues as well.

He walked into the living room to see Cas clicking needles together, a ball of wool slowly unravelling at his feet, mumbling 'In, over, under, out... in, over, under, out...' to himself.

"What are you doing?" he asked.

"I'm knitting," came the obvious response.

Dean sighed. "I can see that, but why are you knitting? What are you knitting?"

"I'm making a scarf," Cas told him, holding up his work to let Dean see.

A purple rectangle, about five inches by one inch.

"For a very small person," Dean joked.

"No, that's the width, not the... Oh. You were joking," he said, observing Dean's teasing smirk. "They're for homeless people."

"They?"

"I'm going to make as many as I can between now and winter. Then the church will give them out to those in need. Others are making hats, and gloves, and even socks. But I'm just learning so I'll stick
to scarves. Rectangles are easy. Damn it! So long as I don't drop a stitch," he said, his tone making it evident that was exactly what he had done.

"I could help you find it," Dean offered. "Where did you drop it?" he chuckled at his own joke.

But Cas, deep in concentration, was not amused. "Sleeping outside is cold in the summer," he said sharply. "It must be freezing in winter."

Dean sat down beside him, careful not to get tangled up in his wool, and pecked Cas on the cheek. "I know. I'm sorry."

Cas sighed, and rested the needles on his lap. "I'm sorry, too. I shouldn't snap at you."

"But isn't knitting kind of like an old woman thing?" Dean teased carefully.

"That's sexist," Cas chided. But then, to Dean's relief, he snorted. "Who do you think taught me? There's a lovely group of women at the church—"

"Would these, by any chance, be old women?"

Castiel raised an eyebrow. "Are you stereotyping, or jealous?" he smirked.

"Hey, if you said they were a lovely group of men..." Dean trailed off teasingly.

Cas pretended to look thoughtful. "I could always take up bowls instead..."

"Don't you dare."

"You might be older than me, but my taste doesn't run that much older," he smiled. It was nice when Dean was relaxed enough about them to make jokes.

"But you were saying," Dean prompted, trying to show an interest. "About these women."

"Oh, yes. They do this every year, and are actually a lot of fun - although poor Sheila's memory's going. She keeps confusing me with her dead husband, Charles. She can't remember last week, but she can certainly remember last century." Castiel looked pained. "Vividly."

Dean couldn't help but laugh, and hastily tried to disguise it as a coughing fit.

"Oh, but that reminds me," Cas said. "If you're free, I might need you to give me a ride in a few weeks."

"Oh, gee, Cas, I don't know. I mean, I'm just so busy doing absolutely nothing most of the time—" Cas elbowed him playfully. "I know you'll give me a ride. I was just trying to be polite."

"Where are you going?"

"A soup kitchen. The person who runs it is a friend of Father Reynolds, and they're short on volunteers, so a number of us are taking turns."

Dean fell silent, the only sound in the room the soft click, click, click of Castiel's needles as he knitted stitch after stitch.

"Did you, uh, ever go? To a soup kitchen? When you were..."
"Homeless? Yes. Sometimes."

*Click, click, click.*

"It would be an exaggeration to say it saved my life, but it certainly helped me survive."

*Click, click, click.*

"I'll help," Dean volunteered quietly.

Castiel paused. "I don't want you to feel like you have to, just because I am."

"I don't."

*Click, click, click.*

Dean put a hand on Castiel's knee and gave it a squeeze. "I guess it would just feel like a way to repay them for looking out for you until I found you."

The corner of Castiel's mouth twitched. "That's really sweet."

"Don't turn this into a chick flick moment," Dean warned him, slapping his hands on his thighs and rising to his feet.

"If you're making coffee I'll have one."

Dean paused. "I..." He wasn't going to make coffee, but he didn't need to tell Cas that. "One coffee, coming up."

While he was in the kitchen making a cup of coffee for Cas, the phone rang.

"Can you get that?" Dean yelled through.

Cas quickly - or at least, as quickly as he was able to - finished the last three stitches on his row of knitting, and reached for the phone.

"Hello?"

"Cas? It's Sam. Is Dean in?"

"Hi, Sam," Cas smiled. "He's just in the middle of something at the moment."

"Oh. Right. I can call back, if—"

"Oh, no, he'll just be a couple of minutes," Cas hastened to keep Sam on the line. "He's just making coffee."

"Oh, that's okay. I can wait." Sam sounded audibly more at ease, now. "How are things?"

*They could be better,* Cas mused. "Things are good," he told Sam instead. "How are you and Jess?"

"We're good. Thanks." Sam was silent for a moment, then asked, "Look, I know Dean'll probably tell me what he thinks I want to hear, so... How is he?"

"He's fine," Cas assured him.

"Really?"
Frowning, he asked Sam, "Why wouldn't he be?"

"Who is it?" Dean asked, carrying through a mug of coffee.

"Where's yours?" Cas asked him as Dean placed it in front of him.

"I didn't want one."

"You should have said! I can make my own coffee. I just thought you were having one."

"It's fine. You were busy knitting. Who is it?" Dean repeated, nodding at the phone.

"Oh, it's Sam," Cas told him, holding the handset out to him. As Dean reached for it, however, he took it back. "I'm just going to hand you over. Bye, Sam."

"Bye, Cas."

This time, he let Dean take the phone from him.

"Sammy? Is everything okay?"

"It's fine. I just wanted to check in with you. See how you were doing."

"We're good. I'm good."

"Good."

"You had me worried there for a second," Dean said, sitting down.

"Sorry. I guess we're both just bad at staying in touch."

"Yeah," Dean agreed, thinking that he was great at staying in touch with his little brother - when he needed something.

"How's it going with your therapist? Counsellor? Whatever she is?"

Den motioned to Cas that he was going to continue the call in the kitchen. "It's not easy," he said as he walked through.

"I know it's not, but it is worth it."

Dean's expression hardened and he stopped in the middle of the room. "What would you know?" The last thing he needed was his brother patronising him.

"What do you think I did in rehab, Dean?" Sam chuckled softly. "Sit in an empty room? Meditate?"

Dean had honestly never thought about what Sam did in rehab - just that the very fact he was there meant Dean had failed him. And Sam's comment about meditation reminded him that he still hadn't tried it, despite Pamela's recommendation.

"I talked to the doctors there," Sam continued. "Individual therapy, group therapy - it helps. It sucks, but it helps. And you get used to it. Opening up becomes easier. Then you want to do it, because you can feel the improvement in yourself. Or at least, that's the way it is for me."

Dean got the distinct feeling that Sam was trying not to make him feel like he was being too pushy. "Yeah, I guess it's not as difficult as it was at the start," he conceded, sinking into a chair.
"Good," Sam said, and he sounded genuinely happy. "Does... Does Cas know about your therapy?"

"Yes," Dean said, running a hand through his hair. "We're seeing the same person."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

Dean hunched over the table. "Why?" he asked suspiciously.

"Nothing! I didn't want to mention it to him if he didn't know, that's all."

"Why would you need to mention it to him? What - were you thinking about checking up on me?!"

"No! Well, not like that."

Dean's tone was icy. "Then like how?"

"If I ask you how you are, you say 'good' or 'fine'. I don't know if you really are, or if you're just saying it. So I asked Cas how you were doing."

"And did he tell you I was okay?" Dean snapped aggressively.

"Yes—"

"There you go! I'm good!"

"Dean, can we not start a fight over the fact that I care? You always do this - act like it's your job to look out for me. What do you think my job is?"

The question stunned Dean. "What?" he croaked.

"You saved my life. You got me the help I needed. And then you sacrificed your future for me. Don't you think I'd do the same for you?"

"It's not your job to take care of me."

"But I do it because you're my big brother - there's nothing I wouldn't do for you."

At a loss for words, Dean fell silent.

At the other end of the line, Sam took an audible breath. "Look," he began unsurely, "when I was having problems, I didn't come to you. You swooped in and saved me. My saviour. My brother, the hero. Sometimes you try to help and you mess up, because you think what you're doing is worth it - because you've convinced yourself you're doing more good than bad."

"Sammy—"

"Let me finish. Sometimes you mess up, but sometimes you're right. And you were right then. Ruby was a bad influence, someone I met at a really low point in my life. I don't want you to be without help if you need it."

Dean rubbed his free hand through his hair. "I have help. Okay? I've got Pamela, who's helping - or trying to help - me through some stuff, and I've got Cas. I'm not alone, okay?"

"I just want you to know that you've got me, as well," Sam told him. "And I don't want you to shut me out. I just need to know that you're okay. That you're not... struggling... with anything."
Like being in a relationship with another guy? Dean thought to himself. "I'm doing okay, Sam. Really." He paused, then added honestly, "Probably better than I've been doing in a long time."

"Okay," Sam said, sounding like he believed him.

As they both fell silent, Dean rubbed at a mark on the table with his finger. Sam's phone call had come as a surprise and though he was reluctant to say goodbye to his little brother he didn't really know what else to talk about. Sam never called him - it was always the other way around. He remembered telling Pamela that one time, and she'd advised Dean to talk to him next time they spoke. But he had no idea what to say. He racked his brains to try to remember what they'd been talking about that day.

"I, uh, I think part of the reason it's so hard to open up to her is because I never really talked about how I was feeling growing up." Okay so that wasn't entirely true - on the handful of occasions he'd tried to convey his feelings, he'd either been dismissed or misunderstood. "Having someone listen to me, and accept what I'm saying without judgement is kind of scary. A part of me is just waiting for her to realise I'm wasting her time."

"You're not wasting her time, Dean," Sam assured him. "But from the sound of it, things are going really well. And I'm glad."

"Yeah, it's not a waste of money."

"I don't care about the money, Dean."

Dean heard Sam's unspoken words as clear as a bell: I care about you.

"As long as you can't afford it, and she's helping you, I'm happy to help you pay to see her."

"Speaking about paying, uh..."

Dean detected the faintest of groans on the other end of the line.

"Nothing like that!" he snapped irritably. Clearing his throat, he asked more gently, "What do you want for your birthday?"

"Oh!"

"No need to sound so surprised," Dean said, only half-teasing.

"It's just... We haven't really... It's been years since we last celebrated... anything."

"I know," Dean responded, thinking of all the birthdays and Christmases that had passed them by. And not for lack of thinking about them - on the contrary, Dean thought about it every time. Wondering what Sam would want, regretting not knowing what Sam would like, wishing they weren't so estranged. That's why the gift he'd sent at Christmas had been so unexpected, and he still felt bad that he'd never sent his brother anything in return. "But you're still here, and I'm still here, so..."

"Can I get back to you? I'll have a think."

"Yeah. That's fine. Birthdays are like buses, huh?"

Sam sounded confused when he asked, "What do you mean?"

"Oh, just that there aren't any for months and then two come along at once. Cas's birthday's coming
up as well."

"Oh, yeah? Have you got him something? I mean, are you okay for money, or..?"

"I've got it sorted," Dean told him firmly. "He just won't get it on his birthday."

"Why?" Sam asked, intrigued. "Is it something that isn't available yet? Or is shipping from abroad? Because you know you'll have to pay import fees on that, right?"

"It's not coming from abroad!" Dean exclaimed loudly. Lowering his voice so Cas wouldn't overhear their conversation, he added, "It doesn't matter what it is, just that—"

"Oh, go on!" Sam pushed. "You can't leave me hanging like this!"

"No!"

"You don't have to surprise me when it's not my birthday! I won't tell him!"

Dean closed his eyes and groaned. Ten bucks said his brother was practically giving him puppy dog eyes from the other end of the telephone. "I took out a loan to buy him a car, okay? There was one came into the garage - an absolute wreck, and ugly as hell, but he liked it. So I bought it and I'm going to do it up like I did the Impala after Dad..." He swallowed.

"After Dad died," Sam finished for him quietly.

"Yeah."

"But a loan, Dean? You're going to pay back a lot more than you borrowed by the time you pay the interest off as well."

"Duh! That's how loans work. It's not like I have a few grand just sitting in a savings account."

"Is that all? A few thousand?"

"Is that all?" Dean scoffed. "That might not be a lot for you, but we can't all be lawyers and charge three hundred bucks an hour!"

"I don't charge that much," Sam huffed. "I've only been practicing for a few years. But I do have savings. You could've asked me to give you a loan."

"Don't you think I've taken enough from you?"

"This would have been a loan. Not a gift. Interest free, and I'd draw up a repayment plan and everything to make it official if you wanted. It just doesn't make sense for you to waste a few hundred dollars on interest that you don't need to."

"It's a nice offer, Sam, but I've already got the loan sorted."

"Most should have a cooling off period attached - you can cancel it in that time."

"Thanks, Sam, but—"

"Dean, it doesn't make sense to waste money! Especially when things are tight."

Dean dropped his head and sighed. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"
"You should always listen to your lawyer."

Dean snorted. "So you're my lawyer, now? I can't afford to keep you on a retainer. But what will Jess say?"

"Never mind Jess - it's my money. And it's a loan, so you'll be paying it back."

"Alright," Dean conceded, still not entirely happy about it. But Sam was right about it making good financial sense. "I'll call the bank tomorrow."

"Good. And listen, what's Cas into anyway?"

"Into?"

"Yeah. I'll get him a little something."

"You don't have to do that."

"I want to."

"Well, he likes reading. He's made his way through a lot of Stephen King stuff. And we've watched a few of the movies. Crosswords - I can't throw out a damn newspaper if he hasn't finished it, which sometimes isn't for weeks if he's stuck on it."

Sam chuckled down the line.

"I thought I might get him a book of word puzzles, just so he's got something to open on his birthday. And he's just started knitting."

"Knitting?"

"Yeah. Scarves. But I think he'd like to get better and try other things."

"Knitting," Sam said again.

Dean smirked. "Yeah. I just came home to it today, and if he keeps going with it I think I'm going to be hearing those freaking needles in my sleep!"

They talked a little more about nothing in particular, until Sam had to go but promised to call another day.

"Is everything alright?" Cas asked when Dean rejoined him in the living room.

"Yeah, he was just checking in," Dean assured him, appreciating Castiel's concern for his brother.

"Well, that's nice of him."

Click click click.

Dean stared at the needles moving in Cas's hands. "Yeah."

The needles stopped. "Did... you tell him?"

Dean's throat went tight. "About us?"

"About Ben."
"Oh!" Dean exclaimed, hating himself for the relief that flooded through him. "No. I wouldn't know how to. I mean, Lisa wants to wait before we tell him, and if I told Sam he'd get all excited and want to meet him. While I can understand where she's coming from I think the only way I can be okay with it is if I don't think about it. But when I do eventually tell him, he'll get mad that I didn't tell him straight away."

Cas looked thoughtful. "Well, he is your child. You have to build on your existing relationship with him in a way that you're comfortable with, and that suits you. People don't always share their pregnancy news until they're past the first trimester so they can have more confidence that everything is going to be okay - I suppose a similar logic could be applied here. And Sam should understand that, once any frustration fades."

Dean leaned over and kissed him. "I just want to get everything right. I want Ben, and Sam, and you. But having lost everyone in the past, I feel like I'm pushing my luck trying to get everyone back."

"Everyone's luck has to change at some point. And you deserve the life you want - full of the people you love."

Dean allowed himself a hopeful smile. "Thanks, Cas."
Chapter 61

Chapter Notes

Amendments have been made to chapters 23 and 58.

Dean woke up and cracked one eye open. Still dark. With a tired sigh, he rolled over and prepared to let sleep take him once again.

Then came the unmistakable sound of someone throwing up.

Both eyes snapped open. Throwing back the covers and heaving himself out of bed, he padded down the hallway to the bathroom and knocked on the door. "Cas? You okay in there, dude?"

The sound of retching answered him.

Trying the door and finding it unlocked, he swung it open and stepped inside. Dean looked at Cas, illuminated in the dim light filtering through the small window, curled up around the toilet. Hoping to hell it wasn't a bug, he wet Castiel's face cloth with cold water and crouched beside him, pressing the cloth to the back of his neck.

"Thank you," Cas groaned.

"Hey, after the number of times you've done this for me? 'S the least I can do."

"'M fine. Go back to bed."

"Like hell you're fine - you're trying to throw up everything you've eaten this week."

"Only today," Cas said, wiping his wet eyes with one hand. He froze for a split-second, then lunged over the toilet once again.

Dean grimaced, but rubbed a hand over his back - only just realising that Cas was shirtless. His skin was clammy to the touch, and he was shaking slightly. "Aren't you cold?"

Cas heaved a couple of more times before answering. "No," he groaned, moving away from the toilet and lying on the cold floor with a blissful sigh. "Hmm... 'S cold..."

Dean ran the cloth under the cold tap again and set about wiping Castiel's face. Forehead, cheeks, neck. Castiel let out a pleased moan in response.

"You done?"

A negative-sounding groan answered him.

"Okay," Dean said, making himself comfortable. It could be a long night...

Castiel lay there, unmoving, for several minutes. He was so quiet, so still, that Dean wondered if he'd fallen asleep. But a few minutes later he bolted upright and scrambled for the toilet again.

Dean was there, with a cold cloth and a reassuring touch, until Cas was finally finished throwing up
for the time being and went back to bed.

* * *

"Cas is sick," he told Bobby when he got into work the next day.

"Balls!"

Dean hated to be the bearer of bad news, especially given the bad mood Bobby had been in the past few weeks. Although, hopefully that would begin to life now the insurance company had agreed to pay out. Either way, he kept his head down and worked hard all morning.

He went home for lunch to check on Cas, thinking perhaps he'd be taking it easy on the couch. Instead, he walked in to find the sofabed still pulled out and Cas wrapped up in his blanket.

"Did you not feel like getting up?" Dean teased.

Cas fumbled for the TV remote and turned the volume down. "No."

"Are you feeling any better?"

"Well I haven't thrown up since you left," Cas told him. "But seeing as there's probably nothing left in my stomach that might not mean anything."

"Did you have anything to eat this morning?"

Cas shook his head.

"I'll go make us some sandwiches, okay?"

"I'm not hungry."

"You should eat something, Cas."

"I'll try," he conceded, turning his attention back to the television when Dean moved to the kitchen.

A few minutes later, Dean returned with a stack of sandwiches. "Ham, cheese and pickle, PB&J, and - this might sound a little weird - peanut butter and banana. It's supposed to be good, and I know it's got a lot of good stuff in it. I don't know what you feel like, or what'll taste good, so just have whatever you want. Although on second thoughts, you might want to avoid the pickle."

"My taste buds are fine, Dean," Cas said, starting to stand.

"Whoa," Dean said, putting a hand out to stop him. "Where are you going?"

"To the kitchen."

"What do you need? I'll get it."

"I just want some honey."

"Okay, sit down. Sit!"

Cas sat, both reluctantly and relieved. Once Dean had returned and Cas drizzled honey over the peanut butter and banana sandwich, he tucked into it with a smile.

"I used to eat this when I was younger," Cas revealed. "It tastes like my childhood."
"My brother was always a PB&J fan," Dean told him as he sat down on the other seat.

"Come sit here," Cas said, moving the covers back.

Dean hesitated, only for the slightest of moments, before settling down next to him. "I'd better not catch whatever it is you've got," he warned, only half-teasing.

"I think it's something I ate," he replied. "You did say you thought those tacos tasted funny."

"If it was the tacos, don't you think I'd be sick, too?"

"Maybe. Maybe not. Maybe your immune system is stronger than mine."

"Well whatever it is, I hope you're better soon."

"Fed up looking after me already?" Cas smirked, taking another bite of his sandwich.

"No," Dean told him honestly, thinking of the number of times Cas had looked after him after a night of drinking. "I don't like seeing you like this."

Cas looked at him, food forgotten in his mouth as he stopped chewing, and smiled. Shifting closer, he let his head fall on Dean's shoulder.

"So what are we watching, anyway?" he asked Cas.

Cas finished chewing and swallowed. "I have no idea. But someone just took a flaming tennis ball through the chest."

"What?! Okay, you just made that up."

"Sadly not."

"Then why are we watching this crap?"

"Because it was on?"

"There has to be something better on," Dean responded, reaching for the remote. "Aha!" he exclaimed a moment later. "Dr Sexy. Are you okay with this?"

Cas smiled. "Sure."

They settled down to eat their lunch, the comfortable silence occasionally broken by Dean speaking up to tell Cas something he'd missed from the start of the episode. This had Cas wondering just how many times Dean had seen this particular episode to know it so well. When the episode was finished, it was time for Dean to head back to work.

"Don't worry about the washing up," Dean said. "I'll let them soak, and wash them when I get back."

"I could do it," Cas insisted weakly.

"Nope. Doctor's orders - you stay in bed."

Cas raised an amused eyebrow. "Alright, Dr Sexy."

"No, the show's called Dr Sexy, his name's actually—" Dean cleared his throat, realising what Cas
was implying.

Cas smiled at the pink tinge that suddenly coloured Dean's cheeks.

"Uh, yeah. Anyway." He cupped a hand around Castiel's neck and leaned closer but, to his surprise, Cas recoiled.

"You'll get sick."

"I thought it was the tacos?" Dean pointed out.

"What if it wasn't?"

"Then you should've thought about that before you asked me to sit with you," Dean pointed out, kissing the top of Cas's head goodbye. "And I'll see to dinner when I get home."

"Okay."

"Now, have you got everything you need?"

"I have two legs. I might be a bit wobbly on them but I can get up if I need to - now go! Bobby will kill you if you're late, and then who's going to make me dinner?" he teased.

Dean grinned. "Alright, alright." He kissed the top of Cas's head again, despite the other man's protests that Dean had already done it, and raced out the door.

* * *

Later that afternoon, while Dean was working hard replacing brake pads on a ten-year-old Ford, Cas dragged himself out of bed and ran himself a bath. Catching sight of himself in the mirror as he entered the bathroom he realised, to his shock, he looked paler than a ghost.

"You're a disgrace," he grumbled to himself as he undressed. "Spending half the day in bed without even showering..."

He sucked in a sharp breath as he dipped one foot in the water. Hot. He gingerly sank into the water, letting out a contented sigh once he was lying the full length of the bath. The hot water eased his muscles, stiff from having been sitting still most of the day. He wasn't sure he felt up to going out for a walk, but he could do some stretches later to loosen up further.

All of a sudden, his stomach growled. Tensing in anticipation, ready to leap out of the bath if needed, he was relieved when nothing happened. No coughing, belching, no muscles tensing. The sandwiches Dean had made them for lunch seemed to be staying down. For now, at least.

As he relaxed once again in the hot water, he cast his eyes upwards. It had been months since he'd first lain there, weakened and bruised. He'd never asked Dean why there were tiles on the ceiling, he realised, but decided that it didn't seem like a decision Dean would have made. His eyes wandered over to the toilet, from where Dean had sat and watched him. He'd been so lost, then; convinced there was a place reserved for him in Hell.

Now his life had a direction, although not one he'd have chosen for himself, and he could see a future for himself. He wasn't sure what form it would take, but he had faith that Dean would be in it. Dean might feel stuck in a rut when it came to his therapy, going over the same things, but Cas could see how far he'd come. When he wasn't being impatient, that was. Closing his eyes, Cas murmured a quick prayer, asking God to give him the strength to be patient. Good things came to those who
waited, and Cas was certainly waiting.

* * *

"Alright, here we go," Dean said, carrying a tray of food into the living room later that night. "John Winchester's famous cure-all kitchen sink stew."

Cas sat up with a smile. "You really need to stop claiming you can't cook."

Dean opened his mouth to dispute the fact as usual, but then conceded that maybe Cas was right. "Okay, so I'm not a chef but maybe I can cook a few things."

Cas ate a spoonful and let out a sound of approval as Dean left to retrieve his own bowl from the kitchen.

"Dad used to make it with enough cayenne pepper in there to burn your lips off, but I left that out," Dean told him as he came back into the room. "Don't want to upset your stomach any more than it already is."

"I haven't been sick at all today."

"Well, that's good. Although, you might want to take tomorrow off, as well. Get your strength back, you know?"

Cas made a vague noise as he took another mouthful of stew. He knew Dean was talking sense, but he didn't want to spend another day lounging around on the couch. "I'll go to bed early tonight, and see how I feel in the morning," he said, even though he'd already decided that, providing he wasn't sick again through the night, he was going back to work.

"An early night," Dean repeated, realising that meant the same for him. "Awesome."

* * *

"You're a distraction, you know?" Cas smiled down at the kitten sprawled across his keyboard. Chuck looked up at him angelically.

"And you've grown so much... At what point do you stop being a kitten and start being a cat?"

Chuck rolled over onto his back and meowed needily.

"I didn't think cats were supposed to like belly rubs?" Cas chuckled. As he raised a hand to stroke him, he sighed and acknowledged, "It's not like I was getting much done, anyway."

His bout of sickness seemed to have passed and, though Dean had tried to persuade him to take another day off, Cas had insisted on returning to work. It wasn't like sitting at a desk all afternoon was particularly strenuous. But he hadn't been very productive, he admitted to himself as he looked at the paperwork waiting for him. It wasn't like Bobby would know how much - or how little - work he got finished, but that knowledge didn't make him feel any less guilty about being paid to do the work he was currently neglecting. Especially when, for the last few weeks, Bobby had been taking his bad mood out on the mechanics while Cas was isolated from his temper in the safety of the office.

Chuck meowed at him, and he imagined that the kitten was berating him. He didn't know what was wrong with him - he just couldn't focus.

It wasn't like he hated his job - the work was okay, and he enjoyed the people that he worked with -
but he couldn't see himself working in a garage for the rest of his life. Dean was enthusiastic about cars, but to Cas it had just been the first of many steps to start a new life. But, now that he had one, shouldn't it be one that he was passionate about?

As he continued to stroke Chuck, he eyed the internet icon. After casting a sideways glance at the pile of papers he should be working through, he double-clicked it and searched for local jobs.

"It's nearly the end of the day, anyway," he told Chuck, as if to justify his actions.

It wasn't the first time he'd looked to see what other jobs were being advertised, though he hadn't looked for a few weeks. As usual he was unqualified for most of them, but there was a part-time vacancy at the Gas-N-Sip. He clicked on it and found it was three afternoons a week, but required the employee to be flexible.

He could manage it, if Bobby wouldn't mind him working mornings instead. But if he was committed to the garage, he couldn't be entirely flexible as was required. And nobody could survive on a day and a half's wages, so surely they had to know that many applicants would be likely to have a second job?

He bookmarked the page and went back to the list.
"How'd you feel about some company this morning?" Dean asked.

Cas looked up at him as he tied his shoelaces. "What?"

"Well, I've got the morning off, so..."

"So... you wanted to come jogging with me?"

"Don't sound so surprised."

"I can't help it. You're not exactly the jogging type."

Shrugging, Dean shot back, "Maybe I could be."

Castiel looked him up and down, taking in the well-fitting Henley and jeans - Dean's second favourite wardrobe choice after a t-shirt layered with a plaid shirt. "Do you have any shorts?"

"Oh, I don't do shorts."

"You can't go jogging in jeans."

Dean opened and closed his mouth as several ideas flew through his head; including buying shorts, and not going jogging.

"I have a second pair if you want to borrow them."

The shorts were stretchy, but still a little tight, and Dean paired them with an old Led Zeppelin t-shirt. "I look ridiculous," Dean muttered as he mimicked the way Cas was stretching.

"You're showing off your bow legs," Cas said, admiring how strong they looked.

"I look ridiculous," he repeated.

Cas cupped his face and kissed him. "You're the one who wanted to come jogging with me."

"I know."

"You can still change your mind."

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"Let's go."

"Okay."

* * *

"How much further?" Dean panted.

Castiel slowed, jogging on the spot as he turned to look at him. He hadn't realised Dean had fallen so
far behind. As he waited, he took in the sight of Dean's face; flushed and damp, hair sticking to his forehead. He wondered if he looked like that after a vigorous round of sex.

"Dean, we're not even halfway there yet. And then we need to turn around and jog back."

Dean let out a sound as if he was dying.

Castiel sighed fondly. "I forgot you haven't built up to this like I have. Why don't we head back now?"

"Sounds awesome," Dean said, still breathing heavily.

As Cas started to jog back the way they'd come, Dean called out after him, "But can we walk?"

This time, Cas slowed to a stop. Striding back to Dean, he linked arms with him. "Come on. If you make it back alive, you can have the last slice of pie in the fridge."

"It's mine anyway!"

Laughing, Cas told him, "Not if I get there first!"

With a renewed burst of energy, Dean began the walk home.

* * *

"I don't know why you do that to yourself every day," Dean complained around a mouthful of pie. "It's torture."

"It's fun. And it keeps me in shape."

"There's got to be better ways of staying in shape."

"Joining a gym. Eating less junk food."

"Too expensive. And junk food is tasty."

"I agree. So I jog," Cas stood up. "But now I'm going to shower."

As Cas left the room, Dean heaped another spoonful of pie into his mouth. His chewing slowed, however, when he realised that - faced with jogging more or cutting back on all the unhealthy crap he ate - he was losing his appetite for the sweet dessert in front of him. Dropping his fork onto the plate and swallowing, he carried the plate through to the kitchen and put it back in the fridge.

* * *

"This is stupid," Dean grumbled to himself a short time later.

"What are you doing?" Cas asked from the doorway, his towel-dried hair still a little damp from his shower.

"Meditating," he said. He needed to be able to say he'd tried it before his session with Pamela that afternoon. "Or trying to, at least."

"Oh," Castiel said. A second later he asked, "May I join you?"

"You meditate?"
"No. But I'd like to try it."

Dean opened an eye and stared at him. "Pull up a cushion." Closing his eye again, he sighed.

"I think you're supposed to relax," Cas said.

"No shit. But this is boring, and pointless, and it's driving me crazy."

He heard Cas moving around, then *Travelling Riverside Blues* started playing - albeit quietly.

"Just focus on the music," Cas told him, sitting down beside him.

They sat there in silence after that, and when the song ended Cas asked him, "How do you feel now?"

"More relaxed, actually. I thought this shit was supposed to be done in silence?"

Castiel chuckled. "No. Most people play music - although not rock music."

"Heh. I think we both know I'm a bit of a freak."

"That's not true."

"Has Balthazar told you I'm no good for you recently?"

"Stop it," Cas instructed firmly. "I think he's finally realised how much it upsets me when he puts you down. I'd like it if you'd stop putting yourself down, too."

With a sigh, Dean leaned backwards until he was lying on the floor. "I just feel that you deserve someone who can love you. That can show you they love you," he corrected himself.

Cas crawled closer to him and looked down at him. "You don't realise it, but you do. You take care of me when I'll ill, and support me in everything I do."

"These sound like wedding vows."

Cas snorted. "I think, even if that's something we both wanted, that possibility is a long way off." He stroked a hand through Dean's hair. "I can see myself spending the rest of my life with you," he admitted quietly.

"The rest of your life's a long way off as well," Dean pointed out. "At least, I hope it is."

"I hope so, too," Cas agreed.

"Shouldn't we be being quiet?" Dean asked. "If we're meditating?"

"I think we stopped meditating some time ago."

Dean opened his eyes and sat up. "When you see us together in the future," he began hesitantly, running his tongue along his lower lip, "we're having sex, right?"

Cas forced his gaze away from Dean's very kissable mouth and look him in the eye. "Not all the time," he smiled. "But we are sexually active, yes."

Dean was silent for a long moment.

"I don't want you to feel pressured," Cas assured him. "Your therapy is more important right now."
"It sucks. That you're always having to put my needs first. What about what you need?"

"I need you to be healthy - both physically and mentally. As for what I want... Well, hopefully that will come with meeting your needs - uncovering whatever it is that's creating a block between us."

"It's a pretty one-sided block," Dean muttered self-consciously.

"It might be in your head, but that doesn't mean it isn't real," Cas continued. "I can feel it between us, and I'm sure you can, too."

"Yeah."

"But I think it's getting smaller," Cas said optimistically, leaning in to kiss Dean. "Even if it is slowly."

Dean grinned. "Now that is more fun than meditating."

Cas smirked and pushed him back down to the floor. "It's still too early to think about getting lunch and going to work," he said, kissing Dean again. "And the laundry can wait another day."

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "If I haven't got a clean pair of boxers then I can wear these again tomorrow."

"Ew!" Cas pulled back and looked at him in disgust. "You can't wear the same underwear twice!"

"It doesn't count if you flip them inside out!" Dean said, as if to reassure him.

"That's not how it works."

Dean shrugged. "I've been doing it all my life when I'm short on laundry money, or travelling."

"I think there are some things about you I'd rather not know."

It was Dean's turn to smirk. "But I'm a freaking fantastic kisser."

"Now that I know," Cas smiled, allowing himself to be pulled back into Dean's embrace.

Now that they'd established boundaries for what Dean was comfortable with and what triggered him to withdraw, he could relax more when he was with Castiel. Kissing was easy, something he'd done and been good at for years, and it was safe. He could enjoy kissing Cas without fear that he'd freak out and pretend, for a while, that they were a normal couple in a happy, healthy relationship.

Castiel's kissing skills were improving all the time, and both his hands fist ed in Dean's hair as he kissed him. When Dean caught his lower lip, his teeth gently scraping over the flesh, Cas let out a moan. As he shifted, and growing arousal became more evident between his body and Dean's.

"Okay, okay, time out!" Dean exclaimed, pulling away and making a T with his hands. When Cas backed off Dean shifted away, lips parted as he avoided Castiel's gaze.

"You're uncomfortable," Cas realised.

"Don't... Don't think there's anything wrong with you, please. To react like that, is totally normal and I get it."

"Of course it's a normal response."

Dean stared at him. "Okay, good. I don't want you to feel like it's a bad thing that you... enjoy... us,"
he finished lamely. "Look, bottom line is, I want to. Okay? Or, I want to... want to. I mean, you're not the only one going without here."

"No," Cas agreed slowly. "But I seem to be the only one who actually wants it."

"That's not true."

"Maybe not. But it feels that way, sometimes. You've always thought of yourself as straight, and it's like you still do..." Cas trailed off as he tried to figure how best to say what he was wondering. "What I'm trying to ask is, is it... do you think that maybe you fall somewhere between the two? Straight and gay, that is?"

Dean thought about all the leaflets Pamela had given him, and how he'd been shocked to find out just how many ways people could identify. "It's not guys, Cas," Dean said quietly. "It's just you."

"Is it?" he asked. "Or are you just telling yourself that?"

* * *

Dean stared at the hideous car that Cas loved so much, tucked away under a tarpaulin in the back of the garage, and wondered what the hell he'd been thinking.

"So how much did it cost you?" Bobby asked.

"More than I can afford," Dean admitted. True to his word, Sam had transferred the money for the car into his account once he'd cancelled the loan. "But it'll be worth it."

"Well, it's done now," Bobby told him with a clap on the back. "And it's a damn fine idea."

"Are you sure he won't see it here?"

"When does that boy ever set foot in the garage?" Bobby chuckled. "And it's a damn fine idea."

"Are you sure he won't see it here?"

"When does that boy ever set foot in the garage?" Bobby chuckled. "It'll be fine. He looked at his watch. "But shouldn't you leaving?"

Dean looked at the time. "Shit, yeah."

Dean walked into the office to say goodbye to Cas before heading off.

Roadworks took him past the Roadhouse, and where Jo was taking a delivery. He honked his horn and waved at her as he passed, and she flipped him the bird with a grin for making her jump.

He could see his friendship with her for what it was, now - not just bar staff and customer, but real friendship. A friendship he could easily have ruined, along with his relationship, when he'd drunkenly tried to kiss her a few weeks back.

And it wasn't long after he'd suggested putting Cas's name on the lease, he realised. What the hell had he been thinking? And now they were planning to make it official, when they still hadn't dealt with all of their issues... This was beginning to seem like a bad idea.

For the first time since he'd started seeing Pamela, he was looking forward to his appointment and eager to talk.

* * *

"I kissed a girl in a bar," he admitted once he was sitting in her office.
Pamela's eyebrows shot up.

"What, like Cas didn't tell you?" He figured that was why Cas had asked him to apologise during Dr Sexy the other week.

Pamela looked conflicted over how to word her reply. "This is why I should be counselling both of you," she sighed.

"It's fine," Dean told her. "I don't care that you know."

"If we're talking about the girl from a few weeks ago, I didn't know you kissed her," she settled for, eventually.

"Oh. Yeah." Dean picked at a thread in his jeans. "I figured I was already going to hurt him enough - that telling him everything would only hurt him more."

"Ordinarily I'd push for honestly, but in this instance I think you're right - you've said enough. He understands that you weren't entirely faithful to him, but knowing the full extent of your actions would only cause him more pain and wouldn't help either of you to heal."

"I know I hurt him," Dean admitted quietly.

"You know what I'm going to ask, don't you?"

"Why did I do it?" He licked his lips. "I don't know. I was drunk."

"That's a lazy excuse, Dean," she chided him gently, her tone encouraging him to look deeper into his actions. "While some of the things we say or do when we're drunk are out of character for us, many of them are very real fears or desires. Alcohol lowers our inhibitions, making it harder to think rationally. If you had been sober that night, you wouldn't have kissed her because, rationally, you knew it would hurt Cas. It happened because you weren't in the right state of mind to talk yourself out of it."

"I don't like Jo like that!"

"Maybe it's not Jo," she suggested. "Maybe it's just because she's female?"

Dean was silent for a long moment. Thoughtful. "Do you think I felt like I needed to prove to myself that I'm not gay - that I still like women?"

"That's not something I can answer for you. But why would you ask me that?"

"It doesn't matter."

"It does matter, Dean, because it's clearly upsetting you."

"When we're kissing - or making out, whatever you want to call it - Cas wants more... physically..."

"He gets aroused?"

Unable to look her in the eye, Dean stared at her notepad instead. "Yeah. But I don't. And he thinks that means I don't want him."

"Do you?"

Dean took a second to try to gather his thoughts. "I've got no idea how it's going to work with two
dicks - I mean, I can figure it out in theory, but actually doing it... It's going to take me right back to high school and Robin— Well, that doesn't matter. Point is, my other brain," he paused to point at his crotch, "doesn't seem to be on the same wavelength. And I know that's why I'm here - to figure this shit out - but I don't want my relationship to fall apart before I do." He took a breath. "Does any of this make sense to you?"

"Perfect sense," she assured him. "Obviously we have a lot of work to do to get to the root of whatever is causing this, but it is perfectly normal for a person's sexual responses to be blocked until they resolve any past issues that have been ignored or forgotten about."

"Meanwhile I'm giving my boyfriend a severe case of blue balls."

Pamela raised an eyebrow. "I doubt that."

Dean was reminded of Cas's own admission that he thought of Dean when he masturbated. "I'm a terrible boyfriend. It doesn't matter who I'm dating."

"And yet, you're here," Pamela reminded him. "You've told me you want to be a better man, and you're working with me to achieve that, which make you far better than many out there."

Dean digested her words slowly.

"Do you feel the need to prove to yourself that you're not gay?"

"I don't know!" he exclaimed, with tears of frustration and guilt in his eyes. "But it's stupid and I should be able to recognise what a good thing I have with Cas! He loves me, and he stands by me, and he always tries to make me see the best in myself even when I'm showing him the worst side of me."

Pamela passed him a tissue, and only then did he realise he was crying.

"Fuck," he muttered to himself, wiping the tears from his cheeks. "I really do want to be with him," he told her quietly.

Pamela gave him a minute to get his emotions in check. "It takes a strong man to admit he needs help," she told him, once he'd calmed down.

"A strong man shouldn't need help," he argued.

"Do you think Cas is weak for needing my help?"

"What? No, but—"

"You just told me that strong men don't need help. Cas needed help. Therefore, by your logic, he is weak."

Dean opened and closed his mouth several times, but no sound came out.

"Why do you hold yourself to a different set of rules than you do everyone else?"

Dean said nothing for a long moment, fighting against his instinct to keep quiet and actually open up to her. "Sometimes, things hurt, so you just man up and deal with it," he declared. "It might be physical, it might be mental, but you man up." It was something his dad had drilled into him, more or less.

"Interesting advice," she said, pursing her lips in disapproval. "Did your father tell you that?"
His expression told her she'd hit the nail on its head.

"It's really shitty advice, Dean," she told him bluntly.

"Yeah," he agreed. "I'm beginning to see that."

He stayed silent as Pamela finished writing. Once she laid her pen down she sucked in a breath, as if preparing to speak, then closed her mouth again. She pursed her lips and looked thoughtfully at a point above his head, pen tapping against the paper as she considered how best to get her point across.

"Feminism isn't all about 'girl power','" she began. "It's about recognising that forcing strict gender roles onto one another only hurts us. Expecting women to stay at home to cook and clean and look after the kids, when women at work have given us many great achievements - such as the first drug to treat AIDS, and developing the technique to bring us IVF. Women aren't small and weak, and don't need a man to look after them."

"I know," Dean told her. He'd known so many strong women in his life; Lisa, Ellen, Jo, Cassie... Hell, even the damaged Bela Talbot who'd been one of his biggest mistakes. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because, while everyone talks about the women being hurt and oppressed by sexism, the flip side - that fewer people are willing to acknowledge - is the men who suffer, too. The men who grow up believing that they have to be strong, that they're not allowed to feel doubt, or cry. That they have to provide for their family, and if they don't they're a failure. This toxic masculinity that your father has instilled in you is harmful, even if he didn't realise it. The sooner we, as a species, unlearn these beliefs and simply allow everyone to be who they are, the better off we'll be. And I'd be delighted to go out of business when that happens," she smiled.

Dean scoffed. "We're human. We'll still have a lot of shit for you to help us with."

"Maybe. What kind of man was your father, Dean? I want to understand him, so that I can better understand you."

Dean poured himself a glass of cucumber water and, for the first time, opened up - really opened up - about his father. He told her what little he knew about his years in Vietnam, about the constant moving, the endless string of motels as John took odd job after odd job. He talked lovingly about the man he admired and respected, with a love of rock music and classic cars, whom Dean could never remember wearing anything other than his leather jacket - Dean cast his eyes to that same jacket hanging up behind Pamela's door.

His tone turned bitter and resentful as he talked about the long periods of loneliness, and the times spent quietly in motel rooms so nobody would realise he and Sam had been left by themselves. Of being a mother and a father to Sam, whenever John was at work. Of taking odd jobs himself to earn a few extra dollars to put food on the table when the money John had left them ran out. Of the times John had passed out drunk and Dean had been scared stiff that he wouldn't wake up - that he and Sam would become orphans and separated by the state - but had to pretend like everything was okay so his little brother wouldn't worry. Of desperately seeking his father's approval, because John Winchester meant everything to him. And, if he was good enough, if he could make John happy enough, maybe he wouldn't leave again. Maybe they could stay in once place. Maybe they could have a home.

Pamela didn't speak much as he talked - probably afraid that he'd stop altogether - but she did ask a question every now and then to clarify something he'd said, and by the end Dean felt more tired than
he'd felt in forever.

"Thank you," Pamela told him as the clock chimed, announcing both a new hour and the end of Dean's session. "For many people, that's often the hardest part."

Dean tried to stop himself from closing his eyes. The couch was so comfortable... "I can see why."

"There's something I want you to do."

His eyes snapped open. "You mean like homework?"

"If you want to call it that."

"I hate homework."

"Then don't call it that," she smiled.

Dean narrowed his eyes at her. "Is it difficult?"

"It shouldn't be."

He stayed silent, allowing her to continue.

"From what you've told me today, I can see a lot of your father in you. Perhaps too much. You clearly sought his approval, but you never felt like you got it - am I correct?"

Not trusting himself to speak, Dean simply nodded.

"I worry that you've tried too hard to emulate him," she said softly. "Looking up to him as a child, trying to be him when he wasn't around because you didn't know how else to look after Sam. As an adult, wanting to be like him so that he would look upon you favourably as an equal."

Dean swallowed around the lump in his throat, trying not to cry again. Hearing her put into words everything he'd felt growing up was too much - like someone had cut his heart open and was broadcasting his innermost feelings to the whole world.

"You listen to the same music, you wear the same clothes, you drive the same car. Your 'homework', if you want to call it that, is to try to loosen some of those ties to your father. Not cut them, just loosen them to give you some breathing room."

"How do I do that?" he asked carefully, striving to keep his voice steady.

"Listen to some new music. Wear some new clothes."

Dean saw where this was going. "I'm not getting rid of my car," he said immediately.

She shook her head. "I'm not asking you to. I'm sure that car holds many memories for you."

Dean thought about the initials carved into it the dashboard, and the Lego bricks that still rattled around in the heating vents. "Yeah."

"Just hit pause on the cassettes and turn on the radio. Maybe buy a new jacket, if you can afford one. Or, if you have others, dust them off and wear them. Just not all at the same time," she winked.

"After today, I feel like I know more about who John Winchester was. In two weeks time, I'd like to start learning who Dean Winchester is."
Chapter 63

Chapter Notes

So this chapter turned out to be much longer than intended and an absolute nightmare to get right in some places, but I got there in the end! (And for those who aren't keeping track, which is most likely all of you, now that I've posted this chapter the word count has officially passed the quarter of a million mark!)

Dean rolled over with a groan and stretched a hand out to silence the persistent beep beep beep that dragged him from his dreams. He'd swapped his half-day with Benny, but forgotten to turn his alarm off. Turning back over, he looked at the empty half of his bed where, just a few weeks ago, Cas had been lying. Cas's pillow was lying sideways, so Dean wrapped an arm around it and sleepily buried his face in the cover. If he paid enough attention when he inhaled, he could still smell Cas.

As Dean realised what he was thinking, he abruptly pulled away. He wasn't a thirteen-year-old schoolgirl, and he did not hug pillows longingly while fantasising that they still held traces of a scent from several weeks ago. As a thirty-two-year-old man, however, he could admit that he missed waking up beside a warm body.

With reluctance, he hauled himself out of bed and down the corridor to the bathroom. As he stood over the toilet and relieved himself with a sigh, the phone started to ring. He could hear Cas moving around, though, and figured he'd get it. He smirked as he remembered what day it was. Would Cas remember? It wasn't like he really kept track - after all, the day didn't mean anything to him the way it would anyone else.

As he washed his hands and splashed some water on his face to help wake him up fully, the phone was still ringing. Why hadn't Cas answered it? He hurriedly dried his hands but, as he opened the door, it abruptly cut off. Dean shrugged to himself; if it was important, they'd call back.

Heading back to his room before he sought Cas out in the kitchen, he rummaged in the bottom of his sock drawer until he found the small wrapped box he'd tucked away. As he was doing so, his cell phone started to ring, and he picked up the handset without looking at the caller ID.

"Hello?"

"Hey, Dean. I called the apartment but no-one answered."

"I was in the bathroom," he told his brother. "I don't know what Cas is doing. Is everything okay?"

"Great. I just wanted to let you know that your present arrived. I can't wait to start reading it."

Dean frowned. He'd sent the parcel well over a week ago - now it would look like he couldn't be bothered to make sure his brother's birthday present arrived on time. "I thought it would've got there days ago," he said, his tone making his irritation obvious.

"It doesn't matter that it's late," Sam assured him. "But we sent a little something for Cas - did you get it?"

"No. Not yet, anyway. Hang on, I'll go down and check." As he fumbled with the lock on the front
door, he complained to Sam. "I don't know why it's late, though - I sent it early enough to make sure it got there before your birthday."

On the other end of the phone line Sam chuckled. "I don't care. I'm just glad that we're doing birthdays and stuff again."

"Yeah," Dean agreed as he hurried down the stairs. "I'm glad things are getting better between us. So, uh, what else did you get? Did Jess get you anything kinky?"

Sam sighed, and Dean would bet his next paycheck his brother was rolling his eyes. "She got the most recent season of Game of Thrones on DVD. She always asks if I want it for Christmas, but I tell her to save it for my birthday when it's dropped in price a bit."

"Hang on," Dean interrupted, fumbling with their mailbox. "Isn't that the book I got you? Game of Thrones?"

"One of them."

"There's more?" he exclaimed. "That was a big book!"

"They're still being written."

Dean jammed the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he flipped through the mail. "And it's a TV show?"

"Yeah. I've seen every episode, but I haven't read all the books yet."

"Why do you need to read the books if you've watched the TV show?"

"I like to read books," Sam reminded him. "You know, the ones without pictures."

"Don't talk to me like I don't read," Dean complained. He held up a squishy package and checked the postmark. "Yeah, it looks like your parcel's here."

"Good," Sam said, glad they were moving on before they could start an argument. "Jess also got me a book on Lizzie Borden, and tickets to tour her house when we're in Massachusetts over the summer visiting her parents."

"Who?"

"Lizzie Borden," Sam repeated. "In 1892 she hacked up her mom and stepdad there. Or allegedly hacked them up. She was acquitted, and spent the rest of her days in Fall Rivers hounded and persecuted by the townspeople."

"Wait a minute," Dean said, taking the stairs slower on the way up than he had on the way down. "I know what this is. This has something to do with your freaky fetish for serial killers."

"It's not a fetish," Sam insisted.

"Whatever. So it was a good day?"

"Yeah. We went out for dinner as well - just the two of us."

"Sounds like you had a good time."

"Yeah. How are you doing?"
"Oh, you know. Coping."

"You'll let me know if things get bad, though, won't you?"

Dean huffed a laugh. "Probably not."

"I guess you wouldn't be you if you didn't bottle everything up."

Dean contemplated Sam's words. He was starting to open up to Pamela, which meant he was changing for the better. He'd feel good about it, if it didn't serve to remind him how much catching up he had to do with his brother.

"Look, uh, I haven't had breakfast yet and I'm starving," Dean told Sam as he reached his front door.

"Oh, yeah, go eat," Sam said. "Sometimes I forget the rest of the world doesn't get up as early as me. But I like to get a morning run in before work, so..."

Dean shook his head in amusement. "You and Cas would get along just great," he said. "He likes to jog. I think he's secretly a masochist."

"Jerk. Talk to you later."

"Bye, bitch." Dean hung up with a chuckle and finally made his way to the kitchen. "Sam got his present," he announced to Cas. "He's happy. Hey, why didn't you answer the phone?"

"My hands were wet, and by the time I'd dried them it had stopped."

"Oh, okay. But speaking of presents..." He placed the gift he'd pulled out of his sock drawer on the table along with the mail. "Happy birthday, Cas."

Cas gave it an amused look. "That's Christmas paper."

"Yeah. And?"

Chuckling, Cas thanked him and resumed eating.

"Aren't you going to open it?"

"Once I've finished my breakfast."

"Oh."

Dean sounded so disappointed that Cas couldn't help but smile. "I'm almost finished." He didn't care what Dean had bought him, just the fact that he had was enough for him. Though he was curious as to what was inside...

"If you want to know what's inside, you just have to open it," Dean teased, noticing him glance at the gift.

"And I will," Cas told him. "Once I've finished my breakfast."

"Okay, okay," Dean grinned. He set about getting his own breakfast, thinking that Castiel seemed to chew everything so much slower than usual. But that was probably just his own impatience, he acknowledged as he sat down and started munching his cereal.

Eventually, Castiel set his bowl aside and reached for the mail - not Dean's present.
"Oh, come on, Cas!" he complained with a grin. Cas could be such an ass, sometimes.

Castiel merely smirked and sorted the unusually large bundle envelopes into two piles - Dean's and his. To his surprise, there was also a squishy parcel addressed to him in handwriting that was vaguely familiar, and what looked suspiciously like they might be birthday cards. Dean... He moved Dean's mail closer to him, then set about opening his own. The first was, not unexpectedly, a rejection letter to his application for the Gas-N-Sip post. He allowed himself a moment of disappointment, but refused to be discouraged. His lack of qualifications was irrelevant to that position, but he'd understood his lack of experience would be an issue. The second he had to read twice before the words sunk in, then a huge grin spread across his face.

"Good news?" Dean asked.

"I'm going back to university!" Cas exclaimed happily.

"You— What?"

"I'm going back to university," Cas repeated, less enthusiastically this time. Dean sounded more confused than thrilled.

"I know you were talking about it, Cas, but I didn't know you'd applied."

"I wasn't sure I'd get in."

"Of course you were going to get in - you're smart! What uni wouldn't want you? I'm proud of you, dude." 

Cas smiled again. "Thanks, Dean. I just hope I haven't fallen behind with software updates or I'll have even more catching up to do."

"You'll be fine, Cas."

For a moment they just looked at each other, and Cas appreciated the crinkles around Dean's eyes when he smiled. And his irises appeared greener than usual. Perhaps it was the green plaid - the dark check was very flattering.

"I like that shirt," he found himself saying.

"Uh, thanks?"

"It brings out the colour of your eyes."

Before Dean realised he didn't know how to respond to that statement, Cas was opening his birthday present.

"I got it when we were at the zoo," Dean explained. "I forgot to give it to you before Ben left. Then I found out when your birthday was, so I kept it until now."

Castiel examined the polished, dark-grey fossil attached to a keychain. "I saw these in the gift shop."

"I picked it out before you started eyeing up that big one. It's not exactly a talking piece."

"Size isn't everything, Dean," Cas quipped, and Dean laughed. "Thank you. Though I now have more keychains than keys."

Immediately Dean remembered the bee keychain he'd bought Cas at the museum. Shit! He'd
forgotten about that. "And, uh, dinner at the Roadhouse is on me tonight as well," he added.

"No surprise party, I hope?"

"I might not be able to outdo you, but I'm not going to copy you either."

"It's not a competition, Dean."

"I know. What I mean is, I know you deserve more than I'm doing for you."

Cas looked a little sad, then leaned over and kissed him. "I didn't need anything."

"And you wouldn't have had anything if I hadn't found out your birthday."

"And I'd have been okay with that," Cas said, reaching for what he now strongly suspected were birthday cards.

And they were - one from Lisa and Ben, and another from Sam and Jess.

"Exactly how many people did you tell about my birthday?" he asked, but he found that he couldn't be annoyed when it showed that people cared about him.

"Just a few."

Cas wanted to ask how many 'a few' was, but he had a feeling it probably included Ellen and Jo, Ash, Bobby, and possibly Benny and Andy as well. In fact, knowing Dean, he probably found a way to tell Balthazar even though he didn't like him. If that turned out to be the case, he'd be very grateful.

"Now what is this?" he wondered aloud as he reached for the squishy package. Eyeing the return address on the back, he said, "It's from Sam and Jess." Why hadn't they just put the card in the same package and saved a stamp?

"He did say he wanted to send you something."

Intrigued, Castiel fought with the packaging tape until he could pull out the contents. Puzzlement lined his face until he realised what he was looking at, then he laughed and held it up to Dean. "It's a knitting pattern for Pennywise! The clown from Stephen King's It," he explained when Dean looked confused.

"Ah. I haven't read that one. Saw the film once, years ago. I bet Sam made Jess buy it."

"Why?"

Dean chuckled. "He's afraid of clowns."

"Really?"

"Plucky Pennywhistle's," Dean remembered fondly as he reached for his own mail. "We used to go there as kids."

"And there were clowns there?"

"Why is Lisa writing to me?" Dean asked aloud, suddenly noticing the handwritten envelope in his pile of mail. Ignoring the official-looking envelopes and junk mail, he opened it and pulled out the letter inside. "What the hell?" he wondered, looking at printouts of schedules and photocopies of
school reports.

He read through her letter - shorter than expected, given the extra pages she'd included - and said, "Wow."

"What?"

"All Ben's extra-curricular activities - games club, swimming practice, tutoring sessions... She wants me to know when it's good to call."

"He seems like a very busy boy," Cas mused, scanning his eyes across the page. Warmth blossomed in his chest when he noticed that Ben was also part of a computer club. Even though he and Ben had bonded during his vacation, it was nice to find things they had in common.

"Yeah," Dean agreed. "Is there a good time for me to call?"

"Don't be ridiculous," Cas chuckled. "He still has lots of free time."

"When I was in high school, extra-curricular activities consisted of chasing girls."

Cas cast him a sideways glance before returning his gaze to Ben's busy schedule. "I'm sure Ben does that, too."

"Or maybe he chases guys? Or wants to - I guess kids don't like being different."

"And being gay certainly makes you stand out," Cas agreed. "What's the rest of this?"

"School reports. The kid gets more Bs in one year than I saw in my entire time at school! And what's this? I've never seen one of these before," he joked, pointing at an A-grade.

"Well, from what you've told me, he has a more stable environment in which to thrive."

Dean took a breath. "True." He leaned back into Cas's touch as fingers started playing through his hair.

"Good at communicating, but should aim to contribute more to group discussions as well," Cas read. "That's just a polite way of saying he's a chatterbox."

Dean snorted. "I didn't know you could talk teacher."

Cas paused, looking thoughtful. "Dean is an intelligent young man with great potential, but he needs to have more faith in himself."

"I don't think any of my teachers have ever said I had 'potential'," Dean said, turning back to the letter. "Lisa's also asking if we could send her copies of some of the photographs we took when he was here."

"We could do that," Cas said. "Why don't we head down to the library this afternoon, borrow a computer, and go through them all? We can choose the best ones to print out, then get two copies made of each."

"Couldn't we just use Bobby's computer after work?"

"It's old, and slow. And it doesn't have anywhere to stick the card in unless I take out the keyboard or the mouse."
Dean sighed. "It would have been free."

"The library computers don't cost *that* much to use."

***

The last time Dean had been in a library, he'd been making out with Amanda Heckerling in the philosophy section. Really, it was no wonder he hadn't graduated. While Cas spoke to a member of staff about using a computer, Dean hovered behind him.

"We really should have thought this out a little better," Cas said, sliding the memory card into an adaptor, then the adaptor into the USB port. "We bought a memory card, but had no way of viewing them."

"You've got a good eye," Dean said warmly.

Cas allowed himself a small, proud smile as he looked at the photo he'd taken of the zebra foal lying in the shade.

Dean edged his chair closer to Cas. They'd taken a look at them on the small camera screen before they'd returned it to the church but now, seeing Ben laughing and smiling on the much larger computer screen, Dean missed him even more.

"That's a good one," he said around the lump in his throat.

Cas chuckled. Ben was sticking his tongue out as far as he could, imitating the giraffes in the background. He copied it into a folder named 'FOR LISA' and continued clicking through them. He added some good shots of the animals, along with short video clips of them high-fiving the monkeys and the penguin parade. One of Ben feeding an exotic bird, several more perched expectantly on his arms and shoulders, made them laugh so hard they got a harsh *hush* from the librarian.

Dean didn't remember Ben having so many birds on him, and he hadn't realised Cas had sneaked some photos of them at the bowling alley as well. Dean celebrating after his first of many strikes, Dean and Ben celebrating the game Ben had won...

"I kind of feel bad that you're not really in any of these."

"I'm in a couple," Cas said. He'd asked Ben to take a photograph of him in front of the rhinoceros, which had taken a massive shit just as Ben had taken the image. (It wasn't until later that he'd realised why the boy had been grinning when he handed the camera back.) And there had been a couple of instances where Dean had asked for the camera to take a picture, but it had mainly been Cas behind the camera. Cas didn't mind, though - it was Dean who'd co-parented Ben for a year, and he'd been happy to document their reunion.

It took them longer than Castiel had anticipated to browse through them all, for they kept getting distracted reminiscing, but eventually they had a folder of images to have printed. Then, their time up and with the realisation that neither of them knew where to find a photographer, Dean went off in search of an assistant in the hope of getting directions while Cas removed the memory card and logged off the computer.

With the memory card safely tucked away in his pocket, Cas headed in the same direction that Dean had gone. He saw Dean nodding as a dark-skinned woman with thick, curly hair gestured directions and, when he caught Dean's eye, made his own gesture in the direction of the front desk. While he waited for Dean, he watched as two enthusiastic children signed out an armful of books each, an elderly man returned a heavy hardback volume, and a middle-aged woman inquired about help
writing a CV. It made Castiel wonder about his own CV. Perhaps it wasn't solely his lack of work experience that was an issue...

"Ready?"

Cas turned to Dean with a smile. "Yes."

"Awesome. Let's go get some photos printed!"

"And then get something to eat before work," Cas added, rubbing a self-conscious hand across his loudly gurgling stomach.

With a chuckle, Dean led him in the direction of the photographer's shop.

* * *

A blonde hurricane nearly knocked Cas off his feet as soon as he set foot in the Roadhouse later that night.

"Happy birthday!" Jo squealed in his ear.

Beside him Dean winced, which Cas thought was mildly ridiculous as it wasn't his hearing that had nearly been damaged by her high-pitched excitement.

"Thank you," he told her, hugging her back.

She pulled away then, to his surprise, punched him in the arm. "You should have told us!"

"Ow?" he exclaimed, rubbing his arm.

"Are we not friends? Why didn't you tell us?!"

"I didn't tell anyone," he said, which obviously didn't make it any better from the look of her glare. "Celebrating birthdays wasn't something my family did."

Her expression softened slightly. "Well we're your family and we do."

"Alright," he conceded. "I'm sorry I didn't tell you it was my birthday."

She grinned, and grabbed his arm.

Dean chuckled as she led them over to a booth which had been decorated in streamers. And he used the word loosely, as it was more a case of streamers had simply been thrown across the table and seats.

"Excuse Ash's bad decorating," she said as they slid into their seats. "You can tell who didn't help us decorate when we had Dean's party."

"You're not going to sing, are you?" he asked, thinking that one tuneless rendition of the birthday song was enough for the day. His colleagues would never make it as singers...

"Order whatever you like," Ellen said, coming up behind her. "Dinner's on us tonight. Seeing as we didn't have much of a heads-up to buy you a gift."

"Thank you, Ellen. That's very generous."
"Hey, dinner is supposed to be my birthday treat to Cas!" Dean protested.

"It's the thought that counts," Cas assured him.

"You can pay for the drinks," Ellen told Dean with a smirk, placing two menus on the table.

"And give him a real treat when you get home," Jo told him with a meaningful wink.

"Soda for me," Dean said to Ellen, ignoring Jo. "What about you, Cas?"

"Are you sure you don't want a drink?"

"Soda's fine," he insisted tersely.

"A soda for me, too, please."

Once they were left alone to look over the menus, Dean shifted a little closer so his leg rested against Castiel's.

Keeping his eyes on the menu, Cas dropped his head onto Dean's shoulder. "She doesn't know you're having problems."

Dean snorted, some of the tension easing out of his body. "You make it sound like I can't get it up."

"Well..."

"Oh, come on!"

Cas snickered.

"Everything downstairs is working just fine, thank you." It wasn't entirely a lie - he still woke up with a hard-on some mornings, and if he opened one of his magazines he was sure he could masturbate. He just wasn't. But maybe if - no, when - he and Pamela got to the root of whatever was blocking his sexual responses, his body would start responding to Cas.

"Good to know," Cas said, still giggling, blissfully unaware of Dean's niggling doubts.

"You're awful."

"Sorry. But it did stop you from falling into a guilty mood."

Dean shook his head, trying and failing to hold back his own grin. "I hate you."

"No, you don't," Cas told him. "Mmm, I might have lasagne."

"If we're going to go home and make out, I'd rather you didn't eat anything garlicky."

"It's my birthday, I can eat what I— Are we going to go home and make out?"

Dean smirked. "I said 'if.'"

"You're such a tease."

* * *

The next day, Balthazar dropped by with a belated birthday present.
"I thought you two might have had plans yesterday," he said, looking from Cas to Dean.

"Only in the evening," Dean said coolly.

"We just did some chores in the morning, and then we both had work in the afternoon," Cas elaborated. "Our boss bought a cake and everyone sang Happy Birthday. But it was considerate of you not to want to intrude," Cas told his friend as he gratefully accepted his gift.

"It was more that I didn't want to come all this way to an empty apartment," Balthazar joked.

Dean forced himself to keep the glare off his face, but he swallowed thickly. Because it was such an inconvenience to try to visit a friend on their birthday - whether they were at home or not. It didn't matter that Balthazar was only kidding; it rubbed Dean up the wrong way.

Castiel unwrapped the box of cologne and, with interest, sprayed a little on himself.

"Oh, that's nice," he beamed.

And probably expensive, Dean thought with jealousy. "Coffee?" he asked, getting to his feet.

"Oh, yes, please," Balthazar said pleasantly, settling back in his seat.

"Thank you, Dean," Cas smiled.

As he walked through to the kitchen, Dean felt a little bad. Cas thought he was making an effort with Balthazar, whereas he'd just wanted an excuse to leave the room. Of course it had backfired on him, because now Balthazar would be staying even longer.

* * *

Eventually their guest left, and Dean set about washing up their coffee mugs. There had been a time he'd have just left them sitting, but that was before he'd had someone to make an effort for. It hadn't bothered him if he'd let the dishes pile up in the sink, or put off dusting for a week or two, or didn't wash his bedsheets for a month.

"Thank you for making an effort with Balthazar."

Dean glanced at Cas, who'd come to stand in the doorway. "I didn't do it because I like him any better," he said, scrubbing at the coffee stain.

"I know," Cas said, moving closer. "It's because you like me. And that is why I'm thanking you."

As Castiel wrapped his arms around his waist, Dean caught a whiff of his new cologne. Earthy and spicy. Familiar.

The coffee mug slipped from his fingers.

Dean's elbow knocks his drink, sending it crashing to the floor, and his stomach seems to drop in sync with the glass as he watches it fall. The glass shatters, beer spilling across the already stained carpet. Laughter rings in his ears, but the voices aren't his own.

A waitress appears with a handful of paper towels and he tries to apologise, tries to help, but the arm around his waist keeps him in his seat. Warm breath in his ear, followed by wet lips on his neck, send a shudder through him. A hand slides into his, pressing it against rough denim that strains against a firm bulge that Dean recognises. He's touched his own dick, rock hard at the images in the magazines he keeps in his sock drawer, but this is different. His body tingles, stomach fluttering as if
He's just slipped a quarter into the Magic Fingers machine. This is someone else's.

His father's voice cuts through the babel like a gunshot. "Get away from him! Dean!"

"Dean? Dean?"

Dean blinked, and he was back in the kitchen. Cas was shaking his arm, desperately trying to jostle him from his thoughts.

"Dean!"

"Yeah," he croaked. He cleared his throat. "Yeah."

"Are you alright?"

It was like something from a dream.

"Don't move, I'll clean this up."

He'd dreamt that place before.

"I don't want you standing on anything."

His chest started to feel tight, and his breath was coming in ragged gasps.

Stepping over the broken shards, Dean strode to the front door. Sliding his feet into his shoes as he grabbed his keys from his jacket pocket, he had the door open before Cas's voice stopped him in his tracks.

"Where are you going?" Cas asked. It was too early for Dean to leave for work, and they hadn't eaten lunch, yet.

"Out," Dean replied automatically.

"Where?"

Dean had no idea. He just needed space. Air. To breathe.

"Dean, what happened in the kitchen?"

Dean shook his head. He didn't know how to put it into words; how to explain the dream - memory? - that was churning around in his brain.

Cas tiptoed closer. "Dean," he pleaded softly, "don't shut me out."

Dean swallowed, torn between his instinct to leave and his desire to stay.

"Stay. Stay with me. Talk to me." Castiel started to reach out a hand, then snatched it back.

Dean hated that Cas was afraid of him - of his reaction - in that moment. "I need to drive," he said hollowly. "I need to clear my head."

"Please don't run away from me. From us. It never helps. It just delays whatever conversation we need to have, and makes me feel like shit," he finished, his tone like iron.

It wasn't like Cas to swear.
"I'm going for a drive," Dean said, struggling to keep his voice steady. "If you want, you can come with me."

Without hesitation, Castiel dropped the pieces of the coffee mug he was holding onto the phone table and put his shoes on.

They walked downstairs in silence. Got into the car in silence. Drove in silence. Even the usual background beats pounding out of the stereo were absent, and the silence was suffocating. Cas wanted to talk - to ask Dean what he was thinking - but knew better. If he pushed Dean for answers before he was ready to give them, he'd succeed only in pushing him further away.

He had no idea where they were going, or even if they were going anywhere in particular. The very act of driving seemed to be soothing for Dean, so even if he said nothing Cas was simply glad to be with him.

With him. Cas craved Dean's touch; yearned to know him intimately. When he took a hand to himself at night, there was only so far he could pretend that it wasn't his own. As patient as he tried to be with Dean, for he knew all too well how trying therapy could be, sometimes he wondered if perhaps he'd committed to him too soon. It wasn't that he wanted to break up with him, or that he wanted to date other people, but... Dean not being at the same place he was in their relationship hurt in a way he couldn't fully describe. Maybe they should've agreed to date only once Dean was ready to...

Up ahead, where the road narrowed to a single lane while road works were carried out, he could see the temporary traffic light turn red. It took him a moment longer to realise that Dean wasn't slowing down.

"Dean?" he asked, an edge of panic in his tone. Although Castiel had only been behind the wheel once, he didn't trust that Dean was allowing himself enough time to stop. As the car coming towards them honked, he said his boyfriend's name again. "Dean!"

Dean's eyes widened, suddenly noticing the car in front of him. "Son of a bitch!" He swerved left into the row of traffic cones, and slammed his foot down on the brake.

Pedestrians were staring at them, and the workmen up ahead were gesturing and yelling, but Cas didn't care about them. They were fine. Dean, on the other hand... "Are you alright?"

Dean was still gripping the steering wheel. "Yeah. No. I don't know."

"Get out," Cas said firmly, unbuckling his seatbelt. "I'm driving us home."

As he walked around the car, he apologised to the approaching workmen and made excuses about Dean taking unwell at the wheel. He assured himself it was at least a half-truth once it became clear they weren't going to call the police. Sheriff Mills was probably the last person Dean needed having a go at him.

"'M sorry," Dean muttered as Cas adjusted his mirrors.

'Clutch, gear, accelerator,' Cas thought to himself as he got the car ready to move off. As he slowly manoeuvred back into the lane of traffic, he thought to himself that even he shouldn't be behind the wheel as Dean was in no state to supervise his driving. "The sooner we get you home, the better." What would have happened if he'd simply let Dean leave the apartment alone? An icy weight settled in his stomach, and he was thankful that nothing worse had happened.

"Turn left up here," Dean said suddenly.
"Why? Dean, I'm taking you home."

"Take me to Pamela's," he explained.

Cas cast a glance at him, then slowed and indicated left. If Dean wouldn't talk to him, then at least he was willing to talk to someone. When there was finally a gap in the traffic, Cas began to cross the opposing traffic - and promptly stalled.

"Damn it!"

"It's okay," Dean assured him in a shaky voice, despite the fact his hands were sweating and just itching to take over. As the oncoming traffic stopped and honked, he carefully instructed Cas. "Just start it again and move on. They don't have any patience."

"Says the one who swore at someone who stalled the other week," Cas said tightly as he got the car moving again.

Once he was safely out of the way and his own discomfort had passed, it registered in his mind that he hadn't been the only one unsettled by the incident. He cast a quick glance at Dean, who - despite already being somewhat off - looked noticeably paler. "Sorry."

"It's okay," Dean shook his head, but his tone betrayed his unease. "These things happen."

"Once I get another job," he began optimistically, "I can afford to pay someone for lessons."

"How are you going with the theory?"

"Theory is easy," Cas stated. "It's applying the theory that will be difficult."

It seemed that the decision to see Pamela had taken Dean out of his thoughts, and he was present enough to guide Cas through the journey. He warned Cas to look out for the kids playing on the sidewalk so, when their ball bounced out onto the road, he was ready to brake; he urged him to "Steer more - more!" as he struggled at a particularly tight junction; and he watched the traffic lights changing so was able to get Cas ready to drive off the second their light turned green.

"You don't have an appointment," Cas reminded Dean as he pulled into the carpark a few minutes later.

Dean knew that, but got out of the car anyway. He jogged up the steps with more vigour that he felt, and marched up to the reception desk.

"Can I help you?"

"I need to talk to Ms Barnes."

"Do you have an appointment?"

The receptionist knew damn well he didn't have an appointment. "No, but—"

"I'm afraid Ms Barnes is busy all day."

He wished she'd wipe that smug smirk of her face. "I just need five minutes."

"If you'd like to make an appointment—"

"No, I don't want to make an appointment!" Dean snapped. He closed his eyes and took a breath. "I
have an appointment with her next week. I just need a quick word."

"Ms Barnes has back-to-back appointments all day," the receptionist repeated adamantly.

She didn't like him, Dean knew it. He was good with women when he wanted to be - when he smiled, and flirted, and said all the right things - but Cas was good with people all the time. Maybe there was something to be said about having good manners...

"I'll wait," he persisted, taking a seat. Maybe he could sweet-talk Pamela into giving him five minutes. He drummed his fingers off his legs agitatedly as he waited, aware of the glare from Pamela's other client in the waiting area. But they weren't the only person with problems.

He shot to his feet when the door opened, barely registering the surprise on Pamela's face before blurting out, "I just need five minutes." So much for sweet-talking... "Please."

Perhaps his face gave away the conflicted storm of emotions that were threatening to drown him, because she composed herself and nodded.

"Five minutes," she emphasised, ushering him in quickly. "I have another patient waiting."

"I had this dream," Dean began, suddenly wondering if he was going to sound crazy.

"Go on," Pamela encouraged him.

"I think... I think it was after I tried to kiss Jo. I was in a bar, one I've never been in, but it was familiar."

"You've never been there, or you don't remember being there?"

Dean considered the question. "I don't remember being there," he said carefully. "It feels... real... Like a place I've forgotten."

Pamela nodded.

"I'm not alone, but I don't know the people that I'm with." Not-Cas smiles, his lips stretching apart to reveal a multitude of teeth. "It started to get a little freaky after that - you know, the way dreams get messed up."

"I do, but explain it to me anyway."

"The guy next to me had teeth. Like, a lot of teeth."

"Like a predator? Making you the prey?"

"I guess," Dean agreed, not really sure he liked that comparison. "But maybe more like the predator," he said, thinking about the movie franchise.

"Okay."

"And there were hands. Lots of hands. Kind of like that scene from Ghostbusters, when Sigourney Weaver's in the chair."

"Imagery that shows you don't have control."

"I didn't think anything of it. It was creepy, but it was just a dream. Then just a little while ago I was talking with Cas, and it came back to me. But different."
"Different how?"

"Less teeth. More... real." A hand slides into his, pressing it against rough denim that strains against a firm bulge that Dean recognises. "And there was... It was... sexual." He said the last word quieter, as if there was something illicit in his admission. He cleared his throat. "And then my dad spoke."

"What did he say?" Pamela asked softly.

"Get away from him, Dean."

"Isn't that like something you've heard before? When you and Cas were growing closer?"

"Yeah," Dean said, recognition dawning on him. He swallowed, almost afraid to ask his next question. "Do... Do you think it's real?"

"Do I think weird alien people with lots of teeth drank with you in a bar? No."

Despite himself, Dean chuckled. Which was probably the point, he acknowledged, as some of his building tension slipped away.

"Do I think you were in a bar where something happened that you no longer remember, something that is affecting your behaviour now? Yes."

A shiver ran down his spine. "So now what?"

"Now, you go home. Do whatever it is that helps you relax. But don't get drunk. I think you can agree you don't make good decisions when you're drunk."

"Yeah."

"At your next appointment, I want to try something on you. You might balk at the idea, but it's not as ridiculous as it sounds."

"What?"

"Hypnosis."

"You're not going to make me cluck like a chicken, are you?" Dean asked, narrowing his eyes suspiciously.

Pamela laughed. "Oh, if I had a quarter for every time someone asked me that... No. I'm going to try to take you back to that place you've forgotten."

"Oh. Okay."

"But you have to want to be hypnotised for this to work."

Dean nodded. "I do." He might be a little afraid of what he'd remember, but he wanted to be able to touch Cas; wanted Cas to be able to touch him. He's never had sex with another guy before, but he wanted to give Cas a first time that was special before his dick stopped working.

"I want you to meditate over the next few days. This time, it's not a suggestion. You need to practice relaxing your mind."

"I did give it a go before our last session," Dean told her. "It was pretty boring, but wasn't so bad once Cas put some music on."
"Music can be helpful, but it can also become a distraction."

Speaking of Cas... He was pretty sure he was losing patience with Dean. "What do I tell Cas?"

"That you're working through things. You're making progress."

"Am I?" It didn't feel like it, when he still upset Cas by pulling away.

"I see it," Pamela assured him. "But you need more time. Therapy can't be rushed, as everyone works through their issues at their own pace."

"I don't know how much time I've got left," Dean admitted. "Cas wants more. He's been ready for more for so long."

"Cas knows that this isn't a quick fix. Tell him how you feel, and remind him of how far you've come."

Telling Cas was easier said than done, Dean mused as he walked down the stairs out of the building. Cas could be so understanding, and had the patience of a saint, when he was being rational. But he was in love, and sometimes his heart ruled his head, and that was when he grew frustrated with Dean and the glacial pace at which he was working to resolve his issues.

He stopped outside and rapped the window with one knuckle to get Castiel's attention, before beckoning on him to move over. He took his place in the driver's seat, hands on the wheel, and simply sat there.

"You know, you need to turn the engine on," Cas quipped gently.

Slowly, Dean turned to him. "I think," he began, searching for the rights words - he didn't think words had ever been his strong suit. He clasped Castiel's hand as he tried again. "What we have, I think it means more to me than anything I've ever had with anyone else. I've come so far since I've met you - being with you makes me a better person, and I... I..."

Cas stared out the front window. "Damn you, Dean," he murmured, a smile pulling at his lips. "Damn you for always knowing exactly what to say to me when I'm doubting us."

Dean's stomach twisted. "You mean so much to me, and I don't want to lose you. I want you. I want you in my life, in my apartment... in my bed." Dean dropped his head on Cas's shoulder. "Come back into my bed, Cas. Get off that damn couch."

Castiel's free hand reached out and cupped his face. "Why can't love be as easy as it is in the movies?" he asked wistfully.

"Is that a yes?"

Cas nodded.

"Good." He let go of Cas's hand so he could drive off, but then looked at him again. "And, for the record, it's because we haven't got a script."

Cas poked his - surprisingly long - tongue out.

"Very mature," Dean grinned. "But if I had a script, we could save a fortune on therapy bills by just reading ahead."

"Would you?" Cas asked him.
"Yeah. I want to be able to tell you everything's going to be okay."

"I wouldn't."

'Liar,' Dean wanted to accuse him. Instead he asked, "Why not?"

"Because what if it's not okay? Even if I sometimes doubt the decisions we've made that have brought us to this point, I want to enjoy what we have now."

"Like several luggage cases of emotional baggage?" Dean joked.

Cas smiled. "You're right - we've both come a long way."

* * *

They didn't have time to go home and eat, so stopped at a diner to have lunch before Dean had to go to work. As much as Cas enjoyed having a morning with Dean during the week when he was rostered to work a Saturday, he much preferred it when Dean had his full weekend off as they didn't need to worry about being on time for work. But, although they'd planned to eat quickly, the diner was busy. As a result, they arrived at the garage at half past twelve.

"You're late!" Bobby declared before Dean had even set foot out of the car that afternoon.

"I... Uh..."

"Sorry, Bobby," Cas apologised for him smoothly. "I didn't think to to call you - we had an emergency."

"What kind of emergency?"

"A personal one," Cas stated firmly, his tone leaving no room for further questions. He put a hand on Dean's arm, and almost leaned in to kiss his cheek before he caught himself. "I'll see you at home."

He walked back out of the garage lot and started walking home, leaving his red-faced boss staring at his retreating back.

"We had a personal emergency," Dean repeated quietly when Bobby's glare focused on him once again.

"There are cars in the garage, so what the hell are you still standing out here for?"

Dean darted into the garage before his boss could give him hell.

"And you'll work your time back after closing tonight!" Bobby shouted after him.

* * *

Before heading to bed that night, Dean pulled an old t-shirt out of a drawer. He usually slept shirtless when it was warmer, but... He ran a hand over the softness around his middle, pinching the excess flesh. Catching sight of himself in the mirror, he abruptly turned away and yanked the shirt over his head before climbing into bed. As he lay in bed with his eyes closed, he listened as Cas ran the tap, switched the light off, and closed the door.

Dean opened his eyes a moment later when he walked into the bedroom, shorts slung low on his hips. Dean swallowed, jealousy and admiration churning in his stomach. He didn't have long to look, however, as Cas quickly lifted up the duvet and slid into bed beside him, inching closer until he was
lying alongside him.

"If you're always going to sleep this close to me, I could trade this in for a single bed and have more floor space."

Cas peered at the carpet. "To leave clothes lying on?" he asked cheekily.

Dean put the bedside light out, plunging the room into darkness. "Shut up."

Cas snickered before teasing him some more. "It's okay. You're not as messy as when I first moved in."

Dean rolled over and buried his face in Cas's neck. "I'll clean them up tomorrow."

"Thank you. I'd rather I didn't trip over them and break my leg."

"So would I."

Cas kissed the top of Dean's head.

"When the elevator's out it'd be a pain in the ass to drag a wheelchair up and down three flights of stairs."

Cas punched Dean's arm playfully. "Hey!"

This time it was Dean who snickered. "Kidding! But I know how fucking trapped it makes you feel."

There was a pause, before Cas asked, "You broke your leg?"

Dean swallowed. "Yeah."

"How?"

"I don't really want to talk about it, Cas," Dean told him, snuggling even closer.

"Of course. Sorry."

Dean sighed as Cas ran his fingers through his hair. The memory intruded despite his reluctance but, for the first time, it didn't hurt quite so much to think about it. "It was the crash that killed my dad," he revealed quietly. "I got off lightly."

With a sympathetic murmur, Cas shifted so he could wrap both his arms around his boyfriend.

Dean's breathing grew more steady as they lay there in silence, and he was hovering on the edge of sleep when Cas spoke again.

"I missed this. You."

"'M going to miss sleep if you keep talking," Dean mumbled.

Smiling to himself, Cas ran a hand up and down Dean's back. "Good night, Dean."

"Night, Cas."
I know, I know, it's been over two months! I'm sorry. I was sick, I went away for a week because my friend was getting married, then I got sick again (damn viruses that go around at this time of year). And I knew I'd put a lot of pressure on myself to get Dean's therapy right, but I didn't expect it to be this difficult. Add in a couple of really shitty comments I've had from people on this fic, and it's been really hard to motivate myself to sit down and finish this chapter. But, despite usually take a writing break in December because Christmas takes over, because I was so close to finishing this it (or at least the first half, as I split it in two because it was getting too long) I kept forcing myself to fit in a bit of writing time here and there. So instead I'm going to take a bit of time off from writing in January to mentally recharge and, while I hate it when authors ask for comments, I'm going to say that if you want to comment but you don't know what to say or you think that what you want to say isn't enough please, say something anyway! I could use some positivity right now.

I hope you all have a fantastic Christmas and an awesome New Year!

With his dream - no, memory - weighing so heavily on him, Dean didn't know how he was supposed to empty his mind. He dug through his music collection for Led Zeppelin but, as the first notes began to play, he abruptly switched it off. He was supposed to be experimenting with new music. He turned the radio on - an annoying jingle for Biggerson's playing - and made himself comfortable on the cushion he placed on the floor.

He had to hand it to Cas - the soft-green cushion covers he'd appeared with one day didn't clash with their drab grey sofa. Dean just hoped he hadn't been bitten by the interior decorating bug, because as nice as it would be to brighten up the apartment after all this time they couldn't afford to go all out. Small, affordable swaps were ok. Like new cushion covers. Maybe new curtains...

Dean tried to purge his mind of stray thoughts, and focused on his breathing. In through the nose... Out through the mouth... In through the nose... Out through the mouth... As his breathing fell into a steady rhythm, he muttered to himself, "I feel like a damn hippy." In through the nose... Out through the mouth...

An annoying beat started to play, and a woman started singing repetitive lyrics. He wasn't that keen on her voice, and had to really listen to understand what she was singing about. And what the hell was Photoshop? As she moved into the chorus, however, he found her tone softened and it became quite catchy - he just wished the backing singers would shut up.

Every inch of you is perfect from the bottom to the top
Yeah, my momma she told me don't worry about your size
She says, boys like a little more booty to hold at night

Dean pulled a thoughtful face. Sometimes it was nice to feel a little give; a little extra cushion for the, uh... He cleared his throat. Meditating. He was supposed to be meditating, not thinking about sex. In through the nose... Out through the mouth...
One catchy tune moved into another, and then another. His body felt restful, but his mind was racing.

*I keep on hoping we'll eat cake by the ocean*

Picnics on the beach ruined food, because the wind blew the sand into everything and the next thing you knew you were chewing on grit.

*See you licking frosting from your own hands*

Unless the cake was a euphemism...?

*Want another taste—*

If so, that made the frosting... He frowned. Were all songs about sex these days? Beach sex seemed romantic until you actually tried it - as one of his high school trysts would attest, it was an uncomfortable experience. Sand got everywhere. Everywhere. Especially where there was a lot of... frosting.

Dean found himself grinning and drumming his fingers along to the next song that came on.

*Because I'm happy*  
*Clap along if you feel like happiness is the truth*  
*Because I'm happy*  
*Clap along if you know what happiness is to you*  
*Because I'm happy*  
*Clap along if you feel like that's what you wanna do*

What was happiness? A juicy burger, a cold beer, Chicago pizza... Ben. Sorrow panged his heart as he thought about how much time he'd missed out on. Some might say that Lisa had done the wrong thing in denying Ben's true parentage - that Dean had had a right to know - but he couldn't blame her for trying to protect her son. Sometimes fathers - or mothers - weren't fit to be in their kid's life. How many times did you hear on the news about parents abusing or neglecting their children? Just because your sperm made a human being, didn't make you a *dad*.

The next song had a catchy beat, and Dean found himself bobbing along with the tune - until he started listening to the lyrics.

*I hate these blurred lines*  
*I know you want it*  
*I know you want it*  
*I know you want it*  
*But you're a good girl*  
*The way you grab me*  
*Must wanna get nasty*

Dean stilled, irrationally angry. There were no blurred lines when it came to sex; when a woman hadn't explicitly expressed she was into it. Dean might be good at picking up girls, but that didn't mean he hadn't been turned down on more than one occasion. He might push his luck a second time if he was really into her - see if she was playing hard to get - but if the answer was still a definite 'no', then he'd move on and try his luck with someone more interested - and willing.

"Dean?" Cas asked quietly from the doorway.

"Yeah?"
"Dinner's ready. Or I can keep it warm if—"

"I'll be there in a minute," Dean told him, getting to his feet and turning the radio off. When he moved towards the door, Cas had already gone.

He made his way to the bathroom, where he washed his hands and splashed some cold water on his face. As he did so he caught sight of himself in the mirror, noting the creases around his eyes. *Laughter lines.* When had he ever laughed enough in his life to cause them?

"I didn't mean to disturb you," Cas said when he walked into the kitchen.

"You didn't," Dean assured him, sliding into his seat. "Enchiladas?" he asked with a grin as he eyed the cheesy baked wraps before them.

"Yes. With turkey mince."

"With... turkey?"

"It's healthier, and delicious."

Dean poked at his food, unconvinced.

"Oh, just eat it!" Cas laughed. "It won't kill you." As if to prove his point, he cut off a large piece and stuffed it into his mouth.

"Enchiladas should be *beefy,*" Dean said, nevertheless cutting into his food. He was starving. "Eh meh Goh ass goo!"

"Would you like to try that again *after you've swallowed?" Cas asked pointedly.

Dean hurriedly chewed and swallowed. "I said, 'Oh my God that's good!'"

"It's not lacking in, I don't know... *beef?"

Dean stuffed another bite into his mouth. "Shuddup," he said around the mouthful of food.

Cas shook his head in amusement. His boyfriend was ridiculous...

Dean swiped a finger across the splash of food that had fallen from his over-filled mouth then, after a second's pause, licked it clean.

... And disgusting. "So I take it you won't complain that there's leftovers for tomorrow, then?" he asked, a little smugly. He was always proud when he cooked something new and Dean liked it, but more so when Dean had expressed a reluctance towards it first.

"*Will* there be leftovers for tomorrow?"

"Yes, there's plenty—" Cas caught Dean's wicked grin. "You are *not* having seconds!" he laughed.

Dean pouted.

"Or else you'll have no room for pie."

At the mention of pie, Dean perked up. "Pie?" he echoed.

"Pie," Cas repeated with a smile.
It was then that Dean started to notice the sweet scent of apples baking under the lingering spicy smell that filled the kitchen. So fattening... But so good... "Leftovers sounds good," he said, before tucking into his dinner again.

* * *

Later, they ate dessert in front of a movie Cas picked about an abused kid who finds out he's a wizard.

"To think there was a time I'd have been afraid to watch this," Cas said, happily, shoving the last mouthful of pie into his mouth.

Beside him, Dean laughed. Unfortunately he was halfway through swallowing, so ended up choking and spraying beer across the coffee table.

As Dean coughed and wheezed, Cas leaned forward and wiped the table.

"You what?" Dean asked, once his breathing was under control again.

"Magic and witchcraft are condemned in the Bible, because practicing them can put you under the power of Satan."

"You're kidding! So you couldn't even watch this kids' movie?"

Cas shook his head. "Unfortunately not. Harry Potter is supposed to be a classic story of good versus evil and, from what I understand, the franchise teaches us the strength of love, the importance of friendship, and that family isn't just your blood." All themes that carried a great deal of importance for Cas. "The Weasleys are Harry's family."

"The who?"

"No, that's a band. Ron—"

"Wait, you know The Who?"

Cas ignored him. "Ron's parents and siblings," he continued, "are more Harry's family then the, uh..." he trailed off, forgetting the name of the family who raised the main character.

"The assholes who shut him in a cupboard under the stairs?" Dean finished for him, far less eloquently.

"Yes."

"Ron's the ginger kid, right?" Dean checked, pushing a piece of pie around his plate.

"Yes, Dean,"

"Eh, I don't know how I feel about him. I like Snape, though."

Cas considered Dean's love of Die Hard. "Do you like Snape, or Alan Rickman?"

Dean chuckled. "Duh, Alan Rickman!"

Cas nodded to himself.

"Did you say this was a franchise?" Dean asked, a couple of minutes later. He licked his fork.
"Yes. There's a book for every school year."

"This is based on a book?"

"Mmhmm."

"Have you read them? Is that why you wanted to watch the film?"

"No."

"Then how do you know all this stuff about them? The themes, or whatever?"

Cas smiled at Dean's stubbornness. "If you must know, I overheard the librarian defending the books to a rather concerned religious mother. And I got curious."

"What, when we were using the computer there?"

Cas looked cagey. "No."

"Then when?"

"Does it matter?" Cas asked, getting defensive. He didn't want to tell Dean everything about his job-hunting endeavours, because that would involve sharing several failures. And if Dean didn't know he was disappointed, he couldn't try to make Cas better and unintentionally remind him of why he was feeling disheartened in the first place. There was also a small part of Cas that secretly derived pleasure from Dean's opinion of his intelligence (though Cas would argue he was simply educated) and - despite pride being sinful - he was in no hurry to change Dean's mind on the matter, so couldn't bring himself to admit he'd asked for help to write something as simple as a CV.

He'd pray for forgiveness later.

"Okay, okay," Dean said, settling back in his seat. "I didn't mean to be pushy, I was just curious. I mean, you usually tell me about your day, and I don't remember the last time you said you'd gone to the library."

"I don't tell you all about my day. Just the highlights."

"Having to pay for a bus home because you decided to buy washing powder that was on promotion, thereby cancelling out what you'd saved on the powder, was a highlight?" Dean asked pointedly.

"Sometimes there's nothing to tell," he reasoned.

"Well, seeing as we're talking about talking about your day," Dean said, putting his plate aside, "I never asked - how did your meeting thing after church go today?"

"Is there something wrong with it?" Cas responded, pointing to the remains of pie on Dean's plate.

"No."

"I've never known you to leave pie."

"The, uh, enchiladas were filling."

"They were small. Although, now I think about it, you ate the salad I made to go with them. Are you feeling okay?"
"Yes! Jeez, a guy can't eat salad one time?"

"You hate 'rabbit food'."

"So I thought I'd try it again."

"And?"

"And it's gross."

"You'd tell me if you thought the pie was horrible, right?"

"Did you think it was bad?" Dean turned the question back on him.

"No, but—"

"It's delicious."

"But you're not eating it."

"Damn it, Cas, I'm not hungry!" Dean snapped. Immediately he screwed his face up. "Sorry. Can we just... stop talking about the pie."

Castiel's lips were pressed tightly together, but he nodded. "The meeting was fine," he told Dean eventually, eager to break the uncomfortable silence that followed Dean's outburst.

"Good."

"Did you still want to help at the soup kitchen?"

"Yeah. If... if you want me there."

Cas looked at him - at the way Dean was avoiding looking at him - and realised that Dean was beating himself up for snapping. What could possibly have set him off? Moving to sit beside him, Cas wrapped an arm around him and drew him close, stroking a hand through his hair in the way he knew Dean pretended not to love.

"Of course I want you there. If you want to be there. It's not about me, or you, but the people we're there to help."

"I know. But, like, if you wanted space or—"

"I like sharing my life with you."

"And I like it too, but maybe it's good to have outside interests." Like Cas had once pointed out; they lived together, worked together, socialised together.

"I have other friends, Dean. I'm going to uni. I'm looking for a new job."

And Dean was clinging to Cas like a drowning man, taking him down with him. "Maybe I'm the one who needs an outside interest," he realised aloud.

"Are you happy?" Cas asked him.

"Yeah. I mean, I think so."

"Because that's what matters. Not what you think you should be doing."
"How did we even end up having this conversation?"

"Because something's bothering you and you won't talk about it," Cas stated.

"That obvious, huh?"

Cas took a breath. "Just tell me it's not me."

"It's not you," Dean said immediately, but not too quickly that his words rang false.

"Will you tell me when you're ready?"

"Probably not," Dean admitted.

Cas shook his head in defeat. "Fine," he conceded. "But you can't take it out on me."

"I know. I'm sorry. I... I want to be enough for you."

"You are."

"No, I'm not," Dean told him, sitting up. "And you know it. But I want to be, and that's why I'm sticking with the whole therapy thing. I want to be better. I want... I want to look at you and feel like I deserve you."

"Oh, Dean," Cas murmured, cupping his face in his hands and kissing him. "You do."

* * *

Dean grinned and held Cas's hand as they walked up to the mirror but, as he got close enough to see his reflection, his smile faded.

"What the..?"

Cas was there, beside him. He could still feel the weight of his hand in his. Except, he was alone in the mirror.

"Oh, I get it," he said. "I'm my own worst nightmare, is that it? Huh? Kind of like the Superman III junkyard scene?"

Except... wasn't the Mirror or Erised supposed to show you what you desired most in the world? Cas had even pointed out that 'erised' was 'desire' backwards, a detail that had gone completely over Dean's head.

"Joke all you want, smart-ass," his reflection scoffed. "But you can't lie to me - I know the truth. I know how scared you are inside. How worthless you feel. How you look into a mirror, and wonder what Cas sees in you. I see your confusion, how it makes you push him away."

Swallowing, Dean dismissed his reflection. "Sorry, pal. It's not gonna work. He forced a smile. "You're not real."

The other version of himself smirked. "Sure I am. I'm you."

"Wake up, Dean," Dean urged himself. "Come on, wake up."

"You are nothing. Nothing but a mess of insecurities and daddy issues."
"That... that's not true." He was everything to Cas; he'd told him that. But why couldn't he believe it?

"No? What are the things that you want? What are the things that you dream? I mean, your car? That's Dad's. Your favorite leather jacket? Dad's. Your music? Dad's. Do you even have an original thought?"

He'd covered this shit in therapy with Pamela. He'd give up his car over his dead body, but he had gone clothes shopping. Or browsed, at least. He hadn't seen anything he'd liked. And he was listening to new music.

"No. No, all there is is, 'I told you not to leave this room. I told you not to let him out of your sight!' 'I wouldn't have given you the car if I thought you were going to ruin it.'"

Get away from him! Disapproving. Or disappointed?

"You can still hear your Dad's voice in your head, can't you? Clear as a bell."

"Just shut up." Dean told him. He was getting better. He was trying to get better. To be better.

"I mean, think about it..." his reflection smiled, "...all he ever did was boss you around, and you tried so hard to be like him. But, deep down, Dad knew who you really were. Nothing more than a babysitter for the son he truly loved. Your own father didn't care about your happiness. Why should you?"

"Son of a bitch!" Dean's hand formed a fist and made impact with the mirror without thinking, the glass shattering under his skin, broken shards landing at his feet. Seven years bad luck. "John Winchester was a piss-poor excuse for a father!" Dean screamed. "All that crap he drilled into me, about looking after Sam - that should have been his crap. He was never there for Sam. I always was! It wasn't fair! I didn't deserve what he put on me!"

His fist relaxed, and reached out for Castiel's hand once again. But all it found was empty space. He turned and looked, but he was alone, now. Where had Cas gone? When had Cas left him? Being single and indulging in casual sex wasn't what Dean wanted anymore. Tears burned at his eyes as his reflection laughed.

"You can't escape me, Dean," it grinned knowingly, surrounding him in every broken shard. "You're going to lose Cas. And this? Alone and broken? This is what you're going to become!"

* * *

Dean bolted upright with a gasp, the arm Cas had draped across his chest sliding off as he did so.

In through the nose... Out through the mouth... Like he was meditating - or trying to - Dean slowly calmed himself. A dream. It had just been a dream. He looked over at Cas, sleeping peacefully beside him. It was probably the enchiladas, he reasoned. Spicy food was supposed to give you bad dreams, right? Or was it cheese?

He lay back down, reaching out for Cas under the covers as if to reassure himself that he wasn't alone. Not yet, anyway, the echo of his reflection taunted him.

Beside him, Cas stirred. "You okay?" he asked, his voice rough with sleep.

"Yeah. Just a... nightmare, I guess."

"S just a dream," Cas assured him sleepily. "Go back to sleep."
"Yeah," Dean agreed, unconvinced.

Perhaps something in his tone betrayed his doubt to Cas, for his boyfriend shifted closer until he was tucked up alongside him.

"I..." But the words got stuck in Dean's throat, and he didn't finish his sentence. "Good night," he whispered instead.

He lay there and held Cas, who fell back into a peaceful slumber far easier than Dean did.

* * *

"Do you still want to do this?" Pam asked Dean at his next session, as he got comfortable on the couch.

"No. Yes."

"Which is it?"

"Yes. But... I guess I'm a little afraid of what you'll find." Last night's nightmare still plagued his mind.

"Of what we'll find," Pamela corrected him. "We're doing this together. And it's only natural to be scared, or nervous. Are you ready?"

"As I'll ever be."

"Okay. Close your eyes close naturally and take a few deep breaths for me." Dean could hear her taking the deep breaths with him.

*In through the nose, out through the mouth... In through the nose, out through the mouth...*

"Continue to focus your breathing. Notice your chest and abdomen expanding as you breathe in, and slowly deflating as you breathe out. This time when you breathe in, pause for a moment, then exhale slowly and let the tension melt away. Feel yourself becoming more and more relaxed with each breath.

"Now I want you to concentrate on the top of your head. There's a warm sensation beginning to spread across your scalp, making its way slowly downwards. It's a pleasant feeling, soothing, like a warm hug. As this feeling travels down over your body, it relaxes everything in its path. Your forehead grows smooth, your eyebrows are resting, your cheeks relaxing - as the tension in your muscles dissolve, you allow yourself to feel more and more relaxed. Your lips part slightly as your jaw loosens, even your tongue softens in your mouth. Feel your eyelids becoming very heavy, and very relaxed."

And so Pamela continued her verbal journey down his body - arms, spine, hips, legs - until Dean felt lighter and more relaxed than he could ever remember feeling. He was like a cloud, drifting through the air.

"Now you're no longer on a couch in my office - picture yourself lying on a sun lounger, eyes closed, alone on a tropical island. You can hear the waves, breaking on the shoreline... You can smell the salty ocean mist... The air is warm, but a cool breeze blowing through the tropical forest behind you keeps you cool. Can you see the beach?"

"Yes," Dean replied, almost dreamily.
"Good. Now open your eyes, and see the cloudless blue sky overhead. Sit up, and see the ocean
before you, aqua and shimmering in the sun. When you stand up, you realise you're barefoot and the
soft, white sand is warm under your feet. It feels pleasant. Relaxing. Take a moment to relish in that
feeling. Notice the waves washing onto the sand, before receding back to the ocean. The waves
come in, then go out. In... out... Let the waves and your breathing fall into a steady rhythm."

_In through the nose, out through the mouth... In through the nose, out through the mouth..._

"Let yourself walk towards the water, over the warm sand. As you walk closer to the waves, the
sand becomes wet and firm. Cool. As you breath in, a wave washes over the sand towards you, and
touches your toe before returning to the ocean. You walk closer, and the next waves washes over
your feet. It's calming – just you and the water. Free from worries. Free from stress. You feel very
relaxed. Stand there for a moment, letting the waves wash over your feet and ankles. As you exhale,
let your anxiety flow out of you and be carried away by the waves."

A faint smile was on Dean’s face as he continued to imagine his own private island, far away from
everything. He wriggled his toes inside his shoes and could almost feel the sand Pamela was
describing. Had he ever felt this peaceful?

"When you’re ready, turn away from the ocean and look towards the forest. See the different shades
of greens, hear the breeze rustling through them. Let your feet guide you into the tropical forest. The
path is soft and cool beneath your feet, a mixture of soil, fallen leaves, and moss. You can still hear
the waves, though they grow fainter with each step you take. The scent of the ocean spray grows
tainter, too – replaced with the scent of trees, and soil. You can feel the sunlight filtering through the
trees, falling in a dappled pattern at your feet. The path up ahead opens out into a clearing, warm and
bright. In that clearing, there is a cabin."

Pamela swallowed. "How do you feel, Dean?"

"Relaxed. Calm. Safe."

_Good._ "Inside this cabin is a memory. Try the handle. It's locked. But it is your cabin. The key is a
heavy weight in your pocket, so take it out. Feel the key in your hand, heavy and cold to the touch.
Slide it into the keyhole, and turn it. The lock clicks. The door is open. It's up to you if you want to
step inside. I can't guide you any further, but I'll come with you if you guide me. If you choose to
step inside, Dean, you need to tell me what you see."

_Dein looked over his shoulder towards the ocean, unable to see it for the trees._

_He stepped inside._
Chapter 65

Chapter Notes

*lets out a breath* Holy shit. I think that might be the longest chapter I've written! And it's such an important chapter for Dean that I was really nervous about writing it, because if I got this wrong I'd be letting down every one of you who has patiently (and impatiently!) been waiting for Dean to get to a place where he can fully embrace his relationship with Cas. But when my beta (who has been complaining to me for months about the slow progression but reluctantly trusting that I had a plan) read this chapter she said, "Now I get why it had to take so long." I think that means I got it right, so I hope everyone else feels the same when they get to the end of this one! *crosses fingers*

Okay, so, chapter warnings. If consent issues are a thing for you, you might want to read the end notes first. I'm going to put spoilery stuff down there for those who are concerned about triggers.

Several of the bulbs are out, giving the bar a seedy atmosphere. Cigarette smoke lingers in the air. Men are crowded around tables or jammed into booths. The bass pulses through his body. Dean's mouth goes dry, and the fake ID feels heavy in his pocket.

"I'm in a bar," he told Pamela. "I shouldn't be."

"You're underage?"

"Yeah," Dean agreed, because it felt like it should be the right answer.

He approaches the bar with more confidence than he feels, then chickens out and orders a cola. If anyone asks what he's drinking, he can tell them there's vodka in it.

The memory is fuzzy - clouding over in his mind's eye. Suddenly he's squashed between two men in a seat intended for two.

"I've joined a group of guys. A few years older than me, maybe. We're all sitting in a booth."

"Weren't you at the bar?"

"Yeah. I don't know..."

"Its okay, Dean."

"I'm pretty sure these guys could overpower me if they wanted to," he admitted, "though I'd give them one hell of a fight."

"I'm sure you would. But do you get the feeling that they want to hurt you?"

"I don't think so... They're laughing. Happy."

"Are you?"
"I'm nervous."

"Because of the men you're with, or because you're underage?"

"I don't know. They buy the drinks," Dean continued. "I've got money, and a fake ID, but they don't want me to get them kicked out."

At some point Dean's elbow catches his glass, sending it falling to the floor. It shatters into a thousand pieces, the dregs of his beer soaking into the already stained carpet. A waitress appears with a handful of paper towels and he tries to apologise, tries to help, but the arm around his waist keeps him in his seat.

Dean shifted uncomfortably in his seat as the memory jumped forward in time again. "Some guy's got his hand on my junk."

Pamela leaned forward. "Tell me what's happening."

"I try to move away from the guy touching me, but there's nowhere to go - then the guy on my other side starts kissing me."

Dean's breathing was becoming slightly erratic.

"Remember your breathing, Dean," she urged him.

In through the nose... Out through the mouth... In through the nose... Out through the mouth...

"It's just a memory - they can't hurt you."

Suddenly, a voice booms across the room. "Get away from him, Dean!" His father. "What's wrong with you?!"

Wrong.

Wrong.

Wrong.

"Dad?!" Dean cried out.

"It's alright, Dean. Tell me what's happening."

"I can't get up," Dean panicked. "There's too many hands. They're too strong. There's too many of them."

"Dean!" his father repeats. "Dean!"

* * *

"Dean! Dean!" Pamela raised her voice to get him to focus on her, and not his memory. "On the count of three, you're going to stand up and walk back to the door. No-one will stop you. Once you step outside, you're going to feel as relaxed as you were before you went in. Okay? One, two, three."

Her patient visibly settled, as if a nightmare had passed. What he'd told her concerned her, but was outwith her area of expertise. She tried her best to calm him further as she audibly guided him back through the trees, across the beach, and onto the lounger once again.
"And when you're ready," she finished, "you're going to open your eyes."

She waited a moment until Dean blinked himself into awareness, his eyes unaccustomed to the lights after having been closed for so long.

"How do you feel?"

"Angry."

"Dean, what you're describing is a sexual trauma I'm not sure I'm best qualified to help you through," she began carefully. "When clients come to me in situations such as this, I refer them to a sexual assault specialist - someone who treats only people who have experienced sexual assault."

"I wasn't assaulted!" Dean insisted adamantly. He couldn't have been. He wouldn't have let himself be.

Pamela frowned. "You've told me this man - these men - put their hands on you without your permission," she reminded him.

Dean said nothing, because that's exactly what he had said. What he'd remembered - hadn't he?

Pamela licked her lips, and referred back to her notes. Before, he'd come to her talking about a dream that was the reason he was currently on her couch.

"This dream you had - full of hands and teeth," she began. "You said you had it again in the middle of the day. Can you think what might have triggered it? Something new, perhaps. Something that was said? Something that was unique to the situation?" There was more to his memory than he'd seen - perhaps the rest would come to him over the next few days, or perhaps they'd need to do this all again.

Dean was silent for so long she began to think he wasn't going to answer.

"It's okay if you can't—"

"Cologne," Dean interrupted her softly. "Cas got cologne for his birthday. Tried it on."

"Describe it for me."

"Earthy. Spicy. Strong. I don't like it, but it was a gift."

"Okay. Next time, I'd like to try this again."

"What?!"

"But I'd like you to bring this cologne with you. See if it helps you remember more details."

"More details? Like that wasn't detailed enough?!"

"You haven't finished uncovering this memory—"

"Maybe I don't want to!"

Pamela sighed softly. "Dean, I understand that this is difficult for you. However, I believe facing this memory in its entirety is important. You said you wanted to be intimate with Cas - to stop pushing him away. This could be the first step on the road to doing so."
Dean opened and closed his mouth, seeming to agree with her statement. "You want me to wait another two weeks to finish this?"

"You're upset, and I don't want to push you too far in one session. But we still have some time to talk about—"

"Damn right I'm upset! You've put all this shit in my head and now you expect me to just go home!"

"I didn't put anything in your head, Dean. It was already there. I just helped you uncover it."

"What the hell am I supposed to do? Carry on like normal?"

"I understand your frustration—"

"You don't know shit about my frustration!"

"If you really think you'll be ready to do this again sooner, you can make an appointment for next week on your way out. But Dean, I—"

But he was already storming out. She was a professional and, though she felt empathy, she tried to remain as detached from her patients' issues as she could. It was harder with some than with others, however. As she held her head in her hands, she wondered if Dean would come back at all.

* * *

The front door flew open with such force, Cas thought it would come right off its hinges.

"Dean?"

Footsteps thundered down the hall, then the bedroom door slammed shut.

Oh, no, Cas thought to himself. He got to his feet and followed Dean down the hall, standing outside his - no, their - bedroom. His hand was on the door handle, but he didn't turn it. He'd promised Dean that he'd give him space if he needed it. But his experience of therapy, and his instincts as a friend - and boyfriend - were at war with one another as he stood there. He wanted to ask if Dean was okay, if he needed anything, but he'd promised—

A muffled sob shook him out of his thoughts and he leaned closer to the door, listening. Was Dean crying? He dropped his forehead against the wood and willed Dean to know that he was there if he needed him.

Reluctantly, Castiel released the door handle and walked away.

* * *

The hand over his dick hasn't moved, but the pressure has increased. There's another hand on his knee, and another on his shoulder. The lips kiss harder; the hands grip tighter. There's nowhere for him to go, but he still tries to move away. Unfortunately, the guy on his other side takes this as an invitation and cups his neck, pulling him in for a kiss.

Wherever he turns, the lips follow. He tries to get up again, fight off the hands holding him in place, but he can't. They're too strong. There are too many of them.

* * *

The next day, Dean woke in a cold sweat. He'd tossed and turned all night, his short periods of sleep
plagued by nightmares. He left his bed in search of Castiel, finding him in the living room.

"You didn't come to bed last night."

"I slept out here," he said, patting the sofa.

Dean frowned. "Why?"

"I wasn't sure you wanted company," Cas told him honestly.

Dean was torn between being grateful to Cas for keeping his promise and leaving him alone, and guilty that he'd essentially kicked Cas out of his own bed. He took his hand in his own and told him, "It's your bed."

"It was yours first."

Cas's smile was a little sad and Dean wanted to kiss him, to reassure him that he was okay, but he couldn't. Not just yet. So instead he reached out to cup his jaw, and smiled softly when Cas met his eyes. Cas put his hand over Dean's, and turned his face to kiss his palm. Could he tell that Dean was beginning to pull away again? That Dean was afraid that, this time, he wouldn't find his way back to Cas?

"Besides," Cas told him, "the sofa's probably comfier than your bed."

That took Dean by surprise. "What?"

"Your mattress is lumpy."

"It's not—"

"It's lumpy," Cas insisted.

"I mean, there might be a few dents in it, but what do you expect when I lie in it every night?"

"How old is it?"

"I don't know. It was there when I moved in."

"Then maybe it's time we looked for a new one?"

"Do you know how expensive—"

"I said look," Cas repeated. "We don't have to buy one now, but if we know what we like then we can shop around."

Dean's thoughts ran a mile a minute. He wondered if Cas was truly oblivious to him withdrawing again. That was a more comforting thought than the idea that Cas did notice, but was choosing not to say anything to spare Dean's feelings. However, there was also the possibility that maybe he was overthinking everything. Perhaps he wasn't putting as much distance between them as he'd been imagining.

His thought spiral was making his head hurt.

Curling up beside Cas, he rested his head in his boyfriend's lap, trying to push all his thoughts to the back of his mind for now. Almost immediately, fingers brushed through his hair. But instead of soothing him as it usually did, Cas's action only served as a reminder of Dean's nightmare.
He tries to get up again, fight off the hands holding him in place, but he can't.

He sat up. Said, "I'm going to jump in the shower."

Cas looked at him. "That's probably a good idea."

Dean swallowed. Nodded, but didn't stand up.

Cas reached a hand out. Stopped, his hand hovering in the air between them. Squeezed his arm.

* * *

Is this really as awkward as it feels? Dean wondered to himself. Damn, I wish I knew what to tell you, but I don't even know what to tell myself.

Eventually Cas took his hand back, the red ghost of his handprint still marking Dean's skin from where he'd squeezed Dean too hard.

"I'll put the coffee on for you," Cas said.

"Thanks," Dean said.

They stood up together, walked out of the living room together, then turned in opposite directions.

Over the next few days, Cas seemed to be more and more withdrawn to Dean. Or maybe he was just too distracted with the soup kitchen they were supposed to volunteering at.

"Are you sure you're up for this?" he asked Dean for what felt like the hundredth time.

"Honestly? I need the distraction."

"Because I can go alone if you need more time alone."

"Believe me, being alone with myself is the last thing I need."

"I'm just saying—"

"I know what you're saying, Cas. And you're probably right. But if I stay home, I'll go crazy. Or drink. And neither of us want that."

Cas stared at him for so long, Dean was beginning to think there was something wrong with him.

"I'm so proud of you," he gushed a moment later, his voice cracking over the words. When was the last time someone had said they were proud of him?

He put on a show of looking warily at him. "You're not going to start crying, are you?" he joked.

But Cas ignored his attempts at deflecting his praise and continued to enthuse about Dean's progress. "You have come so far, and I'm happy for you."

Have I really? Because it kind of feels like I'm going backwards, here. "Okay, stop, before you give me an ego." Like that would ever happen.

* * *

Dean didn't know what he'd expected at the soup kitchen, but the sheer number of people they were feeding left him stunned. He knew there were thousands of people living on the streets statistically,
but he'd only ever seen a handful for himself. He'd assumed most lived in larger cities.

And Cas had been one of them. Many months ago. Cas had been one of the people queueing up for a meagre bowl of soup and a roll, which might have been his first real meal in days.

He smiled at one woman as he ladled soup into her bowl. The smell coming from her clothes made his stomach churn, and he hoped it didn't show on his face. He turned to Cain, who was also volunteering, and excused himself to the bathroom.

To his surprise, Cas appeared behind him as he splashed water on his face.

"Are you okay?"

"Yeah. Just feeling a lot of... feelings."

"Such as?"

_That Cas's hands were warm on his waist as their eyes met in the mirror._ "Relief, that you're home with me and not out there anymore. Guilt, because I find myself grossed out by their... hygiene." He knew Cas was going to think he was an ass, and rightfully so, but he still found himself getting defensive. "I know they can't help it, but—"

"You're a bit of a germaphobe," Cas smiled. "Which makes it all the more meaningful that you're here."

Dean turned around, remarking to himself that Cas never failed to surprise him. "You always know how to put a positive spin on things, don't you?"

"Not _always_. But I hate seeing you so down on yourself." He pressed a short, chaste kiss to Dean's mouth. "Though I suppose I should be glad that I wasn't _too_ smelly when you found me, otherwise you might not have taken me home..." he teased fondly.

Dean let out an embarrassed chuckle and dropped his gaze to the floor. "There was no way I was leaving you there. So, smelly or not... you were coming home with me."

"And _that_ is why you are a good man," Cas told him, punctuating his praise with another kiss. "I wish you could see yourself the way I see you."

"I'm pretty sure you've said that before," Dean told him with a yawn.

"Are you still not sleeping?"

Dean looked cagey. "No."

Father Reynolds cleared his throat in the doorway. "If you two are done having a moment," he asked pointedly, jerking a thumb back at the soup line, "there are a lot of hungry people out there."

"Of course. I just wanted to check Dean was feeling alright - he's been a little off, the past few days."

"Mmhmm," Father Reynolds smiled knowingly.

"I'll be out in a moment," Cas promised him, sliding into a cubicle.

"It's good to see him looking happy," Father Reynolds confided in Dean as they returned to their duties.
Dean looked a little surprised, and glanced back over his shoulder. "Uh, yeah."

"You two seem to be having a few ups and downs - would I be right?"

"Um... Not really," Dean said unsurely. "I, eh, I'm having these, ah, counselling sessions. Talking about stuff. Sometimes... Sometimes it's tough."

Father Reynolds nodded. "I remember when Castiel was struggling on his journey of self-acceptance. It makes it easier to have someone to support you through it."

"Uh, yeah," Dean agreed again.

"Providing you let them." With one last knowing look, Father Reynolds left Dean to continue serving.

* * *

Cas smiled and chatted with everyone queuing for food, taking the time to try and coax a smile or greeting out of the warier ones. Most of the people were kind and grateful, but others were distrusting. Cas tried a little harder with them, but grudgingly accepted that some just wanted to be left alone. Despite the reluctance he faced from some, he was caught off guard when his friendly greeting was met with hatred and hostility.

"I remember you," the man in the line said.

* * *

Cas stood in front of the bathroom mirror, squeezing toothpaste into his mouth. His toothbrush had suspiciously gone missing after an altercation with one of the other men that had left him with fresh bruises to join and replace those that were fading or faded, so settled for moving the frothy paste around his teeth with a finger for now.

He heard the door open and glanced up, recognising the reflection of the man in question.

"How much longer you gonna be with us?" the man spat.

"Until I have somewhere else to go," Cas replied calmly.

The man leaned in close. "Don't think I don't see the way you look at us. At me. It's disgusting."

"I don't look at you," Cas assured him. "I don't look at any of you." He just wanted to be left alone, to be safe and warm and fed.

"Do you think they'll let you stay when I tell them what you are? That I've caught you looking?"

The man was right about him, but Cas wasn't going to let him know that. He was being honest when he said he hadn't looked, and the man couldn't prove anything. He told him as much, but the man just laughed.

"You really think it'll matter?"

The sad thing was he had - had believed in God to protect him as he strived to stay true to His teachings - but he had been wrong. He'd thought that when he'd found St Anne's Shelter for Men, where he helped maintain the church grounds in exchange for food and accommodation, it had been a blessing - had believed God was offering him a second chance. But God had turned his back on him, knowing what he was. If that was the case, then he couldn't fight it. And so he'd been 'asked' to
Tired and unhappy, scared and alone, he'd wandered the streets until he came to the only logical conclusion in his moment of weakness - that, if he was already damned, he'd be as well ending his torment sooner rather than later.

* * *

"And I remember you," Cas said coolly.

"Filthy fag," the man muttered under his breath. "How'd you get off the streets - whore yourself out to some rich queer? Do you suck his filthy cock in your mouth so he'll put food in your stomach? Moan like a bitch when he fucks you in the ass so you've got a warm bed to sleep in?"

Castiel bit his tongue to prevent himself from saying something he'd regret as he dutifully ladled soup into a bowl. He was wrong - Cas wasn't Dean's *whore* - but he *had* taken him in and saved him, and Cas hated the way the man's words rang true regardless.

"Hey, I'm talking to you."

Castiel's whole body had tensed, and he was practically shaking with quiet fury.

"I wonder, is your sugar daddy here now?" the man continued, looking around before staring back at Cas.

Cas tried to keep eye contact with the man whose name he had forgotten, but eventually his eyes betrayed him and sought out Dean for reassurance.

The man followed his gaze. "Oh, he's a pretty boy," he smirked. "With a mouth like that I bet he goes down on you, doesn't he?"

God, how Cas wished that were true. His patience and understanding with Dean were wearing thin beneath the man's hurtful words, wishing that Dean *did* go down on him. That he could go down on Dean, that he could feel Dean, *taste* Dean, wishing that Dean would— He closed his eyes.

"Bet he sucks everything good out of you, leaving only the sin behind."

Cas opened his eyes and, with everything he had, threw the bowl of hot soup all over Frank. He remembered his name, now. He ignored the gasps and outcries of his fellow volunteers, ringing distantly in his ears, and retreated to the bathroom.

As Cas had done for him, Dean followed him into the small room.

"What the hell was that?" he asked softly.

And God, Cas *hated* that tone of voice - soft, as if Cas were fragile and could easily be spooked.

"I don't want to talk about," he heard himself saying.

Dean stared at his back. "You're always the one telling me that it helps to open up about things," he coaxed, his tone gentle and mildly teasing.

"Then perhaps you should think about taking that same advice," Cas told him sharply.

"Hey," Dean murmured, reaching for him. "Hey, hey, hey."

Cas stiffened in his embrace, melting into Dean's touch against his better judgement as calloused fingers traced the curve of his face. He closed his eyes, licking his lips subconsciously as he
imagined what those fingers might feel like on other, more intimate areas of his body. Stroking swollen flesh, curling inside him... But no. There would be none of that. Not any time soon, he was sure.

"I'm sorry," he whispered, not opening his eyes. Sorry for his moment of weakness, for letting Frank turn him against Dean.

"Hey, you don't have to apologise to me."

Dean had no idea.

"And if that guy was being a jerk, then you don't have to apologise to him, either."

Cas choked out a bitter laugh. "He is a jerk. And the stupid thing is, he isn't even worth getting all worked up over."

"Castiel!"

Cas turned to Father Reynolds, shame turning over in his gut as he met the disappointment in his eyes. "I'm sorry."

"No, he's not," Dean said immediately.

A hand on his arm stopped him from saying anything else, and Cas shook his head. He isn't even worth getting all worked up over.

Father Reynolds sighed, obviously unwilling to get into a verbal dispute over Castiel's actions at that moment. "Go home. Both of you. Just... get out of here," he instructed them tiredly.

* * *

Dean thought about Father Reynolds' words a lot over the next few days. Maybe if he opened up to Cas, he could stop second-guessing what he was thinking. But how could he open up when he wasn't even sure what to say? What had happened? Glimpses of a past memory that left him feeling angry and confused... Glimpses that he was trying not to think about, pushing the memory down during the day, burying it under layers of denial and avoidance.

Unfortunately it was like his treacherous brain wanted to think about it, so would fill his head at night with memories of hands and mouths and accusations of 'Wrong!' So he avoided sleep, telling Cas he'd be there in a minute but never following him through. Sometimes he'd nod off in front of the television, and wake up to the ghosts of hands pinning him in place. Other times he'd last the night, exhausted by the time he got to work the next day. Once Cas tried to sit up with him, but eventually his eyelids grew too heavy and he was too tired to argue with Dean, to insist that he came to bed.

* * *

Cas rolled over and reached an arm out, finding only an empty mattress beside him. Dean had been coming to bed late the past few nights and, as a result, had been increasingly tired throughout the day. He glanced at the clock, finding it was almost three in the morning.

"Oh, for goodness' sake..." he muttered, rolling out of bed and heading in search of Dean.

The apartment was in darkness but, as he glanced in the living room anyway, he found the glow from the TV illuminating his boyfriend.
"Dean, come to bed."

"I don't want to sleep. If I sleep, I dream."

"You need to get some rest. You can't operate safely at work if you're sleep-deprived."

"Are you going to tell Bobby on me?" Dean asked petulantly.

"If I have to. I'd rather you were pissed at me for a couple of days than you lost a finger."

"The end of days are coming soon, my friends. Once men started marrying men, that was it."

Castiel glared at the television.

"It wasn't meteors that killed the dinosaur - they all turned GAY!"

He snorted, realising it was a mocking stereotype. Then his gaze hardened once again as he thought of Frank and how harmful even representation that ridiculed those beliefs could be, as those who shared them inevitably felt victimised and only clung to those beliefs even tighter. "What are you watching?"

"It's about a murderous rabbit."

Cas watched for a moment, until the alleged 'rabbit' appeared onscreen. "That is a rabbit?" he asked, laughing at the low-budget effects. "Dean, you've criticised me in the past for watching movies that are better than this rubbish. Come. To. Bed."

He snatched the remote and turned it off, dragging his protesting boyfriend to bed.

* * *

When Cas woke up the next morning, Dean was snoring.

"'Not tired' my ass," Cas muttered to himself. He leaned across and switched Dean's alarm off, determined to let him catch up on his sleep.

By the time Dean eventually appeared in the kitchen Cas had gone for a run, showered, had breakfast, called Benny to swap his morning off with Dean's, and tidied the kitchen.

"I'm late for work!" Dean yelled, racing into the room. "Bobby's going to tear me a new one!"

"No, you're not," Cas told him calmly. "I called Benny. He wasn't too happy about it, but he agreed to swap his morning off with yours."

"I... What? Awesome," he said, collapsing into a chair with a tired groan, his burst of energy suddenly depleted. But so much for doing any extra work this week...

"How did you sleep?" Cas asked him.

"Fine," Dean conceded reluctantly.

"It's almost lunch. Why don't you just go shower, and I'll make us a plate of sandwiches?"

"Coffee first."

As Cas slid a mug into his hand a moment later, Dean wondered - not for the first time - how the hell
he'd gotten so lucky with Cas. When he vocalised his thought, however, Cas just shook his head.

"I've never known someone with such a good brain to be so averse to using it," he mused.

Dean just looked confused. "Huh?"

"If you thought about it, even just a little, I'm sure you'd come up with something."

"You seem to be forgetting to take my low feelings of self-worth into account," Dean attempted to joke self-deprecatingly. He sipped his coffee.

"Put it this way - who else has supported me through everything since I came to live here? And how did I come to live here?"

"Balthazar," Dean pointed out, taking another sip. "And I just so happened to be out having sex at the time you decided to kill yourself."

"Balthazar hasn't stood by my decision to date you," Cas reminded him. "And it sounds ridiculous when you put it like that."

Dean raised an eyebrow. "I get that you were at a really low point, but you're young and you've got your whole life ahead of you!" So God knows why you'd want to spend it sorting through my baggage, he thought to himself. "It kind of is a bit ridiculous. To me, anyway. Even at my lowest, I knew I could either roll over and die, or keep fighting no matter what. And I chose to fight. Every time. Because if you stop fighting, then that's it. Game over, man! Game over!" he said, in an impression of Bill Paxton's character in Aliens.

Cas smiled. "I understood that reference."

"I should damn well hope so," Dean smirked. "But as for Balthazar, are we... are we even dating? Because I'm pretty sure we haven't been on any dates."

"We go out all the time."

"Yeah - the same old stuff we always do. Drink at The Roadhouse. See a movie if we can afford it."

Cas shrugged. "I've chosen you, you've chosen me, and we're trying to make it work. If our 'dates' aren't very exciting or original, I'm okay with that. For now, at least. If we can get a bit more money coming in, then it would be nice to go out somewhere special occasionally."

Dean looked at him. "I don't excite you?" he quipped before he could stop himself. As soon as the words left his mouth, his eyes widened and he froze. Fuck!

Cas stared at him for a long moment, trying to judge whether it was best to respond to the question or let it slide. "You know you do," he settled for eventually, with a smirk.

Dean coughed and flushed.

Cas chuckled. "You walked into that one."

"Yeah. Yeah, I did. And now I'm going to walk into the shower," he said, standing and pouring the last of his coffee away.

When he turned around, Cas was right there despite Dean not having heard him make a sound.

"I'm going to get you a bell."
Cas tilted his head and squinted at him for a second, hands frozen halfway to Dean's face. Then his face cleared, and his hands were pulling Dean in for a kiss. Dean responded immediately, his hands finding Castiel's waist. In that moment, he realised that any sense of awkwardness he'd felt over the past few days was gone. One of Castiel's hands slid around the back of his head, dragging through his hair; the other trailed down his neck, coming to a rest on Dean's chest. His palm was hot through his shirt, and Dean's own hands dragged a little lower. When Dean slipped his tongue between his open lips, and Cas sucked gently on it, he let out a surprised noise and gripped Cas's hips a little tighter.

Cas pulled away all too soon, a satisfied look in his eyes and a teasing curve to his mouth. "Brush your teeth while you're in there."

"What, you don't like morning breath?" Dean asked him, moving in for one last kiss and eliciting a cross between a shriek and a giggle from Cas. He stopped, amused. "What the hell was that?"

"Go!" Cas demanded, laughing. "Otherwise you really will be late for work."

* * *

By the time his next therapy session came around, Dean thought to himself that maybe, maybe, he was ready to remember. But maybe not, he reconsidered as he lay down on Pamela's couch.

"How has the last week been?" she asked as Dean shrugged off his coat and draped it across the back of the couch.

"Rubbish," he stated bluntly as he sat down.

"In what way?"

"I haven't been sleeping."

"Have you been meditating?"

Dean rubbed a hand across the back of his neck. "I gave up with that," he admitted.

"Dean—"

"I couldn't clear my damn mind, okay?" he snapped defensively. "It's not that I didn't try."

"Okay," Pamela soothed him, her tone saying that she believed him. "How are you feeling today?"

"I don't know. Eager for this to be over, I guess."

"It's not going to be over today, Dean."

"I know, I know, but... Maybe I can at least get some answers today, you know?"

"Maybe," she agreed carefully. "But you have to be prepared for the possibility that this won't help in the way you're hoping."

Dean clenched his teeth, and a muscle twitched in his jaw.

"Did you bring the cologne?"

Dean dug into his jacket pocket and held the bottle out to her. "I don't know what you're planning on doing with it, but I hope Cas doesn't notice it's missing."
"You didn't ask him for it?"

"I didn't know how to," Dean admitted. "I figure once I get some answers for myself, I can give him some answers."

"True. But you can take it back with you tonight, so hopefully he shouldn't notice you borrowed it."

"So what are you going to do with it?"

"With your permission, we'll use the scent as a trigger."

Dean narrowed his eyes. "How?"

"I'll put a little on a handkerchief, and hold it under your nose. If, at any time, it becomes too much, you can stop me. Pick a word - I suppose you could call it a 'safe word' - that, if you say it, I'll take the handkerchief away and walk you back out of the cabin."

"A 'safe word'? Isn't that like some kind of sex thing?"

Pamela chuckled. "It can be."

"No." Dean shook his head. "You can't. I need to know."

"You need to know what, Dean?"

"I need to know the truth," he told her. "I need to know. To make things work with Cas."

"You don't need to rush that today, though, Dean. Taking baby steps at the start is important so we don't cause more damage than good."

"But we've been doing this for weeks already!" Dean complained impatiently.

"If you can't promise me that you won't push yourself too hard too fast, I can't in good conscious hypnotise you," Pamela told him firmly.

A second was all it took for Dean to say, "Poughkeepsie."

"So just to be clear, you're consenting to this?"

"Yeah."

"Alright, lie back, and picture yourself lying on a sun lounger—"

"Didn't we do this last time?"

"Yes," Pamela agreed, "but I need to take you back to a place of complete relaxation."

Dean sighed, but dutifully lay back and closed his eyes as Pamela guided him back to the cabin in the woods.

"You can hear the waves, breaking on the shoreline... see the cloudless blue sky... feel the sunlight filtering through the trees... The path up ahead opens out into a clearing, warm and bright. In that clearing, there is a cabin."

In his mind, Dean reached into his pocket for the key and unlocked the cabin door.

"Now, before you step inside, I want you to inhale deeply," Pamela told him, holding the scented
handkerchief under his nose. "This time when you step inside, you're going to try to remember that scent, and be aware of it." She paused. "Whenever you're ready, Dean."

* * *

Dean tries to focus on the nauseating smell of the cologne. When his nose screws up at the the odour invading his nostrils, he turns the handle and steps inside.

Several of the bulbs are out, giving the bar a seedy atmosphere. Cigarette smoke lingers in the air. Men are crowded around tables or jammed into booths. The bass pulses through his body. Dean's mouth goes dry, and the fake ID feels heavy in his pocket. He knows he's good-looking, but he also knows how people see him - pretty - and he knows, walking into a place like this, what men will think that means. Hell, he's even had regular guys with wives and kids to insinuate his sexual preferences based on his looks. Ropes and clamps have never really turned him on - a little light spanking was about as kinky as he got - so if any guys thought he was a submissive twink they'd soon realise they were mistaken.

He approaches the bar with more confidence than he feels, then chickens out and orders a cola. If anyone asks what he's drinking, he can tell them there's vodka in it. The guys around him smell like vanilla and citrus, light scents that he dismisses easily. With one elbow on the bar, he leans back and scans the room. He spies a group of college guys, a few years older than him, and shoots them his flirtiest look.

It works, and they're soon waving him over to join them. All going well, Dean's not going to have to pay for another drink tonight.

One of the men gets up, and he slides into their place. He smells like earth and spice, and Dean is suddenly hyper-aware of the man's cologne clinging in his nostrils. Then the man sits back down and Dean is sandwiched between their bodies in a way that has his teenage cock hardening in his pants. The men each wrap an arm around him, and Dean makes himself comfortable. It takes a little longer for his stomach to settle, however, as it churns anxiously in fear that someone will realise that he's underage and doesn't belong here.

The men order more and more drinks, and at some point Dean's elbow catches his glass, sending it falling to the floor. It shatters into a thousand pieces, the dregs of his beer soaking into the already stained carpet. A waitress appears with a handful of paper towels and he tries to apologise, tries to help, but the arm around his waist keeps him in his seat. Warm breath in his ear, followed by wet lips on his neck, send a shudder through him. A hand slides into his, pressing it against rough denim that strains against a firm bulge that Dean recognises. He's touched his own dick, rock hard at the images in the magazines he keeps in his sock drawer, but this is different. His body tingles, stomach fluttering as if he's just slipped a quarter into the Magic Fingers machine. This is someone else's.

Eventually, a bag of white powder is shaken at him. He turns it down only to watch in equal parts horror and fascination as the guys use their beer mats to create parallel lines on the table and hoover it up their noses.

Dean doesn't complain when a hand rests on his knee, gradually inching up his thigh, until it becomes a warm pressure over his dick and - not for the first time that night - it starts to harden in his pants.

The guy on his right reacts with jealousy. Dean's not opposed to hooking up twice in the same night, so snuggles closer to him to convey his interest. It seems that neither of the men are opposed to sharing, however, so to Dean's surprise - and physical excitement - they're suddenly both all over him. Hands, lips, teeth. Stroking, kissing, biting.
He's never had a threesome - too young probably - but he'd thought about it. Fantasised about it, more accurately. Only, never with two other men - there's always been at least one woman in the picture. Though he's just beginning to experiment with his attraction to other guys, the idea of embracing it without a woman involved as a sort of safety net simultaneously terrifies and thrills him.

His head is swimming and his senses are overloaded - there are hands on his crotch and chest, lips on his mouth, teeth tugging at his earlobe, and he's got no idea how many beers he's had but he's ready to blow his load right here at the table.

Then he hears his father's voice booming across the room, and there's a mood killer if ever there was one.

"Get away from him!" his father shouts. He storms closer and makes a grab for his son. "Dean!"

The college guys make an attempt to stand up to him, but John Winchester quickly puts them in their place. "What's the hell's wrong with you? He's just a kid!"

Dean bristles at his father's words. He's underage, but no kid.

"Come on, Dean. Let's get you home."

His father's words are those of concern, but his tone is one of anger and disappointment. Dean was supposed to be looking after Sam tonight, but Sam had insisted he was old enough to take care of himself and Dean had been getting cabin fever. For three weeks, now, Dean's been stuck inside watching Sam do his homework. He can't help, because he didn't graduate. There was only so much comfort he could get from his imagination and his right hand, and he hadn't expected John back until morning. He'd just wanted one damn night to himself.

He says as much to his father, who lectures him about responsibility.

That's rich, coming from a man who swings between being a workaholic and an alcoholic. And from the way his father's talking you'd think Sam was Dean's kid, not his own.

Dean snaps, his sense of self-preservation submerged in the depths of his drunken mind. He sounds like a child, even to his own ears, as he rages at John for embarrassing him. But then, Dean had never had the opportunity to be a child, so maybe it had been a long time coming.

It's not John's place to be liked, or so he says, and the words sting Dean more than they should. He loves his dad - so much so that he's killing himself every day for his father's approval. And John can't see it for all Dean's failures.

He's let his father down, again.

* * *

There were tears in Dean's eyes when Pamela brought him out of his hypnotised state, and she offered him a tissue. As she gave him a few minutes to process what he'd remembered, she glanced at the clock. She was running late with his appointment, but that was okay.

"How do you feel?" she asked him once he scrunched the tissue in his hand and tossed it in the trash.


"Tiredness is normal. But the other two emotions are interesting. Can you tell me why?"
"Because that was all bullshit!"

"Are you trying to say you don't believe it?"

"Yes. No!" Dean ran his hands through his hair as his he grew more frustrated with himself. "I mean, is that it? All these weeks - months - of making Cas feel like I didn't want him, for what? My dad catching me making out with a guy?"

Pamela took a deep breath as she prepared to calm and reassure him, but Dean kept talking. Or more accurately, shouting.

"I get that I've got shit to deal with about my dad - we've talked about that. But, what? I disappoint him one too many times and instead of feeling like crap for it, I make up a sexual assault? Over some daddy issues? And then... repress it? Why would anyone do that? How fucked up do you have to be to make up a sexual assault?!!"

"I don't think you made up a sexual assault," Pamela jumped in.

"Then what the hell would you call it?!"

"It's more likely a case of misremembering what happened." She held up a hand as Dean opened his mouth. "I think it's very unlikely that you created a new memory only to bury it. Sometimes we bury a real memory in order to protect ourselves, and that leaves a blank space. Other times, we rewrite it into an alternative memory. A safer memory."

"How do I know that's the real memory? That I didn't rewrite the first one because I didn't like it?"

"That's a good question. I can be confident in saying that what you've remembered today is likely the real memory, for several reasons. The tone you used when you were describing the evening was more relaxed today - your words more honest. The situation you described with your father fits what you've told me about him. This is what I was hoping for by using one of your triggers - that would immerse you deeper into that memory. I was hoping for you to face your confrontation with your father as I'd felt like you were holding something back during our last session - it never occurred to me that you were simply trying to make sense of what little your brain was actually showing you."

"The memory was clearer today," Dean agreed. "So what I first thought happened... didn't happen."

"From all that we've covered in our sessions, I think the most likely scenario is that you felt that you disappointed your father one too many times for you to handle, so your brain simply tried to erase the memory. To grow up feeling like a failure is emotionally crippling. At some point, even the strongest mind would break under the strain of constantly failing."

"Not that I'm saying you failed as a child. On the contrary, I think you did remarkably well from what you've told me. You've acknowledged that his parenting wasn't always great, but that he did try his best. The fact we've already started to analyse your upbringing, and your relationship with your father, should make this memory easier to begin to process."

Dean dragged a hand over his face with a groan.

"Think of your memory like a jigsaw puzzle. You had some of the pieces - the bar, the men, your father - but no idea what the final image was supposed to look like. You were lacking the context. So, your brain tried to make them fit together in the way that made most sense."

"A sexual assault," Dean stated. He thought back to the time he'd found Cas in an alleyway, pants around his ankles, and how he'd jumped to exactly that conclusion. "Yeah, I guess that makes
"Our brains can be rather pessimistic, and have a tendency to jump to the wrong conclusions - the things we fear, or are conditioned to fear, the most. So that shadow on the wall, just at the edge of your vision, is always a spider in your mind - until you look at it, and it's just a shadow."

"We tell women they need to be pure, men that they need to be strong. So yeah, we fear assault. It's an attack on her purity, his masculinity. It's why the xenomorph in Alien works so well - our subconscious fear of penetration."

Pamela was silent for a long moment as she processed what he was telling her. "That's a very intelligent observation," she said eventually, impressed.

"Don't sound so surprised," Dean told her. A second later, he admitted, "It was something Cas realised when we were watching it. I told him he was ruining a perfectly good movie."

Pamela chuckled, but then her expression grew more serious again. "You asked why - and the answer will give us something to address in upcoming sessions. As a child, you were driven by the need to impress your father. Yet, when you failed, you couldn't cope with his disappointment in you, or your guilt from your perceived failure. Sometimes bad parenting, or an unstructured childhood, can emotionally cripple us as children. When that happens, we are forced to do our emotional development as adults. Like you have done, to a degree."

Dean's fingers dug into the sofa cushions. "Then what does it matter if he's dead now?"

"It can help us in adulthood to understand the things that went wrong in our younger years - to prevent us from relapsing in stressful situations, or from continuing the cycle with the next generation."

Ben. Dean swallowed. "Are you saying I've fucked my kid up, too?"

"I'm saying that understanding teenage!Dean will help improve the life and relationships adult!Dean has."

It wasn't until Dean was halfway home that he realised that she hadn't exactly answered his question.

Chapter End Notes

Hi! So if you're down here, you're probably concerned about consent issues. This chapter begins and ends with Dean undergoing hypnosis - during which he begins to uncover some long-buried memories. Unfortunately Dean doesn't remember everything at once and tries to piece his scattered memories together himself, which leads to him believing a consensual situation was something else. I've tried to keep the dub-/non-con implications as light as possible in the opening scene (I don't think they're much stronger than Dean's dreams have been, just perhaps more explicitly stated), and it is all explained clearly in the final scene when his memory comes back to him in its entirety.
Chapter 66

When Dean got home, he stopped in the living room doorway and just looked at Cas. He was deep in concentration, trying to complete another of his word puzzles. Probably a crossword.

Dean wasn't blind. He knew Cas was an attractive man. He had an infectious smile, and an intense gaze. But Dean had never properly taken the time to really see these things - he was aware of them, of course, but his brain seemed to ignore them until moments like this.

Cas muttered something to himself, and picked up the dictionary beside him.

"That's cheating," Dean teased, moving to sit beside him.

Cas looked up, surprised to see him there. "I didn't hear you come in. Is everything... Are you okay?"

Dean cupped a hand around the back of Cas's neck, rubbing his fingers through his hair, and simply stared at him.

"Earth to Dean?"

Dean smiled. "I'm okay," he said, leaning in to kiss him.

Immediately Cas's eyes closed, hands finding him and pulling him closer. His books fell to the floor with a thud.

After a moment, Cas pulled back ever so slightly. "You had a... good session today?" he asked carefully against Dean's lips.

"It sucked," Dean said honestly. "But... it was probably 'good' in that it made a few things clearer. It was... pretty intense."

Cas slid his palms up Dean's chest, one resting over his heart. "I'm glad."

Dean looked guilty. "Look, Cas, I know we're moving at two different speeds here—"

"That's an understatement," Cas said, but there was humour in his eyes. "I want to go full steam ahead and you're at a dead stop."

Dean sighed.

"I'm sorry," Cas said immediately. "I didn't mean to make you feel guilty, or—"

"You didn't. I mean, I already did. What I was going to say was... I want you to know that I do want this. You. And it might not seem like it, but I can't wait until I'm ready to do more than just make out with you." He huffed. "You know, the past couple few weeks, Pamela's had to tell me to slow down with the whole therapy thing."

Castiel pulled away and looked at him in mock shock. "Dean Winchester, eager to talk about his feelings? Who is this man before me?!"

"Yeah, yeah," Dean complained, but with a smile. "I just... You deserve more, and I want to give you that."
"You will," Castiel assured him, momentarily distracted by the strong arm he was stroking.

"Earth to Cas?" Dean smirked.

"One day," Cas finished, with a slight blush. "Someday soon, hopefully, we'll be good."

"Better," Dean corrected him. "We already are good."

Cas looked down at the hand that was absently stroking his hip. "Not that I don't like the touchy-feely you," Cas said in a don't-take-this-the-wrong-way tone, "but I don't often expect this from you."

"I can be touchy-feely," Dean promised, sweeping a hand up his side as he leaned closer to press a line of kisses along Castiel's jaw.

"Promises, promises," Cas smiled, allowing Dean to push him down on the sofa.

Dean continued his trail of kisses down Castiel's neck, then buried his face in his shoulder and simply clung to him.

Cas waited for a moment, both disappointed and amused when Dean did nothing else. "Clearly you only do the touchy-feely thing in small doses," he teased light-heartedly.

"Just want to be close to you," Dean mumbled into his shirt.

Wrapping one arm around Dean, Cas brought his other up to stroke through Dean's hair. His boyfriend sighed in contentment, and Cas kissed his head. "I'm right here," he promised.

* * *

For someone who wanted to be close to him, Dean seemed to be doing a pretty good job of not being, Cas thought to himself as he stared vacantly at the computer screen. Dean had been working longer hours sporadically over the past few weeks, but it was the third night that week that Dean had stayed late. He'd also been going in on his mornings off, and cutting his lunch breaks short. Cas wondered if it had anything to do with the therapy session that Dean had said had gone well... Had Dean exaggerated his progress, to reassure him?

All of a sudden, Chuck rubbed up against his ankles and meowed.

Cas wouldn't mind him doing the overtime, except they didn't seem to have much more to spend. Their wages were the one thing Bobby still insisted on handling himself, so he couldn't even check if he wanted to. And he was tempted. Eyeing the browser icon for a moment, double-clicked it before he could change his mind. Navigating to the yard's website, he looked at the picture of Dean on the homepage.

Apparently unimpressed with Castiel not paying him attention, Chuck attempted to climb his legs.

"I know, I know," Cas told him. "I should be working."

Even as he said it, however, he was rolling his chair backwards. As soon as his legs were out from under the desk, Chuck jumped up onto Castiel's lap. He let out a satisfied purr as Cas scratched behind his ears.

"Are you ever going to stop growing?" Cas asked him fondly.

Chuck put his paws up on Castiel's chest, claws digging into his jumper, and stretched.
"Please remove your claws from my clothing!" Cas demanded with a laugh. "I can't afford to buy a new jumper at the moment if you ruin this one."

Chuck's tail twitched, as if in disapproval at being told what to do.

Cas smiled, and kissed the cat's head.

"I hope you're not going to kiss me with that mouth," Dean said as he came into the office.

"You took your allergy pills this morning," Cas reminded him.

"I take my allergy pills damn near every day - that doesn't mean I want you kissing me with cat mouth!"

Dean looked so genuinely horrified that Cas couldn't help but laugh.

"I thought we could have a movie night tonight," he said, closing down the web browser before Dean could see what - or who - he was looking at. "There's a rather fun-sounding adventure movie on later that I thought might be—"

But Dean was looking guilty.

His shoulders slumped in defeat. "Again?!" he complained.

Dean shrugged. "Sorry. That's what I came in here to say. Are you okay walking home again, or do you want me to give you a ride?"

"Why does it always have to be you?"

"Is more work really a bad thing?" he asked, wondering how soon it would be before Cas realised there was no extra money coming in - if he hadn't already.

"Well, what time do you think you'll finish up?"

"Seven?" Dean shrugged. "Maybe eight?"

"That late?"

Cas looked disappointed, and for a moment - just a moment - Dean felt bad. But there was no other way.

"Well, I'll walk home and start cooking something when I get there. If you're home for seven, we can eat together. I'll try to wait for you. But if you're later than that, I'll keep some warm for you."

"You're the best, Cas," Dean said, giving his arm a quick squeeze. "Alright, the sooner you get out of here and stop distracting me, the sooner I'll get home!"

Cas glanced at the clock, surprised to see it was almost closing time. He smiled at Dean, but it didn't reach his eyes. "I'll see you there."

* * *

As Cas walked up the stairs to their apartment, a young couple from the fourth or fifth floor were coming down. They were holding hands and laughing, not paying attention to anyone but each other. His heart ached as he watched them. He'd vowed to stay with Dean for as long as he was committed to him, but he was beginning to realise he'd underestimated how complicated Dean's
issues really were. But they loved each other - and Dean did love him, he was sure of it, even if he never said it. Besides, many people had emotionally fulfilling relationships without engaging in sexual intercourse. Of course he'd prefer not to be one of those couples, but sex wasn't the most important thing in a relationship. There was love, honesty, trust, communication... He was startled to realise that he had a niggling doubt that Dean was keeping something from him, a doubt he couldn't shake once he started thinking about it. He tried to push that doubt away. He trusted Dean. If - if - he was keeping something from him, it didn't mean it was something to worry about. He'd kept Dean's surprise birthday party a secret, after all. Not all secrets were some awful thing to be afraid of.

He went straight to the kitchen when he got in, washing his hands and then raiding the vegetable drawer. The peppers were going a little wrinkly, so he dug them out. Now, what could he do with them? Rummaging through the cupboards, he pulled out a tin of chopped tomatoes, a half-used pack of lasagne sheets, and some dried herbs. Returning to the vegetable drawer, he grabbed the aubergine and the pair of small courgettes that were left over from the ratatouille he'd made a few days ago.

He set about dicing and slicing, before coating the veg in oil and herbs and roasting them in the oven for half an hour along with some garlic. Then he threw the chopped tomatoes in a saucepan and began making a sauce.

Cooking was easy. He didn't know why Dean claimed he couldn't do it when he had made several dishes very well, such as his father's stew and the burgers that Cas frequently pleaded with him to make. He never needed to beg too hard, as Dean was always happy to make them. Most likely because he loved burgers, but possibly also because it was something he could do well and he got a sense of satisfaction from knowing Cas appreciated them. Comfort food was something he could offer Cas, when he couldn't offer much in the way of physical comfort.

Cas moved to the window sill where he was nursing a few pots of fresh herbs back to health. The price had been reduced as they'd been close to death in the grocery store, but with a bit of water and TLC they'd perked up - the basil was even beginning to flower, Cas noticed as he plucked a few leaves.

It had sounded like Dean had made significant progress during his last session with Pamela, and Cas was quietly hopeful that things would begin to change between them soon. It wasn't like he expected them to start having sex in the next few weeks, but just to be able to touch Dean—

An idea struck him. They'd agreed to keep their hands above the waist, but that didn't mean they had to remain fully clothed... He bit his lip as he thought of Dean, damp and beautiful and wearing nothing but a towel. Dean's laughter rang through his mind: You'll cop an eyeful if this drops! That had been so long ago... He'd caught glimpses since then - when he'd walked in as Dean was getting dressed, or when Dean stretched and his shirt rode up to reveal the slight pudge around his middle. He knew what Dean felt like through layers of clothes - firm chest, his body getting softer as his hands ventured lower - but to actually touch him, skin on skin—

"Ow!" he exclaimed, snatching his hand away from the knife and watching the line of red well up. Immediately he ran his hand under the tap, reaching with the other to the cupboard above the sink and the Band-Aids he'd put there for just this reason.

That would teach him not to pay attention when he was chopping herbs, he thought to himself as he wrapped one around his finger. And it had certainly dealt with the half-hardness of his cock, that had begun to press against his trousers. He splashed cold water on his face while he was at the sink.

"Get a grip," he muttered to himself. Dean wasn't the first object of his affection - merely the first man he'd been in love with - and he'd managed perfectly well without sex until now, so what was coming over him?
There hadn't been much Dean could do with the car when he'd first bought it - he couldn't start work on it until the paperwork was finalised and, even when it was, he'd needed to wait until there was space in the garage to work on it because there'd been a backlog of cars. When he'd finally been able to make a start, he'd realised what an even bigger job he'd signed himself up for. He'd gone in on the weekend and completely stripped the car down to it's bare frame, carefully boxing up and labelling everything so he could rebuild it later.

He knew he was lucky that Bobby had some contacts who would give him mate's rates, as the amount of work required to make it roadworthy again was costly. Cas was worth it, though. In an attempt to keep his costs down, Dean had planned on doing most of the work himself. At least, as far as he could. However, some of it was time-intensive - and he wasn't forgetting his promise to Bobby to only work on the Lincoln in his own time. Besides, even he knew when it was wiser to pay someone with more experience to do the job. Which was why the out-of-shape frame had been loaded onto the back of a truck and shipped interstate to be straightened and strengthened. The damage had been worse than the time he'd rebuilt the Impala after the crash that had killed John. A lot of the panel damage he'd been able to repair himself, however, except for the front side panel which had taken the brunt of the impact. That had needed to be replaced, and had been surprisingly easy to track down a replacement.

Unfortunately, it was the wrong colour - so Dean had to remove the old layers of paint before he could paint it. And that was what he was doing that evening. It should have been an easier job, however, if it wasn't for the small dent he discovered and a patch of rust that needed to be dealt with. Fortunately it was only surface rust, and his hands moved on autopilot as he sanded it down. But, once he was finished, he'd need to apply a coat of primer, and then he couldn't do any more until the following night once it had dried.

Dean hoped he wouldn't be too much longer than he'd estimated. He could tell that Cas had been upset at him for working late again, and Dean couldn't blame him. He wanted a night at home cuddled up in front of the TV just as much as Cas did. His mind strayed as he considered what they might do. Pamela had helped him figure out what was causing his 'blocked sexual responses', and as much as Dean wanted to push himself to be okay and give Cas more, he was also wary of pushing himself too far only to disappoint Cas if he found out he wasn't as okay as he wanted to be. But then again, he wouldn't know for definite unless he tried.

Small steps, he decided. Let Cas's hands venture below his waist, and see how he reacts. From there, they could take it further. He rubbed a gloved hand over the panel, and nodded to himself. Nearly done for the night. He put his tools away and retrieved the primer. Anxious wasn't a feeling Dean had ever thought he'd associate with sex after his first time - but he found himself anxious about the thought of having sex with Cas. He was good at sex; had always left his partners satisfied. But Cas wasn't like any of his other partners. What if he wasn't any good with Cas? What if... what if he was a disappointment in bed? Would he still be enough for Cas? A chill ran through him as he was struck with the possibility of Cas leaving him after all the hard work he'd done to make this work.

Clenching his jaw, he focused instead on the job at hand. Nice even coat, not too thick. Wait for it to dry, and repeat...

In the end Cas ate alone, and it was almost nine by the time Dean eventually came home.

"What did you do?" Dean asked, grabbing for Castiel's hand as soon as he saw the Band-Aid.
"Oh, I just cut myself preparing dinner. I was... distracted."

"By...?"

Castiel looked embarrassed. "I was thinking about you, actually."

"Me?"

"Us," he said meaningfully, unable to look Dean in the eye.

It took Dean a second, then a blush started to creep up his neck as his earlier worry that he wouldn't be any good came back to haunt him. "Oh. You know, maybe best not to think about things like that when you're handling sharp objects."

"I noticed."

"So, uh, what's for dinner?"

"Lasagne."

"Awesome," Dean grinned. Once the food was in front of him, however, he poked at his food. "Vegetable lasagne?"

"Problem?"

"No," Dean assured him quickly. "No problem." He took a bite, his hesitant expression relaxing into a satisfied one as the flavours danced across his tongue. "Wow."

Cas looked smug.

"I think this is even better than real lasagne."

"That is 'real' lasagne," Cas said.

"You know what I mean," Dean said, then fell silent as he devoured his dinner.

* * *

"So did you want to watch something before bed?" Cas asked, when Dean was washing up his dishes.

"I'm exhausted," Dean told him apologetically. "I think I'm going to have an early night."

"Okay." Castiel's disappointment was obvious. "How about tomorrow night?"

He knew what Cas was really asking - whether Dean would even be home tomorrow night - and Dean's stomach twisted. "I, uh, didn't get finished tonight," he admitted.

Castiel's mouth formed a thin line. "Oh."

Dean dried his hands and took one of Cas's in his. "I promise," he said, looking into Cas's eyes, "that it won't be forever, okay? And the day after tomorrow, I am all yours in the evening. Whatever you want. Movie, documentary, anything." He brought Castiel's hand to his mouth, placing several kisses across his knuckles until Cas gave his hand a small squeeze.

"I'll hold you to that," Cas told him, but there was a faint upwards curve at the corners of his mouth.
"But I don't care what we do, I just want you here."

"I know." A final chaste kiss against Castiel's lips, then he bade Cas goodnight.

Cas dropped onto the sofa, alone, with a sigh. He picked up a crossword, then tossed it aside. His mind didn't have the focus to solve it just then. He picked up the TV remote and, after turning the volume down so as not to disturb Dean, flicked through the channels looking for something that would catch his eye. He settled on a documentary about seahorses, which would do until he was tired enough to join Dean in bed.
Cas had felt Dean's absence in their apartment very strongly over the past week, so the fact that he was home on Saturday was pleasing. He just wished that they didn't both have commitments that day. "How do I look?" he asked as he walked into the living room.

Dean glanced up from the letter he was writing to Ben. Cas was wearing his black formal pants, a freshly ironed shirt, and had a blue tie draped around his neck.

"When did you get a tie?" he asked.

Cas blushed. "I didn't - I borrowed one of yours. I hope you don't mind," he said, fiddling with it nervously.

"No, that's cool. I didn't even know I had a blue tie. But it looks good on you - keep it."

"I just want to make a good impression. But I've never been able to... Could you?" he asked, holding both ends of the tie out to Dean.

Dean put the pen and paper aside and stood up. "Come here." He pulled the tie down a little, so it didn't end up longer at the back than at the front. "So where are— Hang on, I can't do this backwards," he said, spinning Cas 180°. "Where are you going?"

"I have a job interview." He found it ironic that the library had helped him draft a better CV only for him to apply for a job there.

"A job interview? That's cool. Where at?"

Cas opened his mouth, but no sound came out. "I'd rather not say," he settled for.

"Suit yourself. You know, I used to do this for Sam when he was a kid, before he learned how to do it for himself." Dean let out a shaky breath as he straightened Castiel's tie. "I used to do a lot of things for him."

"My father always told me I was stupid for not being able to do it."

"Did he ever show you?"

"No."

"Well, I bet there's a lot of things he can't do, but if you'd called him stupid he wouldn't have liked it," Dean said, fingers deftly untying the knot he'd just tied.

"You're probably right," Cas smiled.

"Okay, watch. Over and through, around, up and down." He untied it again. "Now you try."

"Over and through..." Castiel mumbled.

"Around..." Dean prompted.

"Up, and down!"

It was a mess.
"Okay, try this. The fox chases the rabbit around and around the tree, but the rabbit dives under a bush, over a log, and into its burrow."

Castiel looped his tie around and around, looped it through and pulled it down, all the time muttering about foxes and rabbits. When he'd finished, he turned around for Dean's approval.

It was a little askew, but a salvageable second attempt. "Not bad." Dean tidied it up for him, clapping him on the shoulder when he was done.

"Wish me luck?"

"You don't need luck." Dean told him, kissing him lightly. "But good luck."

Cas smiled.

"Do you want a ride down?"

"No, thank you. I think the walk will help calm my nerves."

"You'll knock 'em dead."

"Hopefully not. They can't hire me if they're in their graves."

Nervous or not, Cas hadn't lost his sense of humour, Dean found himself chuckling.

"Alright, well, if you want me to pick you up after just give me a call."

"You can't, you're seeing Pamela," Cas reminded him.

Dean's stomach sank. The last couple of sessions had been intense, and he wished he could take a little time out. "Oh. Yeah."

Cas stopped and looked at him. "Don't push yourself to say or do something you're not ready for," he advised, as if sensing Dean's doubts.

"Can you decide which side of the fence you're on?" Dean asked him tiredly.

Cas looked confused.

"I know you're growing impatient with me, but you try to hide it."

Cas's confused expression turned to one of guilt.

"But I also know you are the most patient person I've ever met, and I think it's a small miracle that you've supported me this long. But if you're fed up with waiting, can you stop with the supportive comments? Because they just make me feel like shit when I know I'm letting you down."

"You are not letting me down," Cas told him firmly. "And contrary to what you think, and what I've thought this past while, I'm not impatient - Pam has helped me realise that I'm just sexually frustrated. And I don't know how to deal with that."

Dean snorted and gave him a dirty look. "Yeah, you do."

"It's not enough," Cas admitted. "My hand isn't you, no matter how much I try to pretend otherwise. So if you're worried that I'm annoyed at you, stop. It's not you, it's—"
"Oh, wow, are you really giving me the 'it's not you, it's me' speech?" Dean asked, looking awkward and pained.

"It's true. And I'm sorry, I don't want you to rush your treatment with Pamela, because it would only do more harm than good in the long run. And I want you, so my hand will have to suffice until then."

Dean wasn't entirely convinced, but decided that if Cas had faith in him then he should have faith in Cas.

* * *

"So how'd it go?" Dean asked later.

"I don't want to jinx it, but I don't think it was terrible," Cas settled for.

"Well, that's good. Any idea when you'll hear from them?"

"No. They said it could be a few weeks before they make a decision. They have a number of people to interview, and they aren't doing them all at once."

"Well, it sucks to be one of the first - what if they forget you?" Dean could have kicked himself, because Castiel's face fell. "Shit, no, that's not what I meant— okay, yeah, it is what I meant, but... I'm sure you did great, and they'll remember that."

"I hope so," Cas said glumly.

"I'm an idiot," Dean said, pulling him down beside him on the couch. He hugged Cas's head into his chest and kissed the top of his head.

"I take it things with Pamela went well today?"

Dean swallowed, unwilling to confess that he hadn't gone. "Well I'm not hiding in my room," he said, dodging the question. "Why don't we find some crappy movie to make fun of until dinner, huh?"

Cas nodded and wrapped his arms around him. "I'm glad you're here, Dean. I've missed this."

"Me, too," Dean said. But he couldn't work on the car and be with Cas at the same time. He supposed he could balance his time a little better, but things were quiet at the garage at the moment which meant there was room for him to work. If things picked up, he might have to pack up the Lincoln and put it on hold. And he'd already missed Cas's birthday... "But can you wait to impersonate an octopus until after I get the TV remote?"

Cas snorted, but let him go. Making himself comfortable, he all but pounced on Dean the moment he sat down again. They both fidgeted until they were lounging in a way that they were both comfortable, and then Dean started flicking through the channels.

* * *

"What the hell is that?!"

"It sure ain't the Pillsbury fucking doughboy."

Dean groaned. "I don't know how much more of this movie I can take. It's like a poor man's version of Child's Play."
Cas borrowed the remote to check how much longer was left. "There's a sequel showing after - Gingerdead Man 2: Passion of the Crust."

"Oh, God, no..." Dean groaned.

"Movie marathon?" Cas smirked.

"Please, no!" Dean laughed, one hand over his face.

"Do you have a problem with Jesus Crust, Our Lord and Savior?" Cas asked with a twinkle in his eye. "Who was betrayed by Judas for some dough?"

"You need to stop."

"You mean knead."

Dean shook with reluctant laughter. "Oh, Cas, you're going to hell."

"I'm sure God has a sense of humour."

"You'd better hope so. Can we just... get to the end of this, and then get some food?" he pleaded desperately.

"We could bake gingerbread men..." Cas teased, chuckling when Dean glared at him. "Hey, it was your idea to watch this."

"I said 'crappy movie' - you chose this!"

"It was the only crappy movie on," Cas pointed out.

"We are not watching Passion of the Christ, or Crust, or whatever. We'll watch something decent. Like Stargate. That's on, later. You fancy that? Egyptian mythology crossed with space travel?"

"Sounds intriguing."

They returned their attention to the murderous gingerbread man, but found the movie unable to hold it. Cas palmed a hand across Dean's chest, feeling a hardened nipple beneath the fabric of Dean's t-shirt. He glanced up and found Dean staring at him.

"I knead you," he smirked, running a hand up and down Castiel's back.

Cas snorted unattractively before clambering into his lap, his back to the TV. "I'm glad you're here today," Cas told him, before lowering his mouth to Dean's.

"I'm glad you're here period," Dean murmured against his lips. Fingers threaded through his hair and he moaned, tightening his arms around Cas.

On the television someone screamed, presumably being murdered, but they didn't know or care who.

* * *

Over the next couple of weeks Dean worked too much, if you asked Cas. After spending a whole evening making out on the couch, Cas thought Dean would take it easy on the extra hours. Instead, it felt like he didn't even want to be around Cas. Which was confusing, given how enthusiastic he'd been about kissing him. Maybe... maybe Dean didn't desire a physical relationship with him - maybe all he felt was an emotional connection. Except he clearly desired a physical connection with
women, but then Cas wasn't a woman. A sexless relationship wasn't what he wanted, but maybe it could be enough? Maybe they could find a happy medium, if Dean would only open up to him. He just wished that Dean would communicate what he wanted from Cas with Cas. He could feel himself bottling up his irritation, and found himself turning away from Dean when he reached for Cas in bed at night. Which was ridiculous, given it was almost the only time they were together. But Cas didn't understand what was going through Dean's mind, and settling for what he was given would send him the wrong message. Unfortunately, it didn't seem like Dean was getting the message.

He answered the telephone a little too harshly when it rang. "Oh, sorry. Hello, Sam," he said, when Dean's brother greeted him.

"Is everything alright?"

"Fine."

"Is that fine fine or a Dean fine, meaning I-don't-want-to-talk-about-it?"

Cas took a breath and paused. "I'm not sure Dean would like it if I spoke to you."

"I mean, I don't know if you've got anyone else to talk to, but I'm here if you need an ear."

"Thank you, Sam. I'll bear that in mind. But I do have other friends." Though not many - or even any - he could talk about Dean with. Jo knew Dean, Balthazar would probably offer the wrong sort of advice that Cas didn't want to hear - even though he had been better at accepting Castiel's choices lately, and he didn't know the rest of Balthazar's friends enough to feel comfortable talking to them about personal issues.

"Okay, well, the offer's there. Is, uh, Dean there?"

"No."

"Can you get him to call me, or do you know when he'll be back?"

"I have no idea. I have no idea what Dean's doing, or when he'll be back, because he isn't talking to me very much at the moment!" Cas said all in one breath.

Sam was silent for a moment. "I thought we weren't going to talk about this?" he said, and Cas could hear the smile in his voice. He sighed. "I'm sorry, Sam."

"Don't be. What's my brother done now?"

"He's never here," Cas confided in him. "And when he is, he's too tired to—"

"Woah, hey!" Sam cut in. "I don't..." There was a strange pause before he continued. "I don't need the details of your sex life, okay?"

There was something strange in his tone that Cas couldn't quite put his finger on. He didn't dwell on it, though, instead letting out a bitter chuckle at the thought of them having a sex life to tell Sam about. He wasn't even masturbating as much as he had been now that he was in Dean's bed. The thought of doing it next to his boyfriend, when he could wake up at any moment, was weird. "He's too tired to do anything other than eat, shower, and go to bed. If we sit down to watch something, he's asleep before we get halfway through."
"Has he told you what he's doing?"

"Only that he's working at the garage. Except there's not that much work to be done, and he isn't being paid any extra."

Sam was quiet as he mulled over what Cas had told him.

"I shouldn't be bothering you with this," Cas told him.

"No, it's okay. It's actually kind of nice to know that my brother's having relationship dramas - it means he's pulled his head out of his ass and is settling down. Would it help if I talked to him about it?"

"Yes," Cas breathed. "But please don't. If he thinks I've talked to you, he'll probably get annoyed."

"You're probably right," Sam agreed. "He doesn't like it when I ask you how he's doing. But, give him time, yeah? We didn't exactly have a good example of a healthy relationship growing up. I'm lucky that I managed to figure it out with Jess, but I've still made mistakes. And I didn't grow up playing Mom and Dad to an ungrateful little brother."

"I'm sure you're very grateful for all Dean sacrificed for you."

"Now, yeah. At the time? Not so much. Look, just be patient, and talk to him. Try to get through that thick head of his. Anyway I'll, uh, try his cell. I'm sure things'll work out."

"Thank you, Sam. Goodbye."

"Bye."

* * *

"You're an idiot."

"Hello to you, too, Sammy. I'm busy, can I call you back?"

"No," Sam said firmly. "I called your apartment - Cas sounds pretty lonely."

"What the hell did he say?"

"Nothing," Sam lied. "It was more the way he said that you were working. How's the car coming along?"

"It's getting there, slowly. I had to send the frame off because it was too badly damaged for me to straighten it out myself. I've smoothed the dents out of the panels. Had to buy a replacement and repaint it, but the colour was just ever-so-slightly off so I had to repaint the whole damn car! I'm slowly putting it back together, but the previous owner didn't take that much care of it so there's a lot more work to be done than just making it roadworthy again. Lots of little things, like windows that don't go down and lights that don't work, you know."

"How long do you think it'll be?"

"I don't know."

"Well maybe you could spend a little less time on the car and a little more time with Cas."

"He has got other friends, you know," Dean tried to say casually.
"Yeah, but they're not you."

"What's *that* supposed to mean?" Dean asked suspiciously.

"Nothing," Sam said quickly. "Just... Think about how you'd feel he was out all the time and left you alone."

Immediately Dean's mind flashed back to the week Cas had moved out. Okay, so Cas wouldn't be *that* bad, but... "Yeah, okay, I see your point. Being home alone when you're used to having company sucks."

"Finish up what you're doing, and go home. Take a couple of nights off. I'm sure Cas won't mind waiting on the car *he doesn't even know he's getting* for a few more weeks if it means spending more time with you, now."

"He doesn't even know why it's so important that I do this," Dean realised aloud.

"Ding, ding, ding, we have a winner!" Sam cried as the penny dropped in Dean's mind.

"Shut up, bitch."

"Go home, jerk. Spend some time with your—" Sam seemed almost to cut off for a moment, "—friend," he finished.

Dean frowned at his phone. Sam was being really weird. More so than normal.

"Bye."

"Yeah, bye," Dean mumbled, still trying to work out exactly what the phone call was.

* * *

"Cas?" Dean called as he entered the apartment.

Footsteps came from the direction of their bedroom and Dean turned around.

"Are you avoiding me?" Cas blurted out, momentarily forgetting that Sam had suggested patience.

Dean froze in shock. "No! What?"

"You're never here anymore," he accused. And okay, clearly patience wasn't something he was capable of right now given everything he'd been bottling up recently.

"What are you talking about? I'm here now!" He'd *literally* come home to see Cas!

"Yes, but I've been here, *alone*, every night for the last few weeks."

"We watched *Stargate* the other week!" Dean shot back defensively.

"Oh, should I be grateful to spend *one night* with my boyfriend?" Cas snapped. "I haven't wanted to go out with Balthazar in case *that* night you came home early. But you come home late, eat, and go to bed."

"I've been tired," Dean said, and it sounded lame even to his ears.

"And I *know* there's no overtime," Cas continued as if he hadn't spoken, "because Andy told me
there wasn't any!"

Dean bristled. "What, are you checking up on me?!"

"I wanted to know when I might see you again! I thought maybe he could work a few nights to give
us some time together. But instead I embarrassed myself because he had no idea what I was talking
about!"

"So what exactly are you accusing me of?" he growled.

"I don't know!" Cas yelled.

"Do you think I'm seeing someone else or something?" If that's what Cas thought, then screw him.
He knew that he was testing Castiel's patience, possibly even taking it for granted, but it's not like he
was doing nothing. It was easier for Cas to open up than it was for him, but he'd been trying and he
was making progress - not that Cas would know much about that, because Dean hadn't told him
anything.

But instead of shouting at him, Cas seemed to deflate. "No. I don't think you'd do that to me."

Despite still being annoyed, and a little afraid of what Cas would say, Dean fought to keep any more
aggression out of his voice. "Then what are you saying?"

"That I miss you," he said quietly. "Us."

Cas sounded like he was close to tears, and Dean was suddenly realising how much he'd screwed
up. "I'm sorry," he said, opening his arms.

Cas stepped closer and melted into his embrace.

"It's not going to be forever. And I promise, tomorrow, I'll finish on time. I'll balance the time I spend
between you and the garage better. Three nights there, two here. Make sure we can spend some
quality time together. I know I've said that before, but—"

"Or two nights there, and three nights here?" Cas asked, only his tone made it clear it wasn't really a
question.

Conceding with a smile, Dean nodded. "Yeah. Okay. And maybe every second Saturday."

"Fine," Cas agreed. "But what are you even doing at the garage, anyway?"

Dean hesitated. "I can't tell you. Not yet." Cas stiffened in his arms, and he added, "I promise it's
nothing bad. It's kind of good, actually."

Cas sighed, but thankfully dropped the matter. "So, quality time, huh?" he asked, sounding
interested. "Like what?"

"What do you want to do?"

"Hmm," Cas hummed thoughtfully, pulling back a little. "We could always put Passion of the Crust
on," he said in an attempt at seduction, palming a hand down Dean's chest.

And the offer of watching yet another movie about a gingerbread man going on a killing spree
shouldn't be so tempting. But the unspoken suggestion absolutely was.

"Is it even on tonight?" Dean asked him.
Cas smirked. "I recorded it."
"I missed you last time," Pam said when he walked in.
"Sorry," Dean muttered.
"What happened?"
"I wasn't up for it."
"Was it because of what you remembered?"
"Not really. Well, maybe a little. But not really. Look, I don't really want to talk about it. I'm here, now, okay?"
Pamela nodded. "Okay. So, Dean, how have you been?" she asked him, starting over.
"Busy."
Pamela quirked a knowing eyebrow.
"Oh, crap. You're not going to give me grief for working extra hours as well, are you?"
"Not at all. Work is important - it provides the income you need to provide a safe and stable home for you and Cas."
"Good."
"Of course, it's not good to use it as a method of avoidance..." she trailed off meaningfully.
Dean sighed.
"It's up to you."
"I don't want to talk about it."
Pamela held up her hands in surrender. "Okay. So what do you want to talk about today?"
"I don't know."
"Has there been any development with Cas, intimately, after what we uncovered?"

Dean stared at the ceiling and took a moment before answering. He'd thought about trying to take things further, but hadn't actually been able to work up the courage to try when he was actually there with Cas. They'd made out in front of the TV, snuggled a little in bed, but no more than usual. More than before they'd cleared the air, though. He may not have acknowledged it out loud, but he wasn't dumb enough to miss the way that Cas had been turning away from him in bed. He was glad he'd...
eventually talked to Cas. The last thing he wanted was to push him even further away.

He figured she'd be disappointed in him when she heard his answer. "No." When she didn't say anything immediately, he added, "I've been too busy."

When she still didn't say nothing, he risked a glance at her.

"And how do you feel about that?" she asked as soon as he met her gaze.

He shrugged. "It's not like things were going to change immediately."

"No," she agreed. "You've had a huge revelation, and you need time to process."

"Okay."

"So why do I feel like you're not telling me everything?"

Dean shrugged again.

"Can you please do more than shrug at me, Dean? Even if it's just to tell me that you don't know."

"Fine, I don't know."

Pamela put down her notebook and poured him a glass of water. Reluctantly, he took it from her and drank some.

"What did you expect would happen?" she asked softly.

"I never really thought that far ahead," he admitted. "I just figured we'd fix me, or not, and Cas and I could either move on, or he'd leave me."

"You're not broken, Dean. You never were."

"It feels like I was."

Pamela looked at him, analysing his attitude. "Has something happened?" she asked eventually. "Something with Cas?"

Dean simply drank more water to avoid talking.

Her gaze turned sympathetic. "Did he not take it well, when you told him?"

Silence again as Dean did everything he could to avoid her gaze.

"You didn't tell him, did you?" she asked after a moment.

Dean shook his head, and Pamela pursed her lips, nodding.

"What prevented you from doing so?"

"I didn't know how to tell him without sounding like an idiot," Dean confessed. "Hey, you know how I've been giving you blue balls for months? Turns out it was for nothing."

"It was not for nothing, Dean!" Pam told him, a little more sharply than she'd perhaps intended. "You've come so far, I don't want to see you regress back to where you dismiss yourself and your feelings as if you can't do anything about them."
Dean stared at her, wide-eyed. "What..." He licked his lips. "What if I'm more trouble than I'm worth?"

"You are not."

"What if he thinks I am?"

"Would you think that? If the roles were reversed?"

Dean sighed, running a hand down his face. "I hate it when you do that."

"You put Cas on a pedestal, and that is not healthy. He is a man, like you, with feelings and flaws. He is not a god to be worshipped. He is your friend. Your partner. You're so afraid of being alone, that you're afraid to treat him like your equal. You let him lean on you, but you are reluctant to lean on him. Trust that he'll share your load, the way you've shared his."

Dean stared at her, eyes shiny with tears. "You're right," he told her.

"I know I am," she smiled, and he let out a choked laugh. "That's why you're paying me. And if you hadn't been avoiding me, I could have told you this sooner."

"Sorry. Speaking of avoiding, um..." He told her about the Lincoln, about how he'd been putting almost all his time and energy into it to the detriment of his relationship with Cas, and about Sam's phone call.

"You seem to have realised what you were doing," she smiled. "Balancing your time between your relationship and Castiel's birthday present is exactly what I would have suggested. Sam gave you some very good advice. Though I wouldn't have called you an idiot."

Dean chuckled. "He was right."

"No." She shook her head. "You're a very intelligent man, Dean. You are certainly not an idiot. However, that doesn't mean you never make poor decisions, as we all do."

"Like avoiding my... Cas. My boyfriend." He still felt ridiculous saying that, sometimes. Like he was back in high school.

"Like that. And do you know what I'm going to suggest?"

Dean sighed. "That I talk to him."

"Yep. I can help you, if you want."

Dean nodded. "Please."

* * *

When Dean got home he found Cas in the bathroom, cleaning. "I thought it was my turn this week?"

"It is," Cas agreed, "but I needed something to do."

"That's really sad," Dean said, grabbing a spray and cloth.

"It needed done. And I wasn't sure if you'd get around to it."

Dean paused. "Is that a dig at me?"
Cas turned to him, eyes wide. "No," he replied honestly. "You're here more often, now. I can deal with you working late a couple of nights a week."

"You just miss me when I'm gone, huh?" Dean grinned.

Cas cast an unamused glare his way, but the subtle twitch of his lips told Dean he wasn't completely annoyed. "Only a little. It's the fear that I'm losing you that hurts more."

Dean dropped his cloth and moved behind Cas, resting his hands on his hips as he kissed his neck. "I thought I was the one afraid of losing you."

Cas's head dropped back to rest against Dean. "What a pair we make."

"I think we make a damn good team."

"We do," Cas agreed. "When we remember to talk to one another."

"Yeah." But now wasn't really the time for Dean to be talking. "So in the interests of communication, where have you already cleaned?"

* * *

Once they'd cleaned the bathroom, they ordered takeout and put on a movie - which is what they'd been watching for the last hour. Dean had his arm around Cas, thumb rubbing absently along his arm, not really paying attention to the film they'd put on. He'd seen it a hundred times before, anyway. Cas hadn't moved in all that time, curled up by his side with his head resting heavily on Dean's shoulder.

Sitting up, Dean reached for the remote and paused the film. Next he grabbed his beer and drained it, before staring at the empty bottle in his hands for a long moment.

"Are you going to get another drink?" Cas asked.

"No." Dean turned to him. "Why, did you want one? I could get you one."

Cas shook his head. "I'm fine. But then, why did you stop the movie?"

Dean took a breath and let it out slowly. "I wanted to talk to you."

"Now?"

"Yeah, now."

Cas adjusted himself on the couch, turning to give Dean his full attention. He waited patiently for Dean to say something.

"So you ever remember something that happened to you, only you remember it wrong?" he asked eventually.

Cas hesitated before answering. "I'm not sure I know what you mean," he said finally.

There was a long pause before Dean spoke again. "When I was a teenager, I snuck out one night. I had a fake ID, and I got into a club." Dean licked his lips, and for a moment Castiel's attention was drawn to them. "I met this group of people - students - and they bought me a few drinks. They didn't know I was underage. Or maybe they did, I don't know. Anyway, then they were kissing me, and one guy had his hand in my lap... touching me." It was so hard to get the last few words out, and
Dean swallowed. He risked a glance at Cas.

Cas's face fell. He shook his head in horror and sympathy.

Dean looked at his hands again. "Next thing I know my dad's yelling at this guy to get away from him." His eyes glazed over, replaying the memory in his mind. "Dad hauled him away from me and dragged me out of there. Didn't say anything the whole way home. He probably didn't know what to say." Dean had had plenty to say, however. He cringed internally as he remembered some of the things he'd said to his father.

"Oh, my... Dean," Cas breathed. "It's no wonder you've had a hard time with us. I'm sorry for all the times I've—"

"That's just it, Cas. That's not how it happened."

Cas stared at him. "What?"

"I guess I... I don't know," Dean sighed, wringing his hands.

Castiel placed his hands over Dean's, stilling his torment. "Yes, you do," he said firmly. "You just need to try to put it into words."

Dean snorted. "You sound like Pamela. That's what we did today - tried to figure out how to tell you."

When Cas ran a hand through his hair, Dean subconsciously leaned into the familiar touch.

"My dad... He was so angry that night. At me, I guess. I... He was everything to me, Cas. I looked up to him."

"You think you let him down," Cas realised aloud.

"I know I did! I was supposed to be looking after Sam - if I'd just stayed at home like he'd told me, he wouldn't have been mad at me." He looked at Cas. "I disappointed him that night, and I couldn't handle it. That's what Pam says. He was my dad, and I wanted him to be proud of me. So I... I guess I..." He trailed off, unable to find the words to convey his thoughts. "It's so fucked up," Dean carried on, "that I found it easier to let myself believe I'd been assaulted than failed my dad."

"Except you didn't fail him," Cas argued. "You repressed it."

"Sort of," Dean said, even though it wasn't as simple as that. Then he pointed out, "And it made it impossible for me to just relax and enjoy being with you."

"It's been hard for you," Cas agreed. Licking his lips, he briefly considered not adding anything further. "You've denied a part of who you are your entire adult life. That's not an easy thing to reconcile."

"You're not... I don't know, mad at me?"

Cas looked shocked. "Why would I be mad at you?"

"For having such a stupid reason to keep you at arm's length?"

"In case you'd forgotten, I have my own issues with my father that led to me trying to repress my sexuality. If anything I'm glad that this is out in the open, and we can start to be a real couple."
"Yeah, but there's a difference between your father being a homophobic dick who turned on his kid and me being too weak to handle disappointing mine."

"I disappointed my own father, as well, Dean. In his eyes, I turned my back on God. On my family."

"It's not the same thing," Dean argued, but he said it without conviction.

"Thank you for telling me," Cas said, knowing that was as close as he would come to convincing Dean he wasn't stupid.

It was amazing how five simple little words could pile on the guilt. "I almost didn't," he admitted reluctantly.

"Is this why you've been spending so much time at the garage?" Cas asked. "Away from me?"

"No. Well, yes. Not exactly." He paused, waiting for Cas to say something - anything - but he sat in careful silence, waiting for Dean to elaborate. "I'm really working when I'm there," Dean began. "But I'm not getting paid - it's more of a... personal job."

"You're working on your car," Cas guessed.

"Yeah," Dean agreed, because it wasn't a lie. Well, maybe only a white one. The Lincoln was technically his. "But I think - no, I know - that I was spending all of my time, instead of only some of my time, there because I didn't know how to tell you. And I had to tell you. It just took me a while to realise what I was doing."

"You're not the only one who runs away from their problems," Cas told him, brushing a hand through Dean's hair again. "Pamela always nags me for avoiding confrontation."

"Yeah, I think I remember you telling me this before," Dean recalled.

"So where are we now?"

"Here, I hope," Dean said, straddling Cas' lap and leaning in to kiss him. His breath hitched as he felt Cas' hands land on his waist, sliding lower. He waited for the fear, the panic, anything - but there was only Cas watching his face with restrained longing. "I'm good," Dean assured him with a grin. "This is good."

Finally Cas let himself move, sliding his hands around the curve of Dean's ass and squeezing as he pulled him closer.

"Can I...?" Cas asked hesitantly, slipping his hands just under Dean's shirt.

Dean swallowed. "Yeah, I guess so."

Cas dragged his fingers over Dean's belly, feeling the stomach muscles twitch and tense under his fingers. He swept his hands around and up, across Dean's strong back and, feeling braver, began to push his shirt up over his head.

"Uh, Cas," Dean said, not lifting his arms.

"Sorry," Cas apologised, unable to keep the disappointment out of his voice as he dropped his hands. Dean's stomach twisted. "No, you don't have to— Don't be." He yanked his t-shirt down. "It's just... It's kind of cold in here. But..." He moved Castiel's hands back under the fabric. "...this is still okay."
Cas looked... not doubtful, but like he didn't want to get his hopes up. "Are you sure?"

"I wouldn't tell you to go for it if I wasn't. We'll just... take it slow."

It felt good to have his hands on Dean, skin to skin, his warm weight settled in his lap - even if it was making him think of all the things he hoped their future would hold. And Dean's touches felt less controlled, more carefree, as his hands roamed over Castiel's arms, shoulders, chest, waist—

"Dean," he warned, dropping his head and pressing a gentle bite to his shoulder without thinking. He was hard and aching in his pants and, whatever progress Dean had made, Cas wasn't sure how he'd react to him rubbing against him.

"Kinky," Dean smirked, shifting in Cas's lap. He paused when his own interested bulge brushed over Cas's very obvious arousal. The fact he didn't immediately freak out was a little freaky in itself, but he supposed that was the whole point of the therapy thing. Instead he moved his mouth to Cas's ear and, without thinking, murmured, "Do I make you hard?"

Cas tipped his head back with a frustrated groan, eyes closed and bottom lip paling between his teeth.

Dean stared at Castiel's mouth. A moment ago he'd been sucking on the lip Cas was currently biting, and his face had been lax with pleasure instead of strained with tension. His eyes lowered to Cas's exposed neck, the prominent Adam's apple, and was overcome with the urge to lick, kiss, and nibble every inch of his skin. He trailed his fingers over Cas's neck, his lips parting and jaw trembling as he spoke Dean's name like a curse and dug his fingers into his hips.

"That's my name, don't wear it out," Dean quipped as he circled his hips, ass rubbing against the bulge in Cas's pants.

Castiel's eyes flew open. "Don't—" he choked, like he was right on the edge and it was taking everything he had not to let himself fall over.

And fuck, if that wasn't the hottest look on Cas. Dean shifted away slightly, and Cas managed to look relieved and betrayed all at once.

"Do you want us to stop?" Dean asked. "Me to stop?"

Castiel was so frustrated he almost looked angry for a moment. "No, I don't want you to stop. It has taken us too damn long to get to this point - but you just said we should take it slow, so perhaps we should—"

To shut Cas up, Dean deliberately rubbed back against his hard-on again, smirking as the man gasped.

"Dean!"

"I need slow," he said, his words contradicting his actions, "but sometimes you've got to hit the accelerator a little before you crawl to a stop." Internally he cringed because what the fuck was he saying?

But it didn't matter if the words coming out of his mouth weren't making sense, because Cas was moving and then he was moaning and Dean was so close to coming and he hadn't even touched himself in weeks and all it was going to take was once, twice, three times more and—

He collapsed onto Cas with a sigh as his underwear grew damp, forehead resting on his shoulder. As
it dawned on him that he hadn't come in his pants like that since he was a teenager, his shoulders started to shake with silent laughter.

"Dean?" Cas asked breathlessly, concerned. "Are you alright? Dean?"

Then Dean started to chuckle out loud.

"What?!" Cas cried.

Dean pulled back to look at him. "I'm a thirty-two-year-old man and I just came in my pants like a teenager making out on the couch."

Cas stared at him for a long moment as his words sunk in. Then he punched his arm half-heartedly. "I thought you were crying, you assbutt!"

Dean only laughed harder.

Cas pouted, his irritation softened by his own amusement. "But honestly," he asked, once Dean's laughter had ebbed, "are you okay?"

Was he? As Dean simultaneously pondered his own feelings while internally grumbling at Castiel making him introspect - because really, doing it during therapy was bad enough - he was aware of Cas watching him with growing apprehension. "I'm okay," he decided aloud. "Are you okay?"

Finally, Cas relaxed. "I'm more than okay," he smiled.

"Oh, are we making this a competition?" Dean joked. "Because in that case, I'm more than more than okay."

Cas kissed him to shut him up. Then kissed him again because he wanted to. "I love you," he smiled against Dean's lips.

Dean swallowed. "I know."
Chapter 69

Chapter Notes

So I was talking to my beta the other week and started wondering... how many of you have been reading this since I first posted chapter one all those years ago?

The next morning Cas slowly drifted awake to the feeling of Dean's mouth moving against his neck, and the press of his half-hard cock against his ass. He smiled as he feigned sleep for a little while longer, unsure if Dean would stop once he knew Cas was awake. Eventually, however, the discomfort in his neck became too much. He shifted away from the uncomfortable lump in the mattress and adjusted his head on the pillow.

"Morning," Dean grinned against his skin.

"Morning," Cas replied softly. He almost couldn't believe that they were finally here - that this was real.

Dean's hand moved over his side, faltering at his waist before coming to a rest on his hip. Warmth from his hand seeped through his clothing, and he was pretty sure Dean was growing more aroused. He shifted again, just a little - rubbing back against Dean in what he hoped could pass for an innocent movement.

Dean groaned as his hips jerked involuntarily.

Cas reached out behind him, pulling Dean closer, and it was all the invitation his boyfriend needed. Fingers dug almost painfully into his hip as Dean moved against him, Cas's own fingers sliding under the waistband of his shorts and curling around his own hard length.

As he jerked himself off, Cas enjoyed the feeling of Dean rubbing against his ass. He wanted more, but this was more than he'd had in months. All the times he'd dared to fantasise, he'd never imagined the breathy gasps that were currently warming his skin under Dean's mouth. Closing his eyes, he lost himself in the sounds and sensations until he was coming with a cry, spilling over his fingers.

"Fuck," Dean breathed, momentarily tensing before relaxing into the pillow with a satisfied sigh.

"Okay, now I really need to move," Cas said, although he wished he could lie there with Dean all day. He sat up, rubbing a hand across his aching neck.

"You're not still trying to convince me we need a new mattress, are you?"

Cas moved to look over his shoulder, but quickly aborted the movement when pain shot up his neck. Slowly, he turned around. "As nice as it was to wake up to this," he told Dean, cupping his face with his clean hand, "it's tempting to move back to the couch as it's far more comfortable than your bed."

"You're not serious," Dean frowned.

Cas kissed him. "Perhaps we can take a look at our finances after breakfast," he suggested.

"You mean you can have a look at our finances," Dean grumbled.
"But right now," Cas said, ignoring Dean's complaints, "I'm going to have a very hot shower. Hopefully it will soothe my neck."

* * *

Cas was on the sofa, frowning over bank statements and receipts, when Dean emerged from the shower.

"When you said 'after breakfast', I didn't think you mean right after."

"Why put it off?" Cas replied distractedly.

Dean paused, realising his most recent bank statement would show the loan Sam had given him. "Uh..." He said, wondering how best to avoid the truth. "Sam gave me a loan to fix up Baby," he started.

Cas looked at him. "That was nice of him."

"Yeah, well, I didn't ask for it. And it's a loan - we've got a repayment schedule made up and everything." He dug out his copy of their agreement and put it in front of Cas. "So, budget for that."

Cas put his pen down and clasped his hands together. "Dean, I know how much your car means to you—"

"I'm not getting rid of it. So don't even start."

"I don't want you to." Cas bit his lip. "But you have to agree, it is very expensive."

"We'll make it work," Dean told him. "How's your neck?" he asked, changing the subject. He moved to stand behind Cas, hands resting on his shoulders. His thumbs rubbed deep circles into Cas's tense muscles, distracting him from further argument.

"Mmm... Lower... lower... Oh, that's it."

"I was wondering how much lower you wanted me to go!" Dean joked.

Castiel's eyes snapped open. "Are you sure you're okay?" he asked.

"Why wouldn't I be? I'm sorting my shit out, I got off for the first time in months, you're still here..."

"Of course I'm still here." Cas rolled his eyes. "But yes, you got off. With me. Is that... Was that okay?"

Dean smirked down at the top of Castiel's head. "Are you asking me if you were bad?"

"I'm asking if you've had any negative responses since last night."

Dean's hands stopped moving, but stayed where they were. "This morning, did it feel like I've had any negat—"

"I'm just asking!" Cas snapped defensively. He sighed. "I don't want you to push yourself too fast and then pull away again. I want you to feel comfortable with me. With what we do. Whatever we do."

Dean climbed over the back of the sofa and sat next to Cas, not caring if he was crumpling bank statements beneath his legs, and pulled him into a hug. "I'm good," he promised. "So can you just
enjoy the fact that I'm not freaking out every time you try to touch me?"

Cas slipped his arms around Dean's waist - lower than he normally would have, his fingers skimming the curve of Dean's ass. "You have a nice ass," he vocalised.

"So all the girls tell me," Dean grinned.

Cas stilled in his arms.

"Shit, sorry. I just keep saying dumb stuff, don't I?"

"I know you have a history with women. I shouldn't let it get to me. Not when I'm with you, now."

"So why do you?" Dean asked, feeling like Pamela.

Cas was silent for so long that Dean wondered if he wasn't going to answer.

"I suppose," he started carefully, "that I'm afraid."

"Afraid?" Dean echoed, confused. "Of women?"

"Of your past with them." Cas held him tighter. "I love you, and I try to give us the best possible chance we can have, but ultimately whether we last or not isn't under my control."

Was Cas saying that he didn't think Dean was as committed to their relationship? After everything he'd done? "I'm trying, Cas," he insisted, not knowing what else he could say.

Cas looked at him. "I'm not saying that you're not, but... What if you decide that it's too much effort? That it's easier with women? What if—"

"Okay, hey, stop right there," Dean told him firmly. "I... This? What we have? I want it. I want you. And yeah, if you'd told me months ago that we'd be here I'd have thought you were crazy. But Cas, you're the best thing that's ever happened to me. It's like... Everything has started going right in my life for the first time, and that's all because of you. And this is coming out all wrong - I don't want you because you're good for me, I want you because I want you— Fuck, I'm not good with words, Cas," he trailed off dejectedly.

But Cas smiled. Dean didn't want easy - Dean wanted Cas. He'd worked so hard to get to a point where his life was improving because of him. "It's okay. I think I know what you're trying to say."

"And is it helping?"

Cas kissed him once before pulling away and Dean followed with his mouth, stealing a second, and a third, and a fourth kiss.

* * *

When Dean walked into the office later that afternoon, shaking his ass as he poured himself a coffee, Cas threw an eraser at him.

Dean laughed.

"Tease."

Dean poured a second coffee and carried it over to Cas's desk, perching his butt on the edge as he handed it over.
Castiel's fingers lingered over Dean's as he took the offered mug. Cradling it in both hands, he took a sip. As he placed it on the desk, he made sure to position his hands so they came into contact with Dean's thigh.

"You can touch, if you want. No-one's here."

"For now," Cas pointed out.

But he stretched his fingers out, stroking lightly at first, then with more purpose. Dean stared at Castiel's long fingers then lifted his gaze to his face, shocked by the intensity that burned in his eyes. It had been a long time since... Had anyone ever looked at him like that? Lisa certainly hadn't, and he couldn't remember Cassie longing for him that much. Anyone else was hungry only for the sex they'd have with him, the one-night-only special before he disappeared from her life. But Cas, he... Cas was hungry for him.

"So, a new mattress, huh?"

Castiel's eyes snapped up to his, as if shaken out of a daydream... or a fantasy. "What?"

"A new mattress."

"What about it?"

"What if we had a look - a look - after work?"

Cas smiled. "That would be good."

"Good. Can't have you moving back to the couch, after all."

Cas's smiled widened. "No?"

"No," Dean paused, and smirked. "I mean, when winter comes around again you'll be better than an electric blanket."

Castiel stared at him for a second, before his face fell and he pushed Dean off the desk.

"Hey!" Dean complained with a laugh as he spilled some coffee on the carpet.

"You're not funny."

"I think I'm hilarious."

* * *

"So you should think about replacing your mattress every eight to ten years," the saleswoman informed Dean cheerily. "How old is the one you have now?"

Cas turned to Dean, who shrugged.

"Old?"

"Very," Cas added.

He hadn't thought the woman's smile could get any wider.

"Feel free to try any of these out," she told Dean. "You need to get a feel for it - after all, we spend a
third of our life in bed. And not just *sleeping*.

Yes, well, they weren't doing anything else yet, Cas thought to himself, "*but— Did she just wink at Dean*?!

"You want to be comfortable," she continued, oblivious to Castiel's blossoming jealousy.

Dean sprawled on top of one. "This is too soft."

"Roll over, try a different position," she pushed. "We don't all lie on our backs."

"Those who do, snore the most," Castiel pointedly, keeping a careful eye on the saleswoman.

Dean blushed slightly. "I don't snore *that* much."

"Mmhmm," Castiel said, unconvinced.

"If you don't like that one, this one's *firmer*," she told Dean. She pressed down on the mattress for emphasis, purposefully giving Dean a good view of her cleavage. "Personally I like one that's *hard*."

Castiel's eyes narrowed.

"Hard's good," Dean agreed, lying on the second mattress. "It doesn't sag as quickly as something softer." He bounced a little. Rolled over and propped himself up on his elbows, showing off the curve of his ass.

*Can he really be this oblivious*?! Cas wondered.

"Excuse me?" an older gentleman interrupted the saleswoman. "We were just wondering about the one in the window..."

"I'll be right back," she said, her smile not reaching her eyes. "Keep trying them out, and I'll be right back!"

"I will," Dean promised. "And don't be too long!"

Cas glared after the saleswoman as she left, hoping that she didn't come back.

"Hey, Cas? ... Cas. ... Come here."

Vaguely he became aware that Dean was speaking to him. "Hmm?"

"Get on the damn bed."

"Are you sure you wouldn't like her to lie down beside you?" he snapped petulantly.

Dean stared at him for a long moment, before grabbing his wrist and pulling him onto the bed beside him.

"Oof!"

"Comfortable?"

Cas shifted onto his back. Then his side. Then his front. "It's too hard," he declared.

Rolling off the bed, Dean jumped onto another.
Cas followed him. "This is worse," he decided.

Three more mattresses were positioned close together, and Dean bounced from bed to bed as he tried them out, before coming to a stop on the last one. Castiel shook his head, finding Dean's childishness both amusing and a little embarrassing. He treated the mattresses with a bit more respect as he considered each one, before coming to a stop beside Dean on the last one, their hands close but not touching.

"This one's nice," he stated.

"Why would I want her to help me pick a mattress?" Dean asked, his hand inching closer.

"Maybe because all 'I like my mattress the same way I like my men'," Cas huffed.

"And how does she like her men?" Dean asked, sounding amused.

Cas glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. "Hard," he mumbled quietly.

Dean laughed, and his fingers tangled between Castiel's. "Tell you a secret?"

Cas remained silent, waiting.

"It's how I like my men, too."

"You're all talk, Dean Winchester," he teased. "But you shouldn't encourage her outrageous flirting."

"Why not?" Dean asked with a cheeky grin.

"Because I am right here!"

Dean gave his hand a squeeze. "Trust me."

The saleswoman was returning, and Dean slid his hand out of Cas's and got to his feet.

"Any luck?"

"We like this one, but it's too expensive for our budget. Have you got anything similar?"

"You might like this one over here," she announced, her high heels clicking on the floor as she led them across to another mattress. "It's the one I have on my bed."

"So, you like this one?" Dean asked her, trying it out.

"Dean," Cas warned as he sat down and bounced a little.

Dean nudged him and smiled. "Trust me," he repeated in a whisper.

Cas held his tongue, but continued to pout as she dragged them around various mattresses similar to the one they had liked, Dean flirting with her the whole time. Eventually, however, they ended up back at the one they had decided was too expensive.

"It's a shame we can't afford this one," Dean said, flopping back down on it. He propped himself up on his elbows, bending his knees outwards as he sat up. "We really like it."

Castiel's eyes were drawn to where the denim was stretched tight across Dean's crotch and he swallowed thickly, knowing that was where the saleswoman would be looking, too. His arms were
already crossed against his chest, and he fisted his hands in his elbows as he watched the careless way in which Dean interacted with the woman.

She pouted thoughtfully. "As a floor model, I can give you a good discount as it's a discontinued line. So, if there aren't any others you've liked, it might be best to make a decision now."

Cas frowned. She was really trying to push the sale - which was her job - but they couldn't afford to get sucked in by her sales pitch. Literally. And she had been working on Dean since the minute he walked through the door.

"Thanks, we'll bear that in mind," Dean said, a little sadly, and got off the bed.

"And of course, we can offer you a payment plan - spread the cost over 12 months. With 0% interest. Though we would require a 20%..."

Dean shook his head regretfully.

"...I mean, a 15% deposit upfront."

Dean beamed.

Castiel's brow furrowed as he started doing sums in his head. That... could make a new mattress affordable sooner rather than later. Even now, depending on the discount they offered on the mattress. He opened his mouth to ask, but Dean beat him to it.

Eyes widening at the response, he smiled when he noticed Dean's fingers tapping against his leg as he counted. He moved into Dean's eyeline and nodded: we can afford this.

"We'll take it."

"Great! I'll go get the paperwork."

Twenty minutes later they left the store, the proud owners of a (mostly) new mattress that would be delivered on Tuesday.

"You can take this," Dean said, handing him the folder of paperwork once they were in the car.

"Wow, thanks," Cas replied sarcastically.

Dean dug into his pocket. "And this."

"What's that?"

"Becky's phone number."

Castie's face fell. "And what do I want this it?"

"You can put it in the trash? Or burn it, if it'll make you feel better."

"I don't know whether to kiss you or hit you," Cas complained.

"You wanted a new mattress, right?" Dean asked, putting his seatbelt on.

Cas buckled his own. "Yes, but I didn't realise you were shopping for a girlfriend as well!"

Dean snorted. "I told you to trust me."
"Easier said than done when I’m watching the two of you flirt with each other for the better part of an hour!"

Dean looked at him, perhaps for the first time realising that Cas was more upset than he was letting on. "I'm sorry," he apologised sincerely, pulling Cas in for a kiss. "But do you really think I'd have any interest in a woman who has no respect for the fact that I'm shopping for a new mattress with my boyfriend?"

Cas felt slightly mollified by Dean's dislike of Becky. His mouth twitched. "No."

"And do you think I'm the kind of guy who'd sit through hours of therapy - when I hate talking about my personal issues - with the goal of having a successful relationship with my boyfriend, only to throw it all away over the first kind of pretty girl I see?"

Cas sighed. "No. But that doesn't mean I have to like what you just did."

"It got us the mattress, didn't it?"

"That's not the point. We could have had the mattress a little later and you wouldn't have needed to make me feel so... so... small."

Dean grabbed Castiel's hands. "I really am sorry. I just didn't want you to move back to the couch."

"Okay, so I probably wasn't going to go back to the couch," Cas conceded.

"And I don't want you to keep waking up with a sore neck or back."

"It's almost worth it for the shoulder rubs. Almost."

"You can have them anyway," Dean told him. "You just have to ask."

"What about a foot rub?"

"Do you want a foot rub?"

"I feel like you owe me something after all that."

"What do you want?"

Cas thought about it, immediately ruling out things that came to mind that were beyond Dean for now. "I'll take the foot rub," he decided.

"Okay."

"And...."

Dean's hand hovered over the ignition.

"You're going to watch a documentary with me tonight."

"A docu—"

"Without complaint."

"What's it about?"

"Bees. And the production of honey."
Dean groaned.

"With... out... complaint!" Cas repeated, jabbing a finger in Dean's side with each word.

"Fine, but I'm giving you the foot rub during the documentary."

"Fine."
"Watch the light!" Dean yelled at Cas, his eyes on the ceiling.

The mattress hit the light which began to swing, alternating between illuminating Castiel's face and casting it into shadow. Dean was oddly reminded of the scene towards the end of *Psycho*.

"Watch where you're going!" Cas snapped back as Dean backed into the bedside table, sending the lamp smashing to the floor.

"Why the hell didn't we do this earlier?" Dean grumbled.

"I wanted to!" Cas reminded him snippily. "You said there'd be plenty of time later. 'Dinner first', you said. 'After we wash up'. you said. 'But the movie's starting', you said."

"Yeah, yeah, alright!" Dean shouted.

With a lot of huffing and grunting, they managed to get the mattress onto the bed.

"Oh, no, you don't!" Cas declared as Dean collapsed onto it. "Sheets!"

Dean sighed, but dutifully stood and helped Cas put fresh sheets on the mattress. Then they put clean covers on the duvet and pillows.

Dean watched as Cas snuggled under the covers. "Now can I lie down?"

"If you've brushed your teeth," he said, knowing that if Dean lay down he wouldn't want to get up again. As Dean got in beside him, Cas let out a pleased sigh. "This is so comfortable."

"Worth the flirting?"

"Yes," Cas conceded, "but I still wish you'd told me the plan beforehand."

"It wasn't a plan until I realised she was interested."

"Hmph."

Dean wrapped an arm around Cas and pulled him closer. "Can we... Not tonight?" he asked, when Cas rubbed up against him suggestively.

"Oh. Okay."

Dean pressed a kiss to his neck. "I'm just not feeling up to it, okay?"

The room fell into silence, and Dean listened to the sound of Castiel's breathing evening out as they lay there.

"Hey, Cas?" he asked, his whisper seeming loud to his ears.

"Hmm?" Cas responded sleepily.

"How did you figure out you're... that you... you know?"

"That I like men?" Cas asked, awake now.
"Yeah."

Castiel took a breath, and let it out slowly. Then he giggled to himself.

"What?!
" Dean asked with a grin, now convinced that this was a story he needed to hear.

"Oh..." Cas groaned into his pillow, fighting back laughter. "You're going to laugh."

"You already are," Dean chuckled.

With a sigh, Cas shifted onto his back and stared at the ceiling. "We had a... I guess you could say a 'trainee' priest at our church for a few months. He was young - very young."

"Aren't most of them old men?"

"It seems that way, doesn't it? But this man - Jack - knew he wanted to give his life to the church, in the service of God. He was... probably between your age and mine. Though perhaps nearer mine—"

"Are you calling me old?"

"Older than I am," Cas replied, sounding amused. "And he was... very good-looking."

"You lusted after a priest," Dean tutted teasingly. "What would God say?"

"Thank you, I'm glad you find My work aesthetically pleasing?"

Dean snorted.

"And he was a trainee priest - he hadn't taken his vows, yet."

"What, like wedding vows?"

"I guess, but are you going to keep interrupting me?"

"Sorry."

"He was good-looking, and I was... I was... Oh, I was a horny teenager, okay?" Cas said, sounding embarrassed. "I couldn't control my... bodily reactions."

"It's called puberty, Cas - we've all been there. My voice was weird, and I had like nine zits at a time, and I had zero control over this," Dean said, gesturing at his crotch. "I mean it was up, it was down. It was up for no reason..."

"Oh, mine had a reason."

"A sexy trainee priest called Jack?" Dean asked, digging his fingers into Cas's side playfully.

Ticklish, Cas squirmed away from Dean's fingers with a chuckle. "A sexy trainee priest called Jack preaching a sermon on avoiding temptation and discussing sins of the flesh."

"Oh, man, I remember popping a boner during sex ed," Dean reminisced, shaking his head. "Not cool when the bell rang and I had to get up and walk to my math class."

"Let's just say that I was very glad for the hymn book." They lapsed into silence again, until Cas turned the question back on Dean. "What about you?"

"Me?"
"When did you know?"

"I... I don't know. I suppose it was before that night my dad busted me for ditching on Sam, but... I must have blocked it out."

Cas ran a soothing hand up and down Dean's side, giving his hip a reassuring squeeze. "If I can ask... What about me?"

"What about you?"

Dean eyes, adjusted now to the darkness, could see Castiel's unimpressed glare.

"I don't know, Cas. It's not like I had this big epiphany that suddenly I had a thing for a guy, you know? It was... little things. Moments. Then suddenly I realised there was this thing that hadn't been there before." Dean swallowed, and the silence between them felt almost... expectant. He wet his lips. "Carving pumpkins with you. Celebrating Christmas together. The way you're grumpy before your first coffee."

"The pot is calling the kettle black."

"Yeah, we both need our coffee in the mornings," Dean agreed. "Seeing you in the alleyway, with your pants around your ankles, thinking..." He swallowed.

Cas raised an eyebrow. "Thinking I had been sexually assaulted attracted you to me?" he asked wryly.

"NO! But it hurt. I didn't want anything like that to happen to you; I didn't want to let it happen to you."

"You grew protective," Cas realised, suddenly understanding Dean's violent outburst on his birthday.

"I guess."

"I can take care of myself, you know."

"I know. But you don't have to. Just like I don't have to be alone anymore," he accepted, his voice breaking as he spoke.

"You never had to be alone," Cas longed to say. But he held his tongue as Dean spoke, eager for him to continue. He knew it was good for Dean to acknowledge these things.

"The way you accept the things I hate most about myself, the worst parts of me, and make me see that they're not all bad. There were so many times I couldn't believe you'd stayed."

"Of course I stayed, Dean," Cas said, reaching out in the darkness to trail a hand across Dean's cheek. Until he hadn't. And perhaps Dean's downward spiral hadn't just been a result of him feeling abandoned and alone, but also a lack of positivity in his life? "I love you," Cas reminded him. "I love you for your kindness, and your generosity, and the sacrifices you make for those you love. I enjoy your sense of fun." He pressed a gentle kiss to Dean's lips. "And, of course, you are a very attractive man."

Dean buried his face in Castiel's neck and held him close.

Realising that their conversation was over, Castiel closed his eyes and let sleep take him.

* * *
When Andy arrived at work the following afternoon, he was grinning from ear to ear.

"If you're going to tell me you won the lottery and you're quitting, you can do it at the end of your shift," Bobby joked gruffly. "There's a lot to get through today."

"I asked Tracey to marry me," Andy said in a rush, as if he'd been bursting to say it out loud.

"And she said yes?" Benny guessed.

"Yes!"

"I'm happy for you, brother," Benny grinned, pulling the smaller man into a crushing hug.

Dean and Cas offered their congratulations while Bobby attempted to maintain his usual grumpy façade, telling him, "Just make sure you book your time off well in advance."

There were a few more slaps on the back before a pointed cough from Bobby had the mechanics moving towards the garage - with the exception of Andy, who walked with Cas to the office.

"I feel like I've hit the jackpot, Cas," Andy rambled. "A guy like me, and a woman like Tracey—"

Cas stopped him with a hand on his arm. "You are a good man, Andy; kind, considerate. And you're a good friend. Those are qualities I believe she would desire in a man - I know I do."

"Are you trying to tell me that it's what's on the inside that counts, rather than the outside?"

"I suppose I am."

"'Cause what's on the outside isn't all that great."

"Andy." Cas almost growled the man's name in his frustration. It was upsetting to him when people couldn't see their self-worth. "Tracey is a lucky woman."

As Andy poured himself a coffee, he narrowed his eyes and cast a sideways glance at Cas. "You wouldn't have a bit of a crush on me, would you?" The smirk that followed his words revealed his teasing.

Cas shook his head and nudged him playfully. "You wish."

"Do you want one?" Andy asked, holding the coffee pot up as Cas took his seat at the computer.

"Oh, yes, please."

When Andy placed it on the desk beside him, he gave Cas's shoulder a squeeze.

"Thanks, Cas," he said, when Cas looked up at him.

"For what?"

Andy's eyes were on the mug of coffee, cupped between his hands. "Sometimes... Sometimes it helps to hear stuff like that. The guys out there... they don't talk about their feelings."

Thinking about Dean's reluctance to open up, Cas snorted. "I know. Although Dean's learned to be more open than he used to be."

Castiel watched Andy as he took a sip of his coffee, noting the release of tension in his shoulders,
and the slight upwards curve of his lips. He had a feeling Andy wanted to say something more, but didn't want to push - Cas figured he'd speak when he was ready. As he waited for Andy to continue, Cas sipped at his own coffee.

"I love Tracey," Andy declared a moment later. "I know I do. But how do I know if I'm good for her?"

Cas let out a breath as he wondered how he'd become an agony aunt for mechanics with low self-esteem. "You don't," he answered eventually. "You have to trust Tracey that she knows who is best for her. If she said yes, it's because she thinks you are."

Andy smiled. "Thanks, Cas. You know, you're a good friend, too."

"A good friend who'll get yelled at by his boss if he doesn't get to work."

"Same.," Andy chuckled. Thanks again, Cas."

"Any time."

Cas shook the mouse and the screensaver faded away, revealing an image of Dean. Cas couldn't help the smile that spread across his face as he closed the garage's website down. Andy and Tracey would be okay. And so would he and Dean.

* * *

When Dean walked into the office a couple of hours later hoping to distract Cas with a quick coffee break, his boyfriend was on his cell. He watched and listened as he grabbed Cas's empty mug and refilled it, before pouring one for himself.

"I thought you didn't answer your phone during office hours," Dean teased after Cas had hung up.

"I don't, normally," he said, moving to take his coffee from Dean. He perched on the edge of the desk and took a sip. "But that was the library."

"Oh?" Dean asked, sitting beside him.

Cas beamed. "I got the job."

Dean felt like he was going to burst with pride. "I told you you didn't need to be nervous!" he declared, bumping shoulders with Cas.

"You also told me that if I was interviewed first they might forget about me," Cas pointed out. "It's only a Saturday job, but it's mine. Not a job his father had gotten for him, or Dean, but his.

"Well that means you get to keep working here as well, right? I mean you'll need the money if you're going back to college."

Bobby walked in as Cas shook his head. "I can't. I need to be flexible to cover absences."

"Does this mean you got the job, then?" Bobby asked.

"Yes," Cas and Dean said together.

"Hmph. Dean's right - you should stay on here, at least until your course starts."

"But—"
"And if you need to work extra hours at the library, then that's okay. Just let me know if you won't be in."

"Alright," Castiel conceded. Bobby was too good to him. To both of them. "Thank you, Bobby."

Once Bobby left the office, Dean rounded on Cas and kissed him.

"I'd forget my damn head if it wasn't screwed on," Bobby grumbled as he reappeared. "Have you seen— Oh."

Dean and Cas broke apart in shock. "Bobby!" they exclaimed together.

In an awkward attempt to look casual, Dean leapt to his feet while Cas turned around from where he was sitting on the desk. He tried to sidle into his chair, but his backside skimmed the edge of his seat and he ended up with his ass on the floor.

Dean looked down and yelled, "Cas!"

Bobby's mouth was twitching. "Oh. So that's how it is, is it?" he asked seriously.

"Bobby, I can explain," Dean started as Cas got back to his feet, brushing off his pants.

"Sure you can. You tripped and your lips landed on his mouth, right?" Bobby grinned.

Dean blushed and started edging towards the door. "I've got to get back to—"

"Oh, no you don't," Bobby said, blocking the doorway. "Sit."

"But—"

"Yes, butt. Sit on it. Now!"

Dean sat, looking like a scolded puppy.

Slowly, Cas sank back into his seat as well.

"So." Bobby looked at each of them in turn.

"I'm sorry, Bobby," Cas apologised.

"What exactly are you sorry for, boy?"

But Cas couldn't answer because he didn't really know. The apology had been an instinctive reaction.

Bobby sighed heavily, in a way that made it clear he was uncomfortable having this conversation. "You said you're gay?" he asked Cas.

Dean bristled, and Cas nodded.

Bobby turned to Dean. "And what about you?"

An embarrassed flush reddened Dean's cheeks. "I'm... I'm..." But he couldn't get the word bisexual past his lips. It was still a concept he was trying to get his head around after all these years. "It's complicated," he settled for.

"Well, I don't particularly care either way, so long as you keep it professional at work. I can't have
the two of you groping in the office. What if a customer had walked in instead of me?"

"We weren't groping!" Dean protested loudly, belatedly realising that Bobby had simply accepted their relationship without any judgement.

"Like I said, I don't care what you were doing because it's none of my business. Just keep it out of my business!"

"Yes, sir," Cas said.

"Alright, now back to work."

As he watched Dean leave, Cas caught Bobby smiling fondly.

"What?" Bobby grumbled when he noticed Cas staring at him.

"Nothing," Cas smiled. It was becoming glaringly obvious to him that Bobby treated Dean as something of a son, and Dean viewed Bobby as a father-figure. However, he doubted they would ever have a conversation about how much they meant to each other.

* * *

"You, uh, didn't look surprised earlier," Dean commented, not looking at his boss. He'd be lying if he said he wasn't seeking some kind of reassurance that Bobby was okay with it despite the impression he got earlier.

"If I'm being honest I kinda wondered about the two of you."

Dean spluttered, lost for words. He'd never known he was into guys in all the time he'd known Bobby. Hell, he'd turned down quite a few who'd flirted with him in the past. But then Cas came along... It had taken him weeks of therapy and hypnosis to start getting to grips with his sexuality while his boss had apparently been wondering this whole time. "What?" he choked out, eventually.

"You've found someone that makes you happy."

Dean's eyes were drawn to the wedding band on Bobby's finger. He'd never said what had happened to his wife, and Dean had never asked.

"That's something special; something worth hanging onto."

The wistful expression in Bobby's eyes was scaring Dean, slightly.

"Cause if you get one shot and you screw it up, or lose it, there's no saying you'll get another." Bobby studied him for a moment before frowning. "Is there a reason you never told anyone here. You know we accepted Cas. Why wouldn't we accept you, too?"

"Uh...

"Are you ashamed of who you are? Are you embarrassed of him?"

"No! It's not like—"

"Don't interrupt me when I'm talking to you, boy!" Bobby snapped at him. "I don't want to see you break Castiel's heart. Because he loves you - any fool can see that. What I don't understand is why you hide it. After all the crap that boy's father put him through, he deserves someone who's proud to call him his boyfriend."
"I know he does!" Dean yelled, surprised to be put on the defensive.

"Than act like it," Bobby said with finality, before walking away.

Dean stared after Bobby as he walked away, his stomach twisting horribly until he dashed to the men’s room and retched into the toilet bowl. Nothing came up, but he knelt there dry-heaving for several long minutes. He wasn't embarrassed of Cas. He wasn’t! But as he thought about all the times they’d gone out and acted like nothing had changed between them when everything had changed - how he still acted like things weren't what they were - he felt sick all over again.

* * *

"It's been a while," Dean told his reflection. "But you owe yourself. You owe Cas. It's nothing but a ground ball - you've just got to put your mitt down. You are Dean Winchester. This is what you do."

He paused, and let out a breath. "Even if it's not who you usually do it with," he added under his breath.

"Who are you talking to?" Cas asked, walking into the bedroom.

"Uh, nobody," Dean stammered as he ran a hand through his hair. "Myself, I guess."

Cas raised an eyebrow as he stared at him, eyes piercing through him as if reading his soul.

Dean swallowed, decision made. A moment later, Cas was in Dean's arms, kissing him passionately as Dean walked them slowly back towards the bed. He lost his balance when his knees hit it and he fell backwards, pulling Cas down on top of him. They scooted up the bed, all awkward limbs, and Dean grunted in pain when Cas's hand slipped on the sheets and he got an elbow in his stomach.

"Sorry!" Cas gasped.

"'S okay," Dean assured him, hands moving feverishly over Cas's body.

When Dean tucked his fingers into the waistband of Cas's boxers, and simply kept them there as he kissed him, Cas froze.

Pulling away, Dean frowned up at Cas. "What?"

"What are we doing?" Cas asked, breathlessly. He didn't want to hope, but...

But Dean smirked. "What do you want to do?"

Castiel slid his hands under Dean's t-shirt, testing his boundaries. His boyfriend's breath hitched, but he made no noise of protest. Dean was warm and firm, yet also soft. He stroked the freckled skin, remembering the times he'd seen Dean wander the apartment in only a towel knotted around his waist with a fond smile. But he seemed to do it less, these days.

"What are you thinking about?" Dean asked, catching his wrists.

"I'm thinking about how beautiful you are," Cas replied honestly, leaning forward to kiss him. When he pulled away, there was a noticeable flush on Dean's cheeks. "It's true."

"I believe you," Dean said quietly, though it sounded like he only believed that Cas believed it. Then he smirked. "You're not the lying type - don't want God to strike you down where you stand."

Castiel moved his hands further up Dean's body, forcing him to release his wrists. He bit his lip, anticipating and yet anxious of what was to come, when his fingers found Dean's nipples. Knowing
what he liked himself, he stroked his fingers across them. An aroused groan from the depths of Dean's throat emboldened him and he pinched them lightly, rolling between his fingers. As Dean involuntarily arched his back with a gasp, Cas grew irritated with the fabric separating them. When he moved to tug the shirt upwards, hoping to remove it, Dean pulled him closer into a kiss.

Smiling against his mouth, Cas spared a moment to be grateful that whatever demons had been living in the shadows of Dean's mind had been banished. Or, he supposed he should say, exorcised. A tongue against his lips had him opening his mouth, allowing Dean to deepen the kiss, but Cas still wanted their clothing off.

Cas pulled away reluctantly. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing."

"Dean."

"I don't know," Dean said defensively.

"You're self-conscious," Cas stated.

"No! I've been naked with people before."

"Women."

"It's not 'cause you're a guy, if that's what you're thinking."

"It wasn't."

"Oh. Okay. Good."

"But you're clearly uncomfortable."

"I'm not."

Cas frowned. "You keep distracting me from taking your t-shirt off."

"Is that what this is about?" Dean hauled the shirt over his head and tossed it aside as if determined to prove Cas wrong, but he couldn't meet the other man's eyes.

A finger brushed lightly along his jaw, followed by the gentle press of lips against the corner of his mouth.

Dean closed his eyes and sucked in a breath.

"If you wanted to keep it on, all you had to do was say," Cas told him. "I just wanted to see you. You're gorgeous," he said, rubbing his hands up and down Dean's chest. He stopped at his stomach.

"I gotta shift these extra pounds," Dean told him, not wanting to dwell on his pudgy midriff. He couldn't hold back a chuckle as Cas's lips tickled his skin. "What are you doing?"

"You don't need to change," Cas told him.

"Dude, stop."

"You're absolutely perfect."
Dean was sure his face was redder than the marks Cas was leaving on his stomach.  

"I'm overweight," Dean admitted. Then, "Fuck, I've been spending too much time with Pamela."

"You are not overweight!" Cas insisted.  

"I'm not fat," Dean hastened to elaborate. "Working at the garage helps me keep in decent shape, but I know my weaknesses - alcohol and junk food. I'm not a rabbit, dude, I can't live off that salad crap Sam eats!" Dean looked pained at the thought of having to sacrifice his guilty pleasures. "But I've always carried extra weight and I don't like it but I don't want to deal with it, you know?"

Cas frowned. "You want to lose the weight, but you don't want to lose the weight?" he said, confused.

"Yes. No!" Dean sighed. "I just wish it wasn't there."

Castiel's face softened. "I don't." At Dean's sceptical expression, he wrapped his arms around Dean and snuggled closer. "I know you pretend to hate cuddling," he said, kissing the spot on Dean's neck that made him shudder, "but secretly you love it. And I love it. And I love that there's a little softness to you."

"I'm a good-looking guy, Cas. I know that, okay, I've looked in a mirror. But there's a lot of better-looking guys out there who actually take care of their bodies."

"I haven't seen a single one of them," Cas whispered in his ear, sucking on his earlobe which caused Dean to shiver. "And even if I had, would any of them take better care of me than you do?"

Dean opened his mouth to reply, but closed it again when he realised he couldn't answer. He knew that, when thinking about his flaws, he believed Cas deserved better. But he also knew that he'd do anything for Cas - he'd move heaven and earth if he needed to - and he wouldn't trust anyone else to do the same. Maybe - maybe - Pamela had a point. Maybe he should take a closer look at his virtues once in a while.

"Sometimes it feels like you're the one taking care of me."

Cas pulled back to look Dean in the eye. "That's what partners do - they take care of each other."

"You're right." Dean agreed, his whole body tingling at the weight of Castiel's words - the level of commitment that lay behind them. He lay there silently for a long moment, taking comfort at the feeling of Castiel's hand moving through his hair as he pondered his feelings. "I guess," he started, rubbing a hand across his stomach, not knowing if it was easier or harder talking to Cas instead of Pamela. "I guess I'm just more aware of it now, being with you."

Castiel's other hand found his and he squeezed it firmly.

"I want to be the best for you. All the women I've been with, it never mattered if they were a little disappointed when they got me home. You know, once they saw past my face and my charm? 'Cause I'm good in bed—"

Not sure if he should feel jealous or aroused, Castiel cleared his throat pointedly.

"In the end my looks didn't really matter, is what I'm saying. I knew what I was doing and I was good at it. I am good at it. But with you... It's different with you. I got my 'V' card back!" he laughed forcefully, slapping his thigh.
"You're deflecting."

Dean sighed. "Yeah. Yeah, I am. 'Cause if I'm being honest, Cas, I'm a little scared. I've never... you know... with a guy."

"Neither have I. But, in a way, you still have more experience than I do," Cas pointed out.

"With women."

Cas frowned. "It's not like you've never touched a dick before."

"No, just never one that isn't mine."

"It's a penis, Dean. It doesn't matter who it's attached to."

Dean smirked. "Well, not all girl parts are exactly the same, so I'm guessing not all boy parts are— Ow!" he complained with a grin when Cas pinched him lightly.

"You know what I'm trying to say."

"Yeah, I do. And that should make me feel better, because there's no expectations to live up to, but it just makes me feel under more pressure because it needs to be good and—" A finger on his lips silenced him.

"Dean, it doesn't need to be perfect," Cas assured him. "You're putting far too much pressure on yourself. I'm nervous, yes, but I don't expect you to be some kind of... of... sex god! We'll figure it out - together - and we'll have fun doing so," he promised, grinding his crotch over Dean's to make his point.

"You sound like Dear Abby."

"Is that an agony aunt?"

"Yeah."

"Well I have been doing some reading."

Dean looked at him. "Have you been researching sex?"

"A little. I wanted to know what to expect."

"Do you want to share with the class?"

"The three rules seem to be: lube, lube, and lube."

"That's one rule three times."

"I agree. But I think it makes the point."

Dean nodded in agreement, his fingers drawing lines on Castiel's thighs as he tried to remember what little he knew about anal sex. It wasn't something most women were prepared to do with a guy they were only screwing once - there was a level of trust that needed to be built first.

"There are also plenty of other things we can do that don't involve penetrative sex," Cas added. "If you want to take it slow."
Dean nodded once. "Yeah," he admitted quietly.

Cas kissed him, but it didn't assuage Dean's guilt at feeling like he'd been leading Cas on.

"I thought I could be ready."

"What do you mean, 'could'? Dean, you don't have to be ready until you are."

"It was just... Bobby said something today, that's all."

"What did he say?"

"That you deserve more than what I'm giving you."

Castiel grew angry. "He said what?!"

"Well, not in so many words."

Cas closed his eyes. He took a deep breath, ignoring his arousal for the moment as he counted to five. "You know, between you and Andy, I think I'm enrolled in the wrong course."

"Huh?"

"I seem to be dishing out free relationship advice to the pair of you. The difference is, he seems to be able to take it. What exactly did Bobby say?"

"That you deserve someone who isn't embarrassed of you."

Castiel's breath hitched. "Are you embarrassed of me?" he asked carefully.

"No! What he sees as embarrassment, is... You know. The whole repressed thing."

"So, despite knowing more about our situation than Bobby, you decided to take his misguided - though well-meaning - advice to heart?"

"Yeah?"

"Dean Winchester, you are ridiculous," Cas declared with exasperated amusement. "You may have gotten to the bottom of your discomfort, but that doesn't mean that you have to be ready to be intimate. Just that you have to be ready to take the first step. It's taken us so long to get here, I'm happy just to be doing something with you. My own hand doesn't offer much in the way of variety or surprise."

Again, Dean found himself picturing how Cas got himself off.

"And hey," Cas said, forcing cheer into his voice. "Even if you are moving slowly, at least you're moving forwards."

"But I want..." Dean swallowed.

"You want what?" Cas asked him softly.

"I want... something more."

"More?"

"Than we've been doing. I want— I want to try."
"What did you have in mind?"

Dean hadn't had anything in mind - he just knew that he didn't want to get stuck in a rut, wheels spinning in his safe zone. He wet his lips before he spoke. "Why don't we do what we've been doing," he suggested, tucking his fingers back into Cas's boxers, "only without these in the way?"

He tugged down, and a second later Cas's fumbling hands were helping, pushing them down until he could kick them off. Cas paused with his hands on Dean's underwear, silently seeking permission as their eyes met. Dean simply raised his hips, and Cas pulled them off smoothly.

A second later their half-hard cocks were trapped between their stomachs, and—

*Oh*

Any hesitation and doubt were lost to Dean as he gasped and bucked up, seeking more. Cas flipped them over, kissing Dean hungrily as he wrapped his legs around Dean's waist and moved. They rubbed together, stomachs smeared with precome, and Dean could feel his release building inside him already. He thrust down desperately, unable to worry about anything other than his need as he pushed himself closer and closer to the edge. When he got there, he took Cas with him, groaning out his name.

"Okay, *that's* gross," Dean declared when they were lying together, breathing heavily, the mess of their shared release on their stomachs.

Cas chuckled sleepily into Dean's neck.

"We need a cloth." He rolled Cas off him and slipped out of bed. "Hey! Don't you fall asleep on me."

By the time Dean had returned with a cloth and cleaned them up, Cas was fast asleep.

Dean looked at him, a soft smile tugging at his lips. For the first time, he felt the growing glimmer of hope that maybe he *could* have this.
Chapter 71

Chapter Notes

Six years and six days ago, I posted Chapter 1 on this website. I posted it elsewhere several months before that, and started writing it a couple of months before that. It'll turn 7 years old in a couple of months and I'm still not finished it... Yikes! I've said it before, and I'll say it again - this fic really got away from me!

"Are you even listening to me? Cas!"

Cas jumped, tearing his gaze away from the confirmation of his student loan as he looked up at Dean. "What?"

"Am I boring you?"

"No, sorry. I was engrossed in this," he said, waving the letter it had surely been obvious he'd been reading.

"Hmph. I was saying, how would you feel if we told the guys at the garage?" When Cas stared at him blankly, he added, "About us?"

Dean didn't miss the sparkle of hope that glimmered then died in Cas's eyes. "Are you sure? I don't want you to feel pressured to just because Bobby walked in on us."

"I don't! But I did think you'd be jumping at the chance to 'out' us."

"You make it sound like we're doing something wrong when you say it like that," Cas noted unhappily. "And of course I want to tell them - they're not just our colleagues, they're our friends - but I only want to tell them if you're ready to be 'out'. You've just gotten past a lot of stuff with Pamela, so don't feel the need to rush."

Dean shrugged. "We've already told Jo, and Ellen, and Ash."

"Yes, but that wasn't exactly planned."

"Look, Cas, I just want you to know that I'm committed to you. To us. I know it doesn't look like I have been, but I am."

Cas leaned across the kitchen table and took Dean's hands in his own. "I know you are. You're not the same man I moved in with, and that's because you've been committed to me. You've wanted to make this relationship work, so you've voluntarily done things you wouldn't ordinarily have done willingly. As a result, you're a better man. And our relationship is all the stronger for it."

Dean looked at Cas, knowing that he meant every word. "Let's tell them," he decided firmly.

* * *

Castiel cast one final look around Balthazar's home, mentally ticking off a checklist as he did so. When he was sure he'd done everything he'd came here to do, he stepped outside and locked the
door behind him. It would be another few weeks until Balthazar returned from his summer vacation in France, so Cas had agreed to keep an eye on the house and water the plants.

As he walked to the bus stop that would take him into town, he wished his friend wasn't on the other side of the world. He longed to tell him about the progress in his relationship with Dean - although he acknowledged that Balthazar would probably to to tell him that what they were doing didn't qualify as sex.

His walk grew to a jog, then a run, as he saw his bus coming. He panicked for a moment as it passed him, but that panic turned to relief when it pulled into the empty bus stop up ahead. That meant it was Hannah at the wheel; the nicest of the bus drivers he knew drove this route.

He panted his thanks and requested a ticket into town, collapsing into his seat as the bus began to move off again. As the bus rumbled and shuddered along the pot-holed road, Cas pondered the line where sexual activity became sex. Before he'd met Balthazar and had his eyes opened to the number of ways it was possible to bring pleasure to someone - some of those conversations involving far too many intimate details about his friend's sex life - he'd naïvely been of the opinion that sex was when penetration occurred. But now he knew that hands, mouths, and even toys could be used to reach climax, and each one of those scenarios were a sex act. Eventually he came to the decision that, if two people masturbating side-by-side could legally be considered sex (even if neither laid a hand on the other), then he and Dean were having sex.

He was so deep in thought as he came to his decision that, if Hannah hadn't shouted back to him, he'd have missed his stop.

"Thank you," he told her again as he alighted the bus and began the short walk to Pamela's. Everywhere he went, people travelled in their own little bubbles. Though he was certainly grateful for people who paid attention to others - despite his attempts at being friendly to other bus drivers, they wouldn't have paid enough attention to warn him he was about to miss his stop.

He arrived at Pamela's early and sat down to wait, taking the time to try to order his thoughts before he went in. There were several things he wanted to discuss, but he knew they couldn't tackle them all in-depth today.

* * *

"I received a letter today confirming my application for a student loan," he told Pamela once he was invited in. "It was successful."

"That's great," Pamela smiled. "Although I'm detecting a 'but'..."

"I know I should be spending it on my degree, but it would also allow me to finally change my name or book a block of driving lessons." He'd been surprised at how expensive it was to legally change your name, and he was doing so well with his driving theory that he was impatient to get behind the wheel.

"You still have your job at the garage, and your new library job..." She trailed off as Cas shook his head. "What?"

"I'm going to leave my job at the garage," he told her. "Bobby's prepared to be flexible around my course hours, and my library job, but I'm going to need time to study if I want to graduate."

"That's true."

"And Dean is repaying Sam for a loan to fix up his car, so money's going to be tight as it is for a
"while." His student loan would also come in helpful with household expenses.

There was a brief flicker of... something... across Pamela's face that was quickly gone again as she asked, "What's your biggest priority, Cas?"

"College, obviously. If I complete my course I can use it to get a better job with a higher wage, and then I can afford the other things I want to do. But..."

"But?"

"Driving would offer me freedom. Although that's more expenses, with either the insurance for Dean's car or even my own. But that's wishful thinking, at this point. It's just so impractical being reliant on Dean or a bus. It's fine when we're both working at the same place, but the cost of buses will add up."

"It's a freedom you never had, living with your father. Being able to do what you want, when you want to do it, and get yourself there."

"Yes. But then, speaking of my father, I also really, really want to change my name. Dean and I agreed that we'd sign a new lease once I'd changed my name, naïvely thinking it would be less complicated a process than it is. And less expensive!"

"Is the lease really that important to you?"

"It's a sign of commitment."

"Do you fear that Dean lacks commitment?"

"I... No."

Pamela arched a sculpted eyebrow. "But?"

Castiel sighed. He was too transparent. "I have found myself feeling... I suppose you might say jealous, of his relationships with women."

"He's your first - first love, first partner, first sexual experience... But you're not his."

"I'm his first man."

"But not his first. That's a big deal for a lot of people. Do you worry that you'll fail to live up to expectations? That he'll be disappointed? That he'll miss being with a woman?"

Castiel hadn't let himself think of it, not really. The worry had been there, though, festering in the dark recesses of his mind. As usual, Pamela had turned her torch on it and banished the shadows, focusing his attention on it.

"I'm afraid," he confessed. "My father loved me, then rejected me. Dean loves me, and a part of me fears that he'll reject me, too. Even though I know it's irrational, as Dean has worked so hard to prove that I'm what he wants, I still fear that he'll give up on me. That, although he is attracted to me, he's attracted to women more. I don't know if I can ever be enough for him."

"You've said it yourself - Dean has worked hard to prove himself to you; to prove to himself that he is worthy of you. But that doesn't mean your fear is irrational."

Castiel was silent for a long moment, organising his thoughts once again as he sought to get back to what he was trying to say before Pamela had taken him on a tangent about Dean's commitment.
"Changing my name, cutting the last of my ties to my father, will allow me to finally be free. To begin again," he stated. "Dean offered me a fresh start, but from the beginning it has been clouded by my father's shadow. Castiel Adler was controlled by his father. Castiel Milton will control his own life."

"Simply shedding one skin will not change how you feel," Pamela warned him.

"No," Cas agreed. "But it will change how I see myself."

* * *

For Dean, it was a long morning waiting for Cas to arrive. His hands were shaking with nerves as he tried to work out the right words to use when he told everyone. His palms were sweating with the anxiety of trying to second-guess what their reactions would be. It was one thing knowing someone was gay, but he wondered if knowing two of your colleagues - and, dare he say it, friends - were dating was somehow different. He was clumsy, more so than usual, and it was probably paranoia telling him that his colleagues were looking at him when his back was turned, as if trying to work out what he wasn't telling them.

Usually he was eager for lunch so he could eat, but today he was desperate for Cas to show up so they could tell everyone together and get rid of this nausea in the pit of his stomach. Whether the others were supportive or not, he just needed to know. He grabbed Castiel's arm as soon as he arrived and dragged him into the garage.

"Uh, guys?" Dean called out. "Can you, uh..."

Three pairs of eyes focused on him, and Dean momentarily lost his voice.

"Cas and I have an announcement."

"You're getting married!" Benny joked, shooting a pointed glance at Andy.

Andy couldn't help but chuckle and beam because it still hadn't fully sunk in that he and Tracey were getting married!

Dean flushed. "What? No!"

Bobby clipped the mechanic around the ear. "Let the boy speak."

"Cas and me, we... I mean..." Dean swallowed, hyper aware of the four pairs of eyes now focused on him. "We, uh..." He turned to Cas. "You tell them."

Cas shook his head because really, Dean could be so ridiculous. "We're dating," he told them, casting a glance at Dean that said, See? That wasn't so hard.

Andy threw an arm around Cas and squeezed him. "You must be delighted," he grinned knowingly. "I'm happy for you."

Cas smiled at his friend. "Thank you, Andy."

Dean visibly relaxed a little as Benny clapped him on the shoulder. "You must've taken a good pounding last night," he said with a dirty chuckle. "You're still bowlegged."

Dean's face darkened, and he jerked away from Benny. "Shut up!"

Benny's face fell. "Hey, I was only teasing, brother."
"Dean," Cas said, stepping closer.

"I don't care who you're sleeping with," Benny continued, before looked as if he'd suddenly remembered something. Then half-heartedly complained, "But you just cost me ten bucks!"

"I've got work to do," Dean muttered, storming into the garage.

Benny looked confused. "What did I say?"

Cas and Andy just looked at him and shook their heads, while Bobby gave him another clip around the ear.

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